

## ***What Is Consent?***

FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSSR

One of the most common characteristics of the scrupulous condition, as noted by the author Dr. Ian Osborn in his book *Thoughts That Cannot Be Shaken*, is the unwelcome and impulsive thought. An impulsive thought is often quite graphic and upsetting, and it routinely causes the person to try to suppress it. In addition to struggling to suppress the thought, which is never successful—in fact, the effort to suppress it only makes the thought more persistent—the person immediately assumes a level of responsibility: Did I consent to the thought, and how grave of a sin is it?

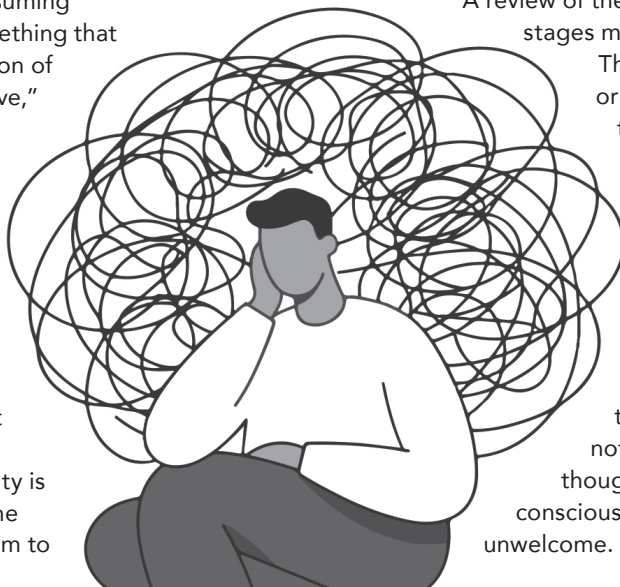
Identifying and assuming responsibility for something that is, by the very definition of the thought, “impulsive,” is where the anxiety is generated. Diminished capacity, a result of scrupulosity, always leads the person to the strictest and most unforgiving categorization of the impulsive thought as grave and serious. That is why scrupulosity is a disorder: it allows the person no real freedom to

consent to the thought, no matter how the person might fool him- or herself. There is only the assumption of serious guilt and responsibility.

Consent, according to traditional moral principles, is the third stage in the process of determining moral responsibility—not the automatic consequence of an unwelcome thought, as many people with scrupulosity assume. Classical spiritual writers, such as St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Francis de Sales, describe what happens from the experience of the impulsive/unwelcomed thought to the possibility of consent as a process with recognizable stages.

A review of these three traditional moral stages may be helpful.

The first stage is suggestion or perhaps understood as temptation—the moment when a thought, desire, or image enters the mind. This can come from many sources: human weakness, memory or imagination, external influences, tiredness, or stress. At this stage, the person has not chosen anything yet. The thought appears in the person’s consciousness, uninvited and unwelcome.



Examples of these types of thoughts include a sudden impulse to respond with anger or disgust, a sexual or erotic thought, a thought about acting selfishly, and so on. Both St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Francis de Sales insist that this kind of thought is not a sin because the person's will has not agreed to it. The person remains morally innocent at this stage.

The second stage occurs when the mind takes some pleasure in or feels some emotional attraction to the thought. The person may enjoy imagining the action, feel drawn toward the temptation, or linger with the thought. This stage involves some engagement, but the will is still resisting or undecided. According to St. Francis de Sales, this is often where spiritual struggle happens. The person may feel attraction to the thought but still refuse to choose the act. Thus, the thought itself is not a sin; the will has not freely consented.

The third stage is consent, the decisive moment when the will says, "Yes, I will embrace this, claim this, choose this." At this point, the thought becomes an act because the person has deliberately chosen it. This teaching is deeply connected with the explanation of sin found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which states that sin requires knowledge and deliberate consent.

It is important to note that this movement from the first stage to the third stage is not instantaneous. It is deliberative. It takes time. It requires real discernment. We are not talking about seconds or even minutes, but rather an extended period of time. There is no set time frame. Each person has his

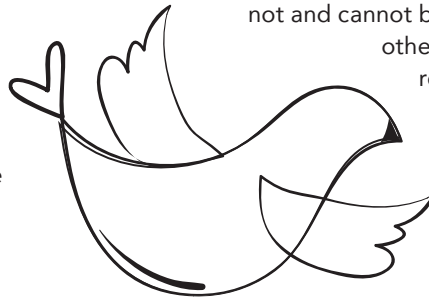
or her own experience, which is dependent on the circumstances and the context of the choice to be made. Only after the person has made a deliberate choice can we even begin to consider the final stage.

