

Personal Relationship Is Essential

FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSSR

Cardinal Basil Hume (1923–1999) once told a story about his mother. After baking cookies one day, she said, “Son, I’m going to leave this cookie jar right here on the table. But don’t you dare sneak in and eat any of them. Remember: God is watching you!”

As a child, young Basil never touched the cookie jar.

Years later, Cardinal Hume said the lesson struck him with new force. If he had secretly reached into the jar and taken a cookie, God would not have punished him. Instead, God would have said, “Basil, they’re so good! Have another!”

Not everyone has a powerful teaching memory like Cardinal Hume’s, but each of us is invited, at some point, to move from a formal relationship with God to one that is deeply personal. This movement draws us away from fear of punishment and toward the hope that God delights in our lives and choices.

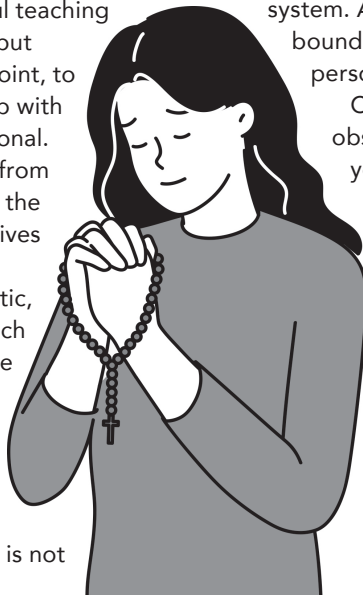
The transition is not automatic, and it unfolds differently for each person. Sadly, some never make it—not because they are bad, but because the journey can be difficult. Some obstacles are manageable, while others, such as scrupulosity, are far more challenging. Scrupulosity is not

impossible to overcome, but it can be difficult to manage.

I believe the greatest obstacle that scrupulous people face is not simply a challenging relationship with God. Rather, their primary relationship may be with the Church—more precisely, with its system of sin, confession, contrition, grace, and mercy—rather than with God himself. This distinction is essential to understanding scrupulosity. God is personal, and Christians worship a Trinitarian God. Moral theology, by contrast, is a system, not a person; one cannot have a living relationship with a system. A system can define, interpret, and set boundaries, but that is very different from a personal relationship.

Consider the energy you spend in the obsessive and compulsive surge of OCD as you frantically search for the answer you seek in the *Catechism*, in canon law, or from a social media personality you often consult for direction. Now imagine redirecting that same time

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and energy from a frantic search for clarity to quiet rest in the presence of God. No answers, no definitions, no certainty—only the calm and confidence of knowing you are a beloved child of God.

For people with the scrupulous disorder, the idea of having an experience of “resting in the Lord” sounds unattainable. I understand that the loudest voice in the silence is not calming at first. It is the voice of the scrupulosity shouting, “Pay attention to me!” That voice must be resisted. There is no peace in the confused and demanding world of scrupulosity; there is only chaos.

I often remind people who suffer from scrupulosity that the wisest and healthiest choice is to avoid triggering the disorder.

In this case, that means stepping away from the system and resisting the pull of both obsession and compulsion.

One common trigger is the examination of conscience, a useful spiritual tool for those who do not struggle with scrupulosity. For the scrupulous person, however, it can create a false sense of sinfulness, often centered on serious or grave sin. Rather than using the examination for honest reflection, the person may engage with it anxiously, asking, *How guilty am I of all these sins?* That is not how people without scrupulosity typically experience the examination. These people can usually set aside most of the listed examples and focus instead on particular actions or weaknesses they know they have engaged in. For the scrupulous, though, the experience is entirely different, marked by intensity and dread.

Another trigger that encourages obsession and compulsion is any one of a myriad of novenas to the saints or for a particular grace or blessing. For the scrupulous, novenas are often experiences of intense anxiety and worry about the so-called



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“quality” of their prayer or the focus they believe a novena demands. Producing even more anxiety is the doubt: *Do I have to start the novena over again because I was distracted or because I might have missed something?*

Non-scrupulous people accept each of the foregoing examples as normal human behaviors and responses. Nothing more is required to fulfill the obligation. If it could only be so simple for the scrupulous! Unfortunately, for every example I provide, and for countless other examples that I have not discussed here, there is some saint or, worse, some social media commentator who has said or will say something that seems to confirm what the scrupulous person fears, thus confirming the anxiety generated.

I repeat, almost word for word, what I wrote about earlier in this reflection: Consider the energy spent in the obsessive and compulsive surge of OCD as you frantically search for errors or mistakes in your novena practice. Now imagine redirecting that same time and energy from a frantic search for perfection to quiet rest in the presence of God. No answers, no definitions, no certainty, no perfection required—only the calm and confidence of knowing you are a beloved child of God.

A personal relationship with God is essential for the spiritual life. In contrast, combat and jousting with a system that was intended to aid you in reaching the experience of union with the Lord, and that has failed you spectacularly because of the disorder, needs to be