

## Reality Versus Fear

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**T**he stand-up comedian Lewis Black is famous for his comedic “rants.” On his weekly podcast, *Rantcast*, he channels his anger in ways only a man who has devoted his entire life to ranting can do. I am not an expert “ranter,” but I have built up some steam around the subject I will discuss in this reflection. Perhaps not with Lewis Black’s energy or comedic effect, but what it lacks in comedy, it more than makes up for in sincerity and concern.

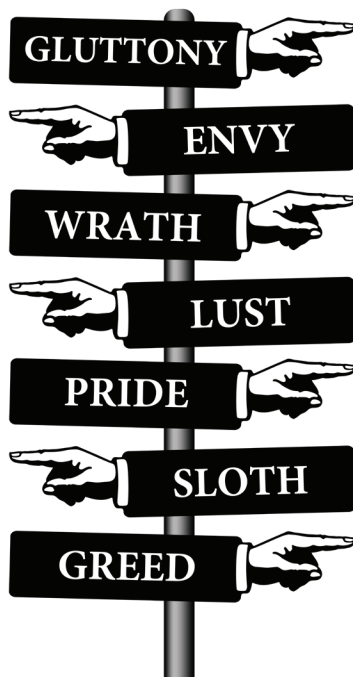
I am sick and tired of hearing about mortal sin. I am at the point where I would like to banish those two words completely from my experience. Not because I have suddenly lost faith in Catholic moral teaching and direction—nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, it is because these two words are misused so often that it has driven me to the point of frustration. I am particularly frustrated to hear the words “mortal sin” used by people who suffer from scrupulosity.

The truth of the matter is this: if you are suffering from scrupulosity, you are not in a state of mortal sin. You are in a state of fear of mortal sin, but that is completely different than being

in mortal sin. The reason is simple: you cannot freely meet the necessary conditions required for mortal sin. Two conditions are missing or at least compromised: first, you are unable to judge the difference between what is a grave sin and what is not; second, you are unable to make choices freely because the scrupulous disorder has contaminated your ability to choose by the confusion it causes.

Please read the previous paragraph again. Read it repeatedly until it begins to sink into your consciousness. You are not in a state of mortal sin, or, as I seem to repeat again and again in spiritual direction sessions, you do not live on Mortal Sin Street. You are not visiting Mortal Sin Street. In fact, if you were anywhere near Mortal Sin Street, you would run in the opposite direction. This is assuredly not my opinion; it is a fact—a true teaching of the Church, rooted in both Tradition and pastoral experience. Let’s reflect on the reasons behind this truth so that you can accept it.

First: diminished capacity. Diminished capacity impacts one’s freedom of choice, and the



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Church teaches that a person with scrupulosity suffers from diminished capacity. In other words, if you suffer with scrupulosity, the disorder has so confused and distorted your freedom of choice that it is impossible for you to freely choose—and free choice is a necessary condition to commit a mortal sin. You cannot freely choose something when every one of your choices, as you reflect and make decisions, automatically descends into gravity and mortality because of your disorder—regardless of what the action or choice may be and regardless of how your scrupulosity falsely identifies it.

Second, it is completely nonsensical to believe that a scrupulous person—a person who is obsessed with not offending God in any way—is going to somehow freely choose to mortally offend God. A scrupulous person is hypersensitive to the idea that he or she may commit a mortal sin and thus destroy his or her relationship with God. This sensitivity is so obsessive that

it eliminates even the slightest possibility of grave sin. If you are scrupulous, you know how much time and energy you spend in a state of constant vigilance and examination, looking for sin, and in the process effectively denying yourself the possibility of engaging in grave behavior.

Third, a scrupulous person is so hypervigilant to the possibility of grave sin that he or she becomes preoccupied with the smallest details of what he or she perceives as sin, effectively acting against each detail. If you are scrupulous, you chop, dice, sort, and examine every presence of a feeling, emotion, or doubt—perfectly normal and acceptable human behaviors—to make sure that

there is no possibility of error or contamination. There is no chance that any of your thoughts, actions, choices, or judgments will develop into the condition required for mortal sin.

