

Phantom and Impulsive Thoughts

FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSSR

It has been my practice in the pages of the *Scrupulous Anonymous* newsletter to often refer to “impulsive thoughts”—those pesky thoughts, always unprovoked and unwelcome, never sinful—that are the triggers for the obsessive/compulsive rituals that follow. The designation of such thoughts as “impulsive” is accurate, up to a point, or at least descriptive. But, I have recently understood that these thoughts do not begin as impulsive but rather as “phantom” thoughts, which

then quickly develop into impulsive triggers. What is the difference, and why is it important?

Experts in a variety of professional fields of study agree that a phantom thought is a thought that feels alien and unsolicited. Phantom thoughts often cause distress or a feeling of being overwhelmed. It feels like personal insight, leading the mind to mistake it for self-generated reasoning. Understood from this perspective, it is not difficult to understand why a scrupulous person pays attention to such thoughts, assigns meaning to them, and accepts responsibility for them.

A phantom thought is not self-generated, no matter what it might feel like. It is, in fact, generated by obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). A person who experiences a phantom thought is a target, a victim of the power of OCD and its ability to pretend to be something that it is not. Once such a thought has been generated, the inclination of the person who experienced the thought is to fix it, control it, get rid of it, etc.

Every response indicative of assuming some kind of responsibility for the phantom thought is counterproductive. Each action initiated in response to the phantom thought will quickly morph into what we understand as an impulsive thought. At this point, the mind generates the obsession and the compulsive response. Once the person recognizes



***This phantom thought
is not your action
but rather the action
of OCD. Reject it
immediately.***

STOCKINPOCKET / SHUTTERSTOCK

and “claims” the phantom thought, it is too late to effectively manage what happens next; it is simply too powerful, and the ritual will play itself out. The key is to cut off the thought when it is still in the phantom stage—in other words, to recognize immediately that the thought is not your action but rather the action of OCD and to reject it immediately.

This might sound like an impossible task, but it is not. Timing is critical. If your timing is off, it will be impossible for you to reject the phantom thought when it is generated. On the other hand, a person can learn how to prepare for such moments, how not to respond, and how not to set into motion the trigger that sets off the OCD.

Therapeutic methods provide a person with the necessary skills to manage phantom thinking, to identify it for what it really is (not what it pretends to be), and to stop the anxiety produced by the thought, which feeds obsession and compulsion. Prescription drugs can provide a person with that single moment in time when managing the phantom thought is still possible. In my opinion, the effective pairing of therapeutic practice and drug therapy is science’s greatest contribution to our shared struggle with learning how to manage OCD/scrupulosity. When I first engaged in this ministry, more than thirty-five years ago, those treatment options were still very much in development.

For some readers, all of this discussion about phantom thinking, obsessions, compulsions, therapeutic applications, and drug therapy might be a little off-putting. It might seem as if there is too much emphasis on the science of scrupulosity rather than on the spiritual consequences and lived reality of a scrupulous conscience. I am aware of the resistance that some of our readers have to this kind of presentation. They want spiritual answers to what they understand is a spiritual issue.

Let me repeat what I often write in the pages of this newsletter. Scrupulosity is not a spiritual issue. It is a mental disorder that uses spiritual

imagery, concepts, and definitions to mask its real destructive purpose. OCD/scrupulosity is about anxiety; the disorder could care less about the content it is using to generate the anxiety it requires. If you were to receive answers to all your questions, perfectly confess every detail of every sin, pray a perfect Act of Contrition, and perform your penance flawlessly and without distractions, by the time you accomplished all these tasks, your OCD will have abandoned your spiritual concerns and latched onto something else.

This is a very hard truth to accept. You might feel betrayed by this abandonment, but your OCD could not care less. It cares nothing about the energy, concern, and dedication you have in trying to complete your compulsive behaviors with the perfection you believe is required for relief. It is the ultimate betrayal, but it should come as no surprise to you. It has nothing to do with your faithful attention to detail. It has nothing to do with content. It is all about anxiety and nothing more.

