

The Lexicon of Sin

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Even the most casual understanding of Church history—an understanding that is not rooted in academics or the concentrated study of history—reflects that the Catholic Church loves systems. The Church is the great organizer, a role it has played in Western culture since the collapse of the Roman Empire around the year 400. Out of the ashes of Rome’s destruction, the Church filled the stability void and began the slow process of rebuilding what had been obliterated.

This is no history lesson, but this general perspective on the Church’s love of systems and organizations helps us understand the Church. We benefit from a variety of systems within the Church: liturgical, legal, dogmatic and doctrinal, sacramental, moral, ecclesial, and many others in a vast list. Each system was developed with a practiced eye toward order, discipline, and stability, essential values that had been lost in the destruction of the Roman Empire.

Some people believe the systems stem from the order and stability of the universe itself and reflect the loving hand of God the Creator. Others may not have quite this experience of wonder and awe but nonetheless

acknowledge how important systems seem to be in the larger scale of things.

One system that people with scrupulosity encounter daily is the lexicon of sin. Over the centuries, saints, scholars, and theologians have painstakingly knitted together the lexicon of sin, actions that are presumed to be against the will of God and therefore displeasing to God. The lexicon may be identified as an orderly, rational, and coherent representation and listing of what the Church understands to be the will of God. This lexicon has been essential to the spiritual practice of people who desire to live a religious and holy life. It has been and can be a reassuring measuring device in helping us answer a question we ask ourselves, “How am I doing?”

As wonderful as systems are, and indeed we have numerous examples of how well systems have served people, they have limitations. Most systems presume some sort of organized truth (absolute truths, some might say) that can be observed and measured. How a system interprets what is perceived depends on the core animating principle of the system. For example, to over-generalize to make my point, science often asks “how,” while religion prefers “why.” Different



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perceptions may generate different answers to the same question.

Any system, regardless of what it studies or represents, can be helpful and useful, but not if it manipulates the “evidence” to fit the system. When the evidence is made to fit the system, the resulting conclusions are fundamentally flawed. When authenticity is abandoned in a scientific experiment, the data will be corrupted and cannot be duplicated, an essential quality of authentic scientific discovery or practice. When authenticity is abandoned in a religious system, corruption also occurs, even if it doesn’t happen right away. Nonetheless, the system will be stressed and the authenticity of what is believed will be challenged.

In all systems, there are numerous examples where practitioners have manipulated the evidence to “make it fit.” They do this for a variety of reasons, some as simple as being reluctant to let go of an idea or insight because it is not supported.

Other times, manipulation occurs because something is unknown or misunderstood, and therefore the application—even if performed in good faith—is flawed and incomplete. Among the numerous examples to support this statement is the human understanding of sexuality and gender. You likely know about the tensions that exist in our culture because of this clash of understanding and acceptance on matters of gender and sexuality.

With that background on systems, how does scrupulosity come into the conversation about systems, specifically the lexicon of sin?

The lexicon of sin spiritually harms people with scrupulosity. The disorder itself wreaks havoc upon people who have it. Scrupulosity consistently and deviously manipulates the evidence of a thought, word, or action, assigning to it a seriousness and consequence that is not supported by the evidence. This manipulation

corrupts a scrupulous person’s ability to use the lexicon of sin as a stable and authentic representation of his or her religious life. Rather than helping people truthfully answer “how am I doing,” the disorder answers with a lie to those who have it: “You are not doing well at all.”

For the disorder of scrupulosity, the lexicon of sin is a playground, an opportunity for mischievousness. For the scrupulous mind, the lexicon is a minefield filled with detail after detail, a never-ending series of

definitions that leads to more definitions and more questions. The conclusion? While it may be difficult for many people to accept, the lexicon of sin is not a helpful spiritual tool for the scrupulous. If you have scrupulosity, do not engage this lexicon. Doing so will trigger compulsive and repetitious behavior that masquerades as a useful spiritual practice. It is not.

Instead, especially during this season of Lent, I suggest three steps to the scrupulous:

- 1: Acknowledge your sinfulness without engaging a traditional examination of conscience.
- 2: When confession is helpful, confess that you are a sinner and need God’s healing grace.
- 3: Ask yourself, “What is the evidence that this fear and anxiety is indeed sinful?” Never ask how you are guilty. Your confessor will encourage and appreciate your choice and spiritual practice, and you will be better off.

