

Embracing God's Love and Forgiveness

FR. PAUL J. COURY, CSSR

For those who struggle with scrupulosity, it is often helpful to look at the past and see which images that we acquired in our youth still linger within our consciousness and might promote our scrupulosity today.

When I was in Catholic grade school, the sister teaching our fourth-grade class tried to impress upon us the horrors of sin and being a sinner. On the front board, she had a picture of a large, pure-white bone that looked like a dog bone. She told us this was what our soul looked like. Sister emphasized that every time we sinned, there would be a black mark on that white soul-bone. During the week, she colored various parts of the bone with a black marker to show us what our souls looked like when we sinned. Mortal sins were large black marks, harder to get rid of, and venial sins were small blotches that came off more easily.

Sister taught us that when we went to confession, the "soul-bone" was wiped



clean—white and pure once again. Every Friday afternoon, we all piled into church and went to confession. The priest helped our soul-bone turn white again. But of course, much of the guilt caused by sinning, the shame of confession, and the regretful memories of sin lingered on, long after our confessions in the sacrament of

reconciliation. I wonder how many of my classmates carried this image of the soul-bone long into adulthood?

Many people with scrupulosity have this anxiety that their soul is never fully wiped clean. They live under a shadow of guilt that says: "You didn't tell all your sins," "You made a 'bad' confession," "I think I remember holding a sin back," "I was too ashamed to tell this sin to the priest," "I forgot some of my sins during my confession, but I remembered them later," "I think all my past confessions are invalid because I didn't remember a sin until later."

It seems clear that the task of our adult lives is to regain an image of God that promotes our God of love, who loves and forgives us always and everywhere.

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Scrupulosity latches onto this guilt and then uses it as a battering ram to tell you that you are a sinner, that God doesn't love you and will certainly condemn you to a life in hell. This is the lie that your scrupulosity encourages, leading you to feel shame and tell yourself, "I am ashamed of being such a sinful person. I look inside and I see darkness, regret, and shame for everything I have done."

Jesus presents us with a completely different image. Read chapter three of St. John's Gospel. Jesus is trying to teach Nicodemus the way of love and light, so he tells Nicodemus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16–17). This passage tells us that our God is a God of love.

This is an excellent Scripture text to read and pray about when you have a scrupulosity attack. God loves us always, everywhere, and at all times. God did not send Jesus to condemn us. If your scrupulosity goes on a rampage of condemning and filling you with guilt and shame, remind yourself that you are forgiven completely and fully. You are loved completely and fully because God is love. God's forgiveness does not rely on you, nor does it rely on the priest; forgiveness resides totally and fully in God.

God's love begins with God. God's love does not depend on your memory, on your lack of attention, on your past regrets, on

your future worries, on your guilty feelings, or on your shame. You cannot erase God's love. God's love is an ocean, uncontrollable by you. God's love is an overwhelming rainstorm that soaks you to the core. This is God's love and forgiveness of you.

As adults, we can choose one of two sides of the following issue. On one side, we can believe in God's overwhelming, constant love and forgiveness of us, no matter what. Or we can believe in our scrupulous side that speaks lies to us—that God is constantly monitoring us, watching us, condemning us, and will punish us.

Later in John's Gospel, Jesus speaks about being people of the light and refusing to live in the darkness. "For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. Whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God" (John 3:20–21).

It seems clear that the task of our adult lives is to regain an image of God that promotes our God of love, who loves and forgives us always and everywhere.

Saint Alphonsus Liguori suffered from high anxiety and scrupulosity. Yet, he wrote 111 books centering on God's love for us and constant forgiveness of us. Saint Alphonsus managed the dark voices of his scrupulosity by relying on a power that was much greater than his guilt, shame, regret, and worry. That power was and is the overwhelming love of God for him. In God, who is all love, there is no condemnation of you! Only love and forgiveness.

How do we rise to a higher level of consciousness where we can embrace this gift of self-love and personal forgiveness? When an image arises out of our forgiven history, we let that image go to God. We say, "Lord, I believe this event or image that is now in my mind has been forgiven by you many times. Help my scrupulous unbelief." Then try to

concentrate on a present moment of deep love and caring, or even to engage in a loving and forgiving deed for someone else.

It is a matter of constant balance to stabilize the scrupulous side of our personality with the believing, loving, and forgiving side. Always challenge yourself to move toward the light in thought, prayer, and action. It is a matter of overpowering the scrupulous darkness

with light-filled images and deeds of love and forgiveness. ✨

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God's Abundant Love

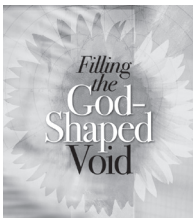
"Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (John 2:11).

Christ produced fifty cases of wine at the wedding feast in Cana. Our God is not only good; he is unbelievably generous. By any standard measurement, he is extravagant. There is no limit to God's love. The sad thing is that often we don't take advantage of God's generosity. It would be like my putting a million dollars in your bank account—a free gift with no strings attached—and you fail to use the money. As a result, you lead an impoverished life.

We often do that sort of thing in our daily lives. We struggle with our problems, our difficulties, our addictions, and never bother to share these burdens with the Father. We hang on to the weight of our guilt and shame and never take the free gift of forgiveness that comes from the crucified and risen Christ. However, there is no need to live our lives as though they were wedding receptions where the wine has run out. There is a superabundance of the grace of God; no need of ours could ever exhaust it. It makes no difference what life has been up to this point; the love of Christ is more than enough for you. It is there for you. Open your heart and your life to him and discover for yourself how generous and extravagant God is. He is waiting to be for you what he claims to be.

You have already won! Christ has already given you the prize. He has done this with his life, death, and resurrection. You simply need to begin to bring that belief into your life. And sometimes that is a very difficult thing to do. It can be difficult to remember daily that God is with you in every part of your struggle and challenge. It is difficult to remember daily that God is with you in the joys and successes. He is in the courage to make those daily decisions that lead you into recovery and peace.

And it can be difficult to remember that he forgives all our sins of the past...a very real prize.... Can you begin to let go of the guilt and shame? Can you begin to be open to God's love and forgiveness? The prize! ✨



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Q. *I understand that for a sin to be a mortal sin it must be “grave matter.” Is it possible to commit a mortal sin because you are unaware of the gravity of the sin, but choose to commit it anyway?*

A. This sounds like “hocus-pocus” or a backhanded trick intended to send people into hell who would otherwise be innocent. For those reasons and because the supposed sin lacks any true awareness of the intention to offend God (which is a necessary component for mortal sin), the answer to the question is a resounding no. As an additional point, this question also sounds like the tortuous complexity of scrupulosity more than anything else.

Q. *Once and for all, straight out, no nuances with your answer. Is it permissible for a Catholic to attend a non-Catholic wedding, funeral, or any other kind of celebration? Would it not be scandalous to do so?*

A. Yes, you may attend events, such as a wedding or a funeral, in a non-Catholic church. You do not need permission, and it is not considered scandalous. Your attendance does not represent your personal seal of approval. It is purely social, cultural, and a necessary experience of living in a world that has many different traditions and practices. Your Catholicism will not suffer or be wounded because you attended these services.

—FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSSR

Additional Resources Online for Those Who Are Seeking Help

Liguori Publications offers resources online that people with scrupulosity have found very helpful:

For helpful videos, please visit [YouTube/Catholic OCD](#).

For pastoral care and spiritual direction opportunities, please visit [managingscrupulosity.com](#).

For direct support and to access new helpful videos, please visit [Patreon.com/CatholicOCD](#). (Patreon offers a direct mail feature that can be used to answer your personal questions and concerns.)

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