Fourth, if by some miraculous chance, something may have survived your constant examination and assignment of guilt, you will most assuredly confess it repeatedly in a never-ending cycle. God gives you his mercy, but instead of seeing God's graciousness and generosity, you seem to believe it is because of the thoroughness of your scrupulous conscience: "You must forgive me because there is nothing that I haven't repeatedly attempted to bring into the confessional."

I could provide even more examples, but these are sufficient to illustrate my point. What I will now discuss is some insight into the fear that scrupulosity and the resulting obsessive behaviors expose.

Scrupulous people have one specific fear that animates—and by no means in the positive sense of animation—the entire disorder. That fear is eternal damnation.

No matter the argument or sermon or theological reflection that speaks of eternal life as the intended final destination for all God's people, as a scrupulous person, you hear a different message. You hear that you are somehow the exception to God's generous love and mercy. You have been singled out for damnation unless you somehow prove to God that you deserve to be saved. Grace will never be enough, but a constant and exhaustive vigilance to guard against any kind of sin might make a difference. To the scrupulous, to think otherwise is too big of a risk; there is too much at stake.

A good therapist, spiritual director, and confessor working with you can effectively provide you with management skills to address the four



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reasons I presented. Unfortunately, there are few management skills that can effectively help ease the fear of eternal damnation, although some techniques can lessen your anxiety. The only way to find any real relief from this fear is anchored in the contemplative Tradition of the Church: you must confront it, face it, embrace the mystery, live with the anxiety, and claim your belief as an act of faith. Not certainty, but faith. This is where, in

the end, all people live, whether they suffer from scrupulosity or not. ⚙

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## ***The Need for Mercy in Modern Times***



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Sr. Faustina wrote that she heard Jesus say to her, "I want this image, which you will paint with a brush, to be solemnly blessed on the first Sunday after Easter; that Sunday is to be the feast of mercy" (Diary, §49).

On the second Sunday of Easter of the Jubilee Year 2000, at the Mass for the canonization of St. Faustina Kowalska, Pope St. John Paul II proclaimed to the world that "from now on, throughout the Church, this Sunday will be called Divine Mercy Sunday." Pope St. John Paul II had actively promoted the message of St. Faustina. In his 1980 encyclical on God's mercy, *Dives in Misericordia*, he wrote, "The present-day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the

human heart the very idea of mercy" (DM §2).

And in his message for the ninth World Day of Peace, Pope Leo spoke with urgency, begging believers to be witnesses to mercy: "The great parable of the Last Judgment invites all Christians to act with mercy. (See Matthew 25:31-46.) In doing so, they will find brothers and sisters at their side who, in different ways, have listened to the pain of others and freed themselves inwardly from the deception of violence" (Message for World Day of Peace, January 1, 2026).

Now, as much as in times past, the world needs the witness of disciples who embrace and practice mercy in their daily lives. Saint Faustina wrote, "Tell aching mankind to snuggle close to my merciful Heart, and I will fill it with peace" (Diary, §1074). Humankind is aching. With St. Maria Faustina of the Blessed Sacrament, we can each become a sign of God's merciful love. ⚙

Excerpted from *Catholic Update*, "Divine Mercy in Our Time: Following in the Footsteps of Saint Faustina" by Fr. James White, CSsR (C2605A). Available from Liguori Publications. To order, call 800-325-9521, or visit [Liguori.org](http://Liguori.org).



**Q.** *I am a nineteen-year-old male, and I am obsessed with impure and dirty thoughts. I fear that I am constantly in the state of mortal sin.*

**A.** You are not in the state of mortal sin; you are in the state of being a healthy human who experiences sexual thoughts and desires. Instead of judging each sexual impulse as bad or something to be repressed, why not choose instead to be grateful that you are alive, that you feel, and that you are a sexual being? Exactly the way that the Creator intended.



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**Q.** *A priest in his sermon hit a fragile point. He clearly said that the obligation to attend Sunday Mass is primary and that nothing can be more important than fulfilling that obligation. This seems to contradict what you often say, so now I am confused.*

**A.** Let me help you with your confusion. The priest in his homily got carried away with his enthusiasm. It is simply not true. The Church provides ordinary examples of lived human experiences that dispense a person from the obligation of Sunday Mass; for example, severe weather, illness (yourself or someone who is dependent on you), the distance between you and the nearest church, and so forth.

### **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.)

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