

Necessary Surgery

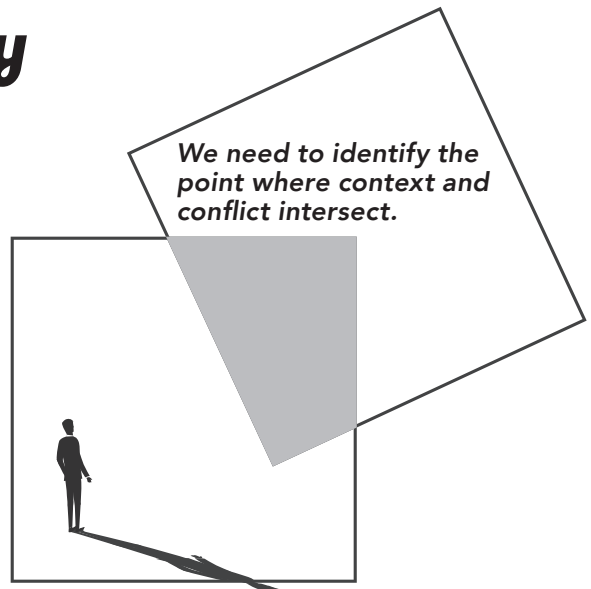
FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSSR

When a surgeon is removing a tumor, he or she must remove the entire tumor for the operation to be a success. In addition to removing the tumor, the surgeon must also remove the area around the tumor, called the “margin,” and have it examined to ensure that the disease has not spread beyond the tumor. The surgeon cannot see with the naked eye whether the area around the tumor is healthy, but the surgeon understands that he or she must remove the margin around the tumor and that, in doing so, some healthy tissue may be removed. To not remove the margin is to risk the recurrence of the tumor, and so the operation would be pointless.

You cannot be a good surgeon if you are not fearless in the pursuit of the fully clean bill of health that this surgery demands. You cannot compromise what you know to be necessary, because that is to risk failure.

The pastoral engagement between a skilled confessor or spiritual director and a scrupulous person needs the same kind of focus. The pastor or spiritual director must be fearless in applying the principles necessary to help the person manage his or her scrupulosity. The pastor or spiritual director must be committed and focused in the same way that scrupulosity is focused on the tormented soul it ravages. The priest or spiritual director cannot compromise what is necessary for the scrupulous person’s healing, because that is to risk failure.

Honestly, I did not always understand what was demanded of me as both confessor and



spiritual director. I thought there might be some middle ground. I believed that empathy and compassion were required, but I did not fully appreciate how persistently cruel and ruthless scrupulosity is. So, while I needed to be empathetic and compassionate, I also needed to enforce the essential behavior modifications that help scrupulous people change their reactions to the triggers that enable scrupulosity—including the willingness to restrict the religious practices and disciplines that trigger their scrupulosity. This was very difficult to understand and accept. I felt at times like I was removing what was good and necessary, not unlike the surgeon who removes some healthy tissue around the tumor to increase the chance of healing.

I got to the point where I no longer needed to be convinced. There is no middle ground. When

working with a scrupulous person, I must fully and thoroughly apply the behavioral and religious modifications needed for the person to manage his or her scrupulosity and, most important of all, to realize and experience the power of God's grace. To understand this commitment, we need to identify the point where context and conflict intersect.

The Church calls all people to salvation, to repentance, and to belief in the gospel. A mission of the Church is to help all people of faith recognize the points of weakness, often identified as sins, in their lives so that they can grow in the life of the Spirit. Throughout the centuries of living out this mission, good men and women of faith—often saints, but more often normal, ordinary people—have attempted specific disciplines and practices to help them on their spiritual journeys. As people of faith, we are grateful for what they have bequeathed to us.

All religious disciplines and practices that aid in this proper awareness and identification of sin are useful in helping individual men and women understand how they need to grow and develop and what they need to change in the process—that is the context. Here is the conflict: scrupulous people see sin everywhere. They do not need any help in identifying their weaknesses and failures, both real and perceived; in fact, their scrupulosity constantly makes them aware of their sins, routinely alerts them to the severity of these sins, and, by extension, underscores the peril they are experiencing by making them feel as if they are not doing enough in response to this awareness. What the Church intends as a help and a guide does exactly the opposite for the scrupulous: it magnifies the responsibility and gravity of perceived sin, effectively condemning scrupulous people to the eternal punishment that their scrupulosity promises is what awaits them because of their imperfections.

