

I Am Really Hopeful

FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSsR

In the fourth edition of my book *Understanding Scrupulosity*, I share an experience I had with scrupulosity as a newly ordained priest. It is an appropriate story to introduce the subject matter to readers of the book, but, in retrospect, from my position forty-eight years after the event, I find myself cringing at my response—not only my response but also the responses of the other priests in the story, each of whom were very good priests and who, taken as a whole, represented over 200 years of priesthood. Here is the story:

As a newly ordained priest stationed at my first parish assignment, I received an unusual phone call within the first few days of my arrival. It was a woman who asked me a question I was totally unprepared to answer: “Should I serve tomato soup or vegetable soup for dinner?”

I remember standing in the rectory, phone in hand, frantically trying to determine if this was a crank call, if this was some important question that only the pastor should answer, or if there was something here that I was missing. I finally blurted out, “Make the tomato soup.”

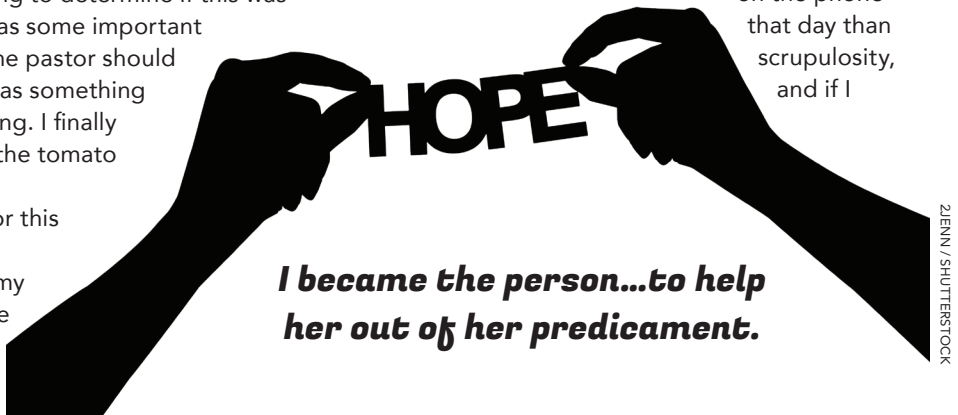
My only reason for this choice was my own preference. In fact, my own soup preference was the only thing

I understood about the conversation. There was undoubtedly something going on, I reflected, but I was missing it.

Later, through the wise counsel of another priest, I discovered that I had experienced my first scrupulous phone call. The woman, well known in the parish by all the priests on staff, had called me because she was “paralyzed” in front of her cupboard, trying to make a choice that she understood to be a serious choice that might offend God. Because I was the priest who had answered the phone, I became the person who was going to help her out of her predicament.

Later, through many more such instances, I learned that trying to choose “which soup might be more pleasing to God” was an extreme manifestation of scrupulosity. I also learned that there was probably more at work with the woman

on the phone
that day than
scrupulosity,
and if I



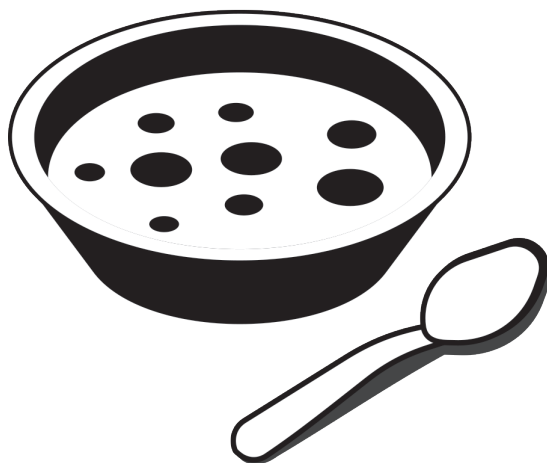
***I became the person...to help
her out of her predicament.***

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were going to be an effective minister, I would have to become more knowledgeable about such experiences.

Yes, this is a powerful story, and, yes, that phone call taught me something important. However, there was something missing in my response and something missing in the response of each of the priests who answered the woman's question in the same way. What was missing was *empathy and understanding*. While each of us perceived the woman as a person with a problem, not even one of us took a step back and listened to what she was really sharing. Her question had nothing to do with choosing a soup. It had nothing to do with sin. It had everything to do with real suffering—a suffering so intense that she engaged in the ritual of seeking reassurance because she wanted to stop, or at least numb, the pain. The woman knew, in her heart of hearts, that it did not matter which soup she chose to make for dinner. She was an intelligent person; however, her intelligence was overwhelmed by the feeling and the emotion manifested by her disorder, which paralyzed her to the point that the only decision she could make was to call a priest for some kind of reassurance that everything was OK.

