

Priest and Penitent

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Inside the confessional during the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation, the encounter with scrupulosity is most pronounced. Its manifestation is experienced by both priest and penitent through a disconnected and pain-filled voice that fills the darkness of the confessional. A recitation of perceived sin often is punctuated with expressions of doubt and endless questioning.

I deliberately describe the experience as disconnected because the priest struggles to connect with the penitent and with the pain-filled experience that the penitent is sharing. At the same time, the scrupulous penitent is disconnected and disengaged in a very real sense because he or she is performing a complex ritual, an expression of a sustained struggle marked by anxiety, guilt, and a profound sense of loneliness.

The penitent often delivers an expressionless confession of thoughts and actions that are not sins. The penitent only perceives them that way. Unfortunately, as soon as the confession is concluded, the ritual of perceived sinning and confession will play out again in the person's life. For him or her, confessions have no finality, they offer no assurance of mercy, no experience of inner calm and peace, nor any conviction of reconciliation or God's mercy.

The scrupulous person who performs this ritual of confession and questioning feels trapped and suffers. The individual enters the confessional expecting to experience, through the recitation of perceived sin and doubt, some form of relief from the torment of the ever-present scrupulous disorder. When the confession then heightens

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the pain, the disconnect is palpable. Thus, penitent and priest feel the power of a frustrating experience that both would prefer to avoid.

The seasoned pastor who reads this will recognize this scenario, since it is played out often in the ministry of the sacrament of reconciliation. The experienced priest also will note that I have outlined only one type of penitent who has scrupulosity. My scenario reveals a penitent who suffers from a powerful expression of the disorder called scrupulosity but which perhaps is better understood as a manifestation of obsessive-compulsive disorder. This scenario in this article is not the traditional understanding of scrupulosity that seminarians and their professors examine in the class devoted to preparing for the ministry of reconciliation.

The classic understanding of scrupulosity that is outlined in the moral texts is perhaps better understood as a “tender conscience.” This form of scrupulosity is best remedied pastorally through patience, the insistence of maintaining the discipline of a single confessor who can aid the penitent through the navigation of the person’s understanding of sin. This pastoral care is rooted in an awareness and understanding that this manifestation of scrupulosity, although painful, is not permanent. Good catechetical training will eventually win out and the anxiety and the doubt will diminish significantly, enabling the penitent to enjoy a practiced and helpful discipline of the sacrament of reconciliation. This positive result is most assuredly not the experience of scrupulosity that is a manifestation of OCD.

When the priest encounters a person who is struggling with OCD, his patience will be tried, as will the patience of the penitent. Both priest and penitent will become even more exasperated if an incorrect pastoral remedy is applied. It is in applying responses where many priests need to improve their pastoral skills. The penitent will need to accept the invitation to grow in grace and in practice. This will not be easy and will take effort and time.

Central to the understanding of the appropriate pastoral remedy is empathy, not catechetics. It is not possible to explain away OCD, even with the most brilliant dissertation. If OCD could be managed with a catechetical application or with accumulated information, the penitent likely would have reached a point of healing long ago. The persistent questioning would have come upon the sought-after answer, soothing the anxiety and taking away the feelings of doubt. However, that is not possible with OCD. More information produces more questioning, fueling the expression of the disorder.

The best pastoral practice that can be engaged by the priest is to inform scrupulous penitents that he feels and understands their pain. Penitents may have difficulty believing the confessor’s empathy, but eventually—perhaps after many confessions—they may respond to the offer of spiritual guidance and support and ask for help and direction. When penitents ask for help, the priest can respond with focused, well-practiced, effective pastoral care.

The application of good pastoral care in this situation will require time and commitment from both the priest and the penitent. But the time required will be worth it because it will produce a helpful pastoral result. If the priest cannot dedicate the necessary time, he should recommend a confessor who can. If the penitent is willing to engage in the necessary steps, he or she likely will experience an openness to face the fear and doubt required as part of the process.

In conversation and within the context of a focused period of spiritual direction—preferably outside the confessional and at an appointment to discuss the needed counseling—the priest should share with the penitent the resources that will help the person learn to manage scrupulosity. The priest may also suggest that good psychological care and therapy is useful in learning to manage the disorder. Many resources are available to help people with scrupulosity manage the disorder. If you are managing scrupulosity in your own life, a good first step will be to share this article with your confessor. ✨

While not easy, the penitent will need to grow in grace. Patience is key.