Systems are wonderful, useful, and necessary. They have helped and guided humanity in our spiritual and cultural journeys. But systems are only useful when they receive information that is not manipulated, incomplete, or in some other manner corrupted. When we are able to recognize both the power and the potential weakness of a system we desire to engage and use, we are better off. ✨

***People with scrupulosity,
please ignore the lexicon of sin.
Many Church systems help you.
The lexicon of sin does not.***

Behold the Man!

During Lent, we walk our Lord's Way of the Cross, the path he took as he died for us and then triumphed over death on Easter morn.

At the first station, Jesus is unjustly condemned to die.

Caryll Houselander reflects on that station with us.



He is a man of sorrows, covered in bruises and stripes. He is made a laughingstock. He is crowned with thorns. A reed is put into his hand for a scepter, a tattered soldier's cloak is thrown over his shoulders. His eyes are blindfolded. His face is covered with spittings. His friends have forsaken him. The kiss of treason burns on his cheek.

Behold the Son of God!

He put on you and me. He is bruised by our falls. He bleeds from our wounds. He sheds our tears. He is going to die our death.

Of all men born, he need not have died; but because things are as they are, Christ chose to give himself to everyone who will receive him so each person who wills can tread that road with the feet of Christ, and at the end of it he can, if he wills, die not his own death but Christ's.

He chose the impotence of humanity to give us the power of his love, the weakness of people to give us his strength, the fear of everyone to give us his courage, our pain to give us his peace.

Behold the man!

In him, behold humanity!

At the beginning of the *Via Crucis*, Christ gave himself to all. He took all of us to himself, made us one with himself. All manner of men and women and children will be redeemed by his passion. We are in Christ, and his Father sees all of us as Christ, his Son in whom he is well pleased.

There, in the Prince of Peace, stripped and wearing a soldier's coat that has been put on him, are the conscripts compelled to go to war. There, in the young man in the flower of his manhood going out willingly to be sacrificed, are all those young men who go willingly to die in battle for their fellow men. There, in the

prisoner, are the repentant criminals. There, in Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, are the kings of this world.

Behold the man!

It is significant that everything contributing to Jesus' condemnation is parallel with everything that contributes to the passion of the martyrs of our own times: the intrigues and the fears of politicians, the hatred of fanatics, mass hysteria; the unstable crowds swayed by paid agitators, the popular craving for sensation—and those many Pilates of our day who wash their hands of the responsibility of knowing "what is truth?" who shut their eyes to Christ in human beings and try to escape from their own uneasiness by evasions: "I am innocent of the blood of this just man—look you to it! In any case, there is nothing that I could do about it!"

Neither is it by chance that those who will carry out the sentence will be the young and ignorant soldiers of an army of occupation deprived of the knowledge of the one God, obeying their orders without question because they are conditioned to obey orders without questioning or thinking.

Behold the man!

Yes, and behold yourself in him. Each of us can recognize himself or herself in the disfiguring, the bruising, hiding the beauty of the sons and daughters of humanity, of God. But always remember, dear brothers and sisters of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, no matter the struggle: **"By his stripes we are healed." Amen.** ✨

This book excerpt, adapted for the *Scrupulous Anonymous* newsletter, is from the revised edition of *The Way of the Cross* by Caryll Houselander, © 2002 (Liguori Publications 808531). Her work was published originally by Sheed & Ward in 1955. To order the revised edition, visit Liguori.org or call 800-325-9521.

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Q. *Just to make things clear, because I am not sure if my original question was clear enough, I went to confession three times in eleven days. I usually go weekly, and I know that this was probably a little too much. Do you think I have scrupulosity?*

A. Yes, I believe you have scrupulosity. The need to constantly clarify is one of the signs. The need to go to confession as often as you have received the sacrament is not a good habit. I know that the saints who lived 500 years ago might disagree, but that was another time and place. This is your time and place. This is where the Lord created you to live. So live, and try to become free from fear and obsession.



Q. *Why do so many priests claim that something is grave matter, quoting the Catechism of the Catholic Church to back up their opinion, and you often disagree with them. It worries me to listen to you because it seems like I am choosing to be willfully ignorant or choosing to take the easy way out. Sometimes they seem to make more sense to me than you do.*

A. I cannot speak for other priests, but I will say that context is very important and necessary when determining the seriousness or gravity of an action. I know, because of my work with scrupulous people, that your default position is always serious and grave. I do not know any scrupulous people who are worried about actions that are not serious and grave. My pastoral assumption is that it is scrupulosity wreaking havoc with your life. You are living a life that is faithful and pleasing to God. Be at peace.

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