

The Real Suffering

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Authors have given various descriptions of the scrupulous disorder over the years. Many have been helpful and insightful. Some, less so. Others have given sufferers a false sense of relief by inaccurately integrating the disorder's spiritual, psychological, and moral aspects.

The designation of scrupulosity as "the doubting disease" has been embraced and accurately focuses on an observable condition of the disorder. Those who experience the disorder understand, in one author's words, that scrupulosity is the experience of doubt resulting in "a thousand frightening fantasies."

I have used several descriptions over the years. Now, after a few years of dedication to intense counseling sessions and group spiritual direction with the good men and women who struggle with this disorder, I am redirecting my thoughts. I prefer a description of scrupulosity that I believe accurately pinpoints the real suffering that is experienced and endured.

Each sufferer lives through

seemingly endless questions, repetitive behaviors, compulsive rituals, shame, guilt, and persistent anxiety. All are symptomatic of the disorder. Shame, guilt, and persistent anxiety are real, not imagined, and the repercussions are real.

The real suffering of the scrupulous disorder stems from the person's inability to trust the authenticity of his or her feelings, emotions, and sensibilities. Scrupulosity leads to a profound

loss of the true self. The inability to routinely trust the feelings associated with a particular action is a real threat. Scrupulosity disassociates people, disconnecting them from the experience of interpreting real and meaningful anxiety, fear, and shame, which can be useful tools for awareness and understanding. Instead, they become obstacles to healthy living.

In short, whatever the feeling might be and the experience of that feeling, the interpretation of why the feeling is generated is not trusted by the scrupulous person. Those who don't have scrupulosity usually know their feelings are being generated by an authentic experience. A scrupulous person is deprived



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of the assumption of authenticity. The feeling is real, but the interpretation of the feeling cannot be trusted.

Such is the cruel suffering that the disorder generates. It deprives a person of the ability to evaluate feelings. Without that tool, life turns upside down.

When life goes topsy-turvy, the questions and doubts are numerous and completely understandable. Without an ability to judge a feeling, how can a person know what is authentic and what is not? When the "compass for deciding" is malfunctioning, we lose our way. Asking questions and seeking reassurance should be expected. Such needs are cries for help as the scrupulous person seeks to be connected again with the ability to trust.

People with scrupulosity are often perceived as having an unrealistic need for clarity. I do not believe their need is unrealistic. How will they get clarity unless they ask? When a scrupulous person asks for reassurance, that person is really saying, "I sincerely do not know and cannot determine the difference. I am filled with confusion, doubt and fear and I am only seeking relief. I am seeking, if only for a moment, what you have all of the time."

I understand that the person who does not suffer with scrupulosity may feel peppered by questions and exhausted by the need to constantly reassure another. What is the best response? Refuse reassurance? Deprive another of a need for clarity and assume that it is acceptable for that person to live life on the edge? I am convinced that it is not acceptable, but it is important to understand the context and content of the doubt and the question.

Scrupulosity reveals itself when the person needs to clarify and define what each experience meant or will mean. The result of all of this expenditure of emotional energy is always

catastrophe. While scrupulosity can exist in the present and future, it cannot exist in the present moment. It feeds on the past and on the future but is effectively denied any energy or nourishment in the present moment. The present moment can only be experienced. It cannot be judged, evaluated, or graded. It is what it is. Scrupulosity is a barrier to the present. It prefers the past and the future, and it thrives in confusion.

The only way to manage scrupulosity is to radically reorient perception. This is difficult to grasp. Reorienting requires disengagement from the human systems that are anchored in the past or projected into the future. People struggling

with religious scrupulosity must be reoriented away from spiritual and religious practices that require examination,

anything more than simple presence, and any activity that introduces new content for consideration.

Spiritually, one is reoriented to the Present Now, a classical identification of the presence of God. God only exists in the eternal now. I know that is hard to understand, but perhaps that is why we identify it as a mystery.