Dog Days Can Make You Growl

Are humans more irritable in the late days of summer than during other months of the year? The ancients certainly believed that rising temperatures in July and August caused a rise in tempers. The so-called “dog days” of summer can make people and animals angry and wild. Our patience, like our fuses, can shorten considerably when the heat and humidity are suffocating.

Climate aside, how “Christian” are we when it comes to dealing with the deadly sin of anger, our own or that of others?

Solution #1: Walk away, even if it’s only for a jaunt around the block or to take a deep breath and count to ten. This remedy works for both the angry person and the recipient of the anger. This “time out” gives the angry person a chance to cool off. After all, any strong emotion, particularly anger, clouds our judgment. So even when our anger is justified, we don’t want to escalate our tension to the point of saying something we’ll regret later.

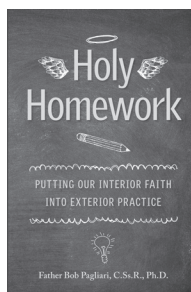
Also, it is impossible to argue with people who are angry because angry people believe they are right. It’s best to postpone any dialogue until the other person’s anger has subsided and a “Christian” conversation is actually possible.

Solution #2: Switch perspectives by peering through the other person’s lenses to help diminish anger. A little-known fact about our species is that we cannot adopt another person’s viewpoint and simultaneously be angry with that person. Can we visualize an injustice when we take his or her point of view? Would we be just as frustrated and upset if our positions were reversed? If so, can we realize why the other might perceive his or her anger is justifiable?

Solution #3: Recognize and respect where the other person is coming from. More than anything, angry people want to feel understood. They want to know that someone else on the planet comprehends what they’re going through. This does not necessarily mean “agreement.” But it does mean acknowledging and appreciating their experience of the situation.

Solution #4: Accept misplaced anger as a compliment rather than a threat. Angry outbursts make adults appear childish and out of control. When an angry person gets “in our face,” it’s extremely difficult for us not to become hostile in return. However, if adults regress into a tantrum in our presence, this may say more about their placing trust in us rather than them being a threat to us.

Solution #5: Pray, not as a last resort, but for continual support. Prayer works. God hears our prayers and answers them by giving us the graces we need when we need them. Moreover, our concentration shifts from selfish to selfless when we turn the spotlight away from ourselves and more toward God. Our focus becomes less on our pain and more on our power. Our confidence will build as a result of our belief that the strength of God will bolster our weaknesses. ✨



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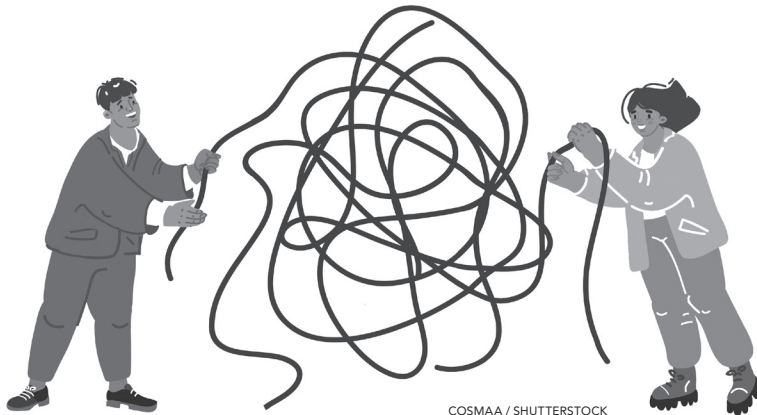
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Q. *I understand that seeking reassurance is one of the traits of scrupulosity. If you should not seek reassurance, what should you try to do to become better?*

A. You should seek relationships that will help you to manage your condition. A good confessor. A good spiritual director. A good professional counselor. None of these people will offer you reassurance, but they will offer you good, healthy, and practical advice and direction that will aid you in learning how to manage your disorder. You will have to do the hard work, but thankfully the grace of God will be there when you need it the most.

Q. *Sometimes when I read your newsletters and watch your videos on YouTube Catholic OCD, I wonder if you believe in mortal sin. You seem to constantly downplay it.*

A. I believe in mortal sin, and I take it very seriously. It is not something to be fooled with. What I do not believe is that people who are struggling with scrupulosity are routinely committing mortal sin in the course of their lives. They fear committing mortal sin and have anxiety about mortal sin, but because of the scrupulous disorder, they consistently lack the necessary moral freedom to *choose* to commit mortal sin.



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