Somewhere in the exchange, the scrupulous person might recognize that there is someone who understands him or her and is willing to help.



Not a single priest told me about the woman's pain. Not a single priest had even the slightest clue about what was really going on; what she was really experiencing. She was just another pastoral problem—almost an irritation, to be honest—that needed to be taken care of.

Today, after many years of experience with people who suffer from scrupulosity, I would respond differently. I might say, "You and I both know this question is not really about soup. We also know your choice is not about offending God; it is not a serious or grave matter. But the pain you feel is real, and you simply want relief. If I tell you which soup to make, you may feel better for a few minutes, but it will not address what is truly happening."

To be perfectly honest and candid, this response would probably not make much of a difference. When a scrupulous person is caught up in the energy of an obsessive or compulsive action, nothing really helps until the energy generated by the action dissipates. It really must play itself out. But, somewhere in the exchange, the scrupulous person might recognize that there is someone who understands him or her and is willing to help. It might not be the first time, it might not be the tenth time, but eventually the suffering person will be able to ask for the help he or she needs, and the healing can begin.

Unfortunately, in most rectories today, the woman on the phone would get the same answer that I gave her forty-eight years ago. All those years have not made a difference. Most priests do not understand the scrupulous condition and the pain it causes—not because they do not care, but because they truly do not know the disorder and how it is manifested.

Many priests understand scrupulosity as a "tender conscience," something that can be fixed with patient and robust catechetical training. There are people who have a tender conscience, and the traditional approach can be very helpful for them. However, with scrupulosity, there is something more going on—and that "something more" is the manifestation of obsessive-compulsive disorder

(OCD), which does not respond well to the traditional pastoral approach. Proper help for scrupulosity has been lacking—until now.

I do not typically like promoting my books in this newsletter, but in this case, I will make an exception. My new book, *A Confessor's Companion: Tender Conscience and Scrupulosity*, is an attempt to inform priest confessors about the scrupulous condition. My intention is to help them respond, pastorally and effectively, to those who suffer. It has taken me more than forty-eight years of priesthood and thirty-five

years of scrupulosity ministry to write this book. I really hope it will make a difference. In addition to helping priest confessors, this book will also be very useful for counselors, therapists, and spiritual directors. I hope you will find it as helpful as I imagine it to be. ⚙

Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR, is the president and publisher of Liguori Publications, his second assignment as the company's leader. Professed as a Redemptorist in 1973, his ministries have included retreat work and writing reflections for the *Scrupulous Anonymous* newsletter.

On Politics

ARCHBISHOP FULTON J. SHEEN

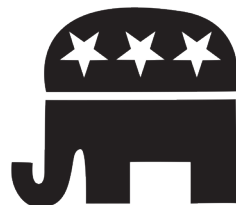
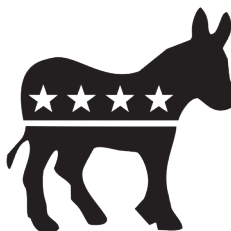
Note: Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, declared Venerable by Pope Benedict XVI in 2012, will be beatified on September 24, 2026, at a Mass in St. Louis. His "pearls of wisdom" have inspired many to enter the Catholic Church and to grow as disciples of Jesus.

Christ's Church will be attacked, scorned, and ridiculed, but it will never be destroyed.... Politics has become so all possessive of life, that by impertinence it thinks the only philosophy a person can hold is the right or the left. This question puts out all the lights of religion so they can call all the cats gray. It assumes that [people live] on a purely horizontal plane and can move only to the right or the left.

Had we eyes less material, we would see that there are two other directions where people with a soul may look: the vertical directions up and down. Both figured in the crucifixion of our Lord. Even those cruel men who crucified him knew that these were the directions that counted. They shouted to him, "Come down," and we will believe. That echo has been caught up and is being bruited about the world today. "Down with religion!" "Down with capital!" "Down with labor!" "Down with reactionaries!" "Down with progressives!"

Have we not been tearing down long enough? Can one build a world with the word "down"? Did not the captain Christ give another cry? "If I be lifted up, I will draw all things to myself." But where shall we be lifted? To the cross, the prelude of the empty tomb, the cross of Christ our Redeemer. Hear that word "up." Shout it abroad! "Up from class hatred; up from envy; up from avarice; up beyond the margin of the world; up beyond the troubled gateways of the stars—Up... Up... Up to God!"

From "Fulton J. Sheen: Seven Pearls of Wisdom" (C2209A). Available from Liguori Publications. To order, call 800-325-9521 or visit Liguori.org.



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