Knowing that this is the truth, the most useful response to people suffering with the scrupulous condition is to help them focus on the present moment. In the Catholic tradition, contemplative prayer and practice is the key. Also, good spiritual direction, professional counseling, and targeted medical care can support the management of the disorder.

The real suffering of scrupulosity occurs when one is deprived of his or her true self. The only management skill that is helpful is to embrace the present moment. Every other strategy seems to me to be useless, at best a distraction, no matter how well meaning it might be. ⚙

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A Conversation with Mother Teresa

On September 5, 1997, the death of St. Teresa of Calcutta, known lovingly as Mother Teresa, saddened the world. Her last act was to lift her hand and touch and kiss the crucifix. Her final words were to offer her sufferings along with those of Jesus and all the while whispering, "Jesus, I love you. Jesus, I offer myself to you. My God, I thank you, praise you, and adore you. Jesus, I love you."

Although Mother Teresa's eighty-seven years of life bore witness to the joy of loving the greatness and dignity of every human person, the value of little things done faithfully and with love, a dark shadow lingered over her. Hidden from the world at large was her interior life, marked by an experience of a deep, painful, and abiding feeling of being separated from God, even rejected by him, along with an ever-increasing longing for his love. She called this inner experience "the darkness." This "painful night" of her soul, which began around the time she started her work for the poor and continued to the end of her life—fifty years in all—ultimately brought her to an even more profound union with God. Saint John Paul II, in reference to this aspect of Mother's life, said: "In the darkest hours she clung even more tenaciously to prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. This harsh spiritual trial led her to identify herself more and more closely with those whom she served each day, feeling their pain, and at times, even their rejection. She was fond of repeating that the greatest poverty is to be unwanted, to have no one take care of you."

What kind of woman was she? I wanted to probe her a bit about the woman behind the icon.

**The feast day of
St. Teresa of Calcutta
is September 5**

What do you do on dark days?

I often read one of my favorite passages from the Bible, Psalm 84 ("...My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God...").

You must be aware of the high esteem in which you are held by many people. What is your own theory about the reasons for this?

Without our suffering, our work would just be social work. If you accept suffering and offer it to God, those who accept it willingly, those who love deeply, those who offer themselves know its value....Jesus wanted to help by sharing our life, our loneliness, our agony, our death. Only by being one with us has he redeemed us. We are allowed to do the same: all the desolation of the poor people—not only their material poverty but their spiritual destitution—must be redeemed and we must share it, for only by being one with them can we redeem them, that is, by bringing God into their lives and bringing them to God.

What person have you admired most in your lifetime?

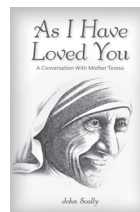
One of them was Oscar Romero.

Any woman from the past or present you particularly admire?

Teresa of Ávila....She once said, "There are no interior trials or feelings of dryness, but the soul lives with a remembrance and tender love of our Lord." She knew that prayer was only produced out of a relationship with God.

What is the greatest lesson life has taught you?

In this life we cannot do great things, we can only do small things with great love. ✨



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Q. *It is a sin to shop, go see a movie, or go out to eat on a Sunday. When I do any of those things, am I not forcing people to work and to break the Sabbath rest?*

A. It is not a sin to do the activities you mention on Sundays. Many people do not share our religious practices and do not perceive Sunday to be a day of rest. They may have other spiritual traditions and practices that are just as important to them. If you choose not to participate, then well and good, but you are not forcing others into sin if you choose to take advantage of these normal opportunities for relaxation.



Q. *I keep hearing about the Novus Ordo and how it is not the real Mass. This confuses me, and I am concerned that I am doing something wrong.*

A. *Novus Ordo* refers to the time, immediately after the Second Vatican Council, when the Church was transitioning from one eucharistic practice to the eucharistic practice discerned by the bishops of the council as normative from our time and place. At one time, it was the “new Mass,” but now it is simply “the Mass,” the way we liturgically express ourselves as Roman Catholics. When people use this term, they are championing a pre-Vatican II perspective and understanding.



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