The final cruelty, the ultimate cruelty, is this: As you read these words, and as you comprehend the meaning of what I am telling you, your scrupulosity is prepared with an answer that you will find almost impossible to resist—that is, without the power of God’s grace. It will make you challenge yourself: *Yes, all of this could very well be true, but am I willing to risk everything— eternal damnation—for what he says? What if he is wrong? Then where will I be? It’s better to be safe than sorry.*

The power of God’s grace is the only power that can bring you peace. The power of God’s grace—the safety and security of the loving arms of Jesus—is a more powerful reality than any phantom thought or compulsive action. Unfortunately, OCD makes the experience of God’s life and love seem so far away. It is not. It is just another lie that scrupulosity generates. Acquiring the skills to manage your disorder will bring the reality of God’s life and love more clearly into focus each and every day. ✨

We Should Continually Encounter Jesus

Always remember this: life is a journey. It is a path, a journey to meet Jesus. At the end, and forever. A journey in which we do not encounter Jesus is not a Christian journey. It is for the Christian to continually encounter Jesus, to watch Jesus, to let oneself be watched over by Jesus, because Jesus watches us with love; he loves us so much—he loves us so much, and he is always watching over us.

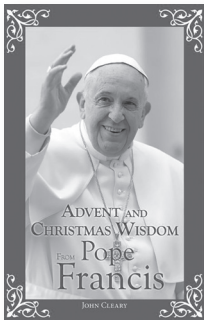
To encounter Jesus also means allowing oneself to be gazed upon by him. 'But, Father,' one of you might say to me, 'you know that this journey is horrible for me; I am such a sinner, I have committed many sins...how can I encounter Jesus?' And you know that the people whom Jesus most sought out were the greatest sinners.... And along the way, Jesus comes and forgives us."

—From Pope Francis' Homily, Pastoral Visit
to the Roman Parish of Saint Cyril of Alexandria,
First Sunday of Advent, December 1, 2013



BERNARDO RAMONFAUR / SHUTTERSTOCK

As a spiritual exercise for the day, focus your attention on the fact that Jesus is right beside you, gazing lovingly at you and encouraging you as you go about your day. Be mindful about how this reality affects your behavior throughout your day. How does having your best friend, your healer, your Savior, and your biggest supporter by your side alter the way you encounter others, be it family, friends, strangers, or those people you struggle to love? ✨



From *Advent and Christmas Wisdom from Pope Francis* by John Cleary, Liguori Publications (826467). To order, visit Liguori.org or call 800-325-9521.

Q. I promised myself and God that I would not use AI models to seek reassurance, mainly regarding mortal sin. However, I did use it again, even though it was a Catholic version. Did I sin?

A. No, you did not sin, but you did make two mistakes that will not be good for you in the long run. The first mistake is seeking reassurance. It does not matter how you seek it; reassurance is not helpful. The second is trusting AI, which is notoriously sloppy with much of the information it offers. You have enough doubt; you do not need any more.



ARTWORKS BY GIZ / SHUTTERSTOCK

Q. In the past, I often confessed past sins—perhaps sins I'd forgotten, perhaps sins I'd partially or inadequately confessed—and it never brought peace. I'd always remember another detail or something I forgot, and the cycle would start all over again.

A. Yes, that is the torture of scrupulosity. It does absolutely no good to examine your past sins, no matter how you remember them. While this may be a pious and helpful practice for a person without scrupulosity, it is not a good idea, under any circumstances or for any reason, for a person with scrupulosity. It should always be avoided.

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](#).

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.)

To manage your *Scrupulous Anonymous* newsletter subscription, please call 800-325-9521 or email Liguori@liguori.org.



Please help us continue Scrupulous Anonymous and other Liguori Publications ministries by making a tax-deductible donation or remembering us in your will. Our legal title is

Redemptorist Fathers dba Liguori Publications, Federal ID 43-0653409. To donate by credit card, please go to [ScrupulousAnonymous.org](#) and click on "Support the Ministry." To donate by check, please use the enclosed envelope or mail to Liguori Publications, 200 Liguori Drive, Liguori, MO 63057.

© 2025 Liguori Publications. All rights reserved. **Policy on copying or distributing:** **Individuals** may download, print, copy, and/or share issues of *Scrupulous Anonymous* provided 1) you don't remove this copying/distributing policy and 2) you don't seek or accept payment for the copies. **Nonprofit organizations** may quote SA in publications offered at no cost as long as you identify *Scrupulous Anonymous* as the source and include the issue number or date and the publisher (Liguori Publications, [ScrupulousAnonymous.org](#)). **For commercial or other purposes**, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of Liguori Publications. Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is a ministry of the Redemptorists ([Redemptorists.com](#)).