The final stage in the process is action, when the person carries the choice from the mind into an external act. This external act is the expression of interior consent. This is particularly important for a scrupulous person to understand. It is not the thought that is sinful; it is the action that results. Saint Francis de Sales gives a helpful illustration. The impulsive thought is like a bird flying over your head. You cannot stop it from flying over (suggestion), but you can stop it from building a nest in your hair (consent).

Undoubtedly, there are some readers who will question my assertion that the thought is not and cannot be a sin. Perhaps they have read other authors or consulted other resources and feel that there is a contradiction here. Let me explain.

This newsletter is for people with scrupulosity. The pastoral direction provided is done within the context of the scrupulous conscience. Because of diminished capacity, scrupulous people will find, through no fault of their own, every impulsive thought to be their responsibility and make the erroneous judgement that they have consented to these thoughts. This is FALSE. They did not. They cannot. They will not.

Diminished capacity is not an excuse. It is not a golden ticket. Rather, it is the description of how the scrupulous mind processes thoughts, not what



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the person consents to. OCD/scrupulosity is a mental disorder—a disorder that can be medically identified and treated with some success and promise. This disorder can generate anxiety and confusing feelings, but it is not sinful.

It is not a sign of laxity or a sign of moral weakness to accept and acknowledge how scrupulosity affects you. It is not a disorder that you sought out to escape moral responsibility. Diminished capacity is a symptom of the disorder—again, not a sign of laxity or moral

weakness. With good medical intervention and good spiritual and pastoral direction and care, you can learn to manage the disorder. A good place to begin learning how to manage your disorder is to understand how consent works and does not work. ✨

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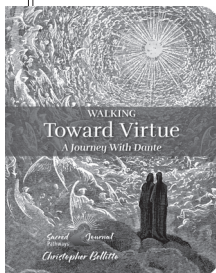
## ***Virtue: Living for Others***

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* talks about virtues in sections 1803–1845, within the part devoted to living a life of vocation following Christ's example. This section on virtues is nestled in Chapter 1, titled "The Dignity of the Human Person," which emphasizes that a life lived in virtue means being in dialogue with and in service to others. The purpose of the virtues is to help us live out the Golden Rule: do unto others what you'd have them do unto you. We might add the reverse, too: don't do to others what you wouldn't want them to do to you. The message is the same.

Living virtuously is a state of mind, a disposition, and a foundational way of engaging with the world. Virtues are tendencies and good habits. Don't forget that, at the same time, vices are these things, too: tendencies, dispositions, bad habits.

Living virtuously makes us better people, and being better people means helping others. Our goal should be to learn to live virtuous lives like it's a good habit. Practice makes us as perfect as we can be, given that we're human.

Christian Tradition puts forward four virtues, known as the cardinal virtues. This term has nothing to do with the men dressed in red who vote for the pope in a conclave. The word "cardinal" comes from the Latin word *cardo*, meaning "hinge." These four virtues are the hinges around which all the other virtues pivot. They are central and essential, serving as the inner core from which the others come. Using the original terms, they are *prudence*, *justice*, *fortitude*, and *temperance*. Saint Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century called them the "principal" virtues because he said they are the key to the others.



Excerpted from *Walking Toward Virtue: A Journey with Dante* by Christopher M. Bellitto (828874). Available from Liguori Publications. To order, call 800-325-9521, or visit [Liguori.org](http://Liguori.org).

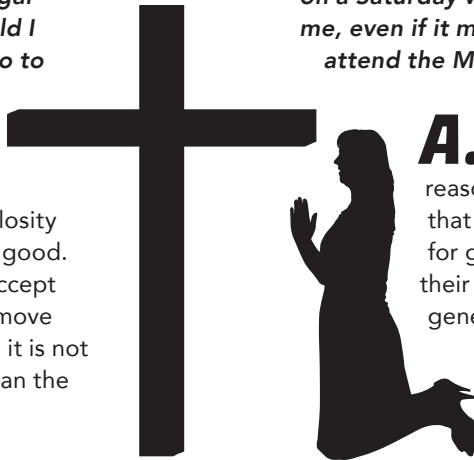


**Q.** I just finished day 50 in my 54-day novena, and at the very end of my novena prayers, I experienced terrible and vulgar thoughts. I am so upset. Should I repeat the novena prayers? Go to confession? Repeat it as a penance?

**A.** Do nothing. It is perfectly fine. It is scrupulosity trying to ruin something that is good. Do not give in to the feeling. Accept that these things happen, and move on. As upsetting as it might be, it is not reflective of any reality other than the reality of scrupulosity.

**Q.** I depend on others to take me to Mass. Is it OK to not want to bother someone on a Saturday when it is their birthday to take me, even if it means I would not be able to attend the Mass?

**A.** It is OK. It is a decision that you need to make, and it is a reasonable choice. It demonstrates that you are not taking this person for granted, and that you appreciate their effort. It is a kind, mature, and generous choice.



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### 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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