The context and the conflict identify the pastoral dilemma, which demands a response. How can a good priest and confessor help free a person of the constant dread of eternal damnation, all the while also not denying that every man and woman is sinful and in need of

God's forgiveness? The obstacles to hearing what is indeed good and true must first be removed; only then can a scrupulous person hear the Good News of the gospel instead of the consistent condemnation their scrupulosity announces.

Here is the ruthless application that is required for healing: Remove, restrict, and contain the scrupulous person's encounters with religious disciplines and practices primarily intended to remind a person that he or she has sinned. Replace the person's experience of condemnation with the experience of gratitude for God's grace and love. In the process, gently permit the grace of God to move the person away from condemnation and into gospel living.

Here is the necessary theological foundation for this pastoral application: God has created his people to be saved, not to be condemned. Here is the remedial theological understanding of sin that must be understood: Mortal sin is very difficult to commit—not impossible, but very difficult. Put simply, God does not give up on his people as easily as we might seem to give up on God.

I am reminded by the teaching of Jesus, which gives me the confidence to be empathetic, compassionate, and ruthless in the pastoral application of what is necessary to help a person combat the scrupulous disorder; most of all, I am orthodox in the application of Catholic teaching and practice. "They tie up heavy burdens [hard to carry] and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them" (Matthew 23:4); also in Acts of the Apostles 15:10: "Why, then, are you now putting God to the test by placing on the shoulders of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?"

Is there anything unorthodox in this belief and in implementing the required surgical removal of the tumor of scrupulosity from the lives of those men and women who suffer? No, there is not. The only difficulties in implementing awareness are a lack of knowledge about how destructive scrupulosity is in the lives of those who suffer and a lack of access to the spiritual surgeons who can apply what the scrupulous need. ✱

We Need Your Support for Scrupulous Anonymous

Dear *Scrupulous Anonymous* Reader,

We're reaching out to ask for your support in keeping alive our free newsletter for people who suffer from scrupulosity.

Since 1964, the Redemptorists and the staff who publish *Scrupulous Anonymous* have been providing valuable resources, coping strategies, and a sense of community for those affected by scrupulosity, but we rely on donations to continue offering it at no cost.

Your generous gift will help pay for the cost of printing and mailing the newsletter as well as the cost of ScrupulousAnonymous.org, where the archive of newsletters is available for everyone.

Your contribution, no matter the amount, will help us keep this resource accessible to those who need it most. Please consider donating and making a difference in the lives of people who suffer from scrupulosity.

Thank you for your kindness and support.

Yours in Christ,
Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR

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Thank you for supporting our ministry.



"Your whole life long, may God be your only happiness, the only object of your affections, the only end of your actions and desires. You will come one day to that world without end, where your love will be in every way perfected and completed. Your desires will be perfectly fulfilled and completely satisfied."

From *The Way to Converse With God as a Friend*
by St. Alphonsus Liguori

Prayer

*Jesus, my true, my only love,
I wish for nothing but you.*

Mailbox

NEWSLETTER@LIGUORI.ORG

Q. On Divine Mercy Sunday, I went to confession and received holy Communion. However, I forgot to confess a sin from my past. It just popped into my head when I was saying my penance. Did this invalidate my confession?

A. No. Absolutely not. This is the torture of scrupulosity at work, trying to deprive you of the wonderful experience of God's loving grace and mercy. Unfortunately, we are often vulnerable to scrupulosity after we receive absolution in confession; it is just one more trick that scrupulosity plays on us. But being aware of this can help lessen the anxiety that our doubt produces.

SAINT ALPHONSUS LIGUORI, BY GIUSTI FERRERI



Q. In your writings, you seem to express the opinion that scrupulosity needs to be managed and controlled. I think of it as a gift because it brings with it a remarkable thirst for truth.

A. I cannot agree with you that scrupulosity is a gift, unless you are an accountant or lawyer and are scrupulous with your accounts. For someone on a spiritual journey, scrupulosity wreaks havoc and slowly drains the person's energy and life. It is a torturous disorder. I agree that it brings a thirst, but unfortunately that thirst is unquenchable. Thank God for the power of grace, which is the only effective response.

Additional Resources Online for Those 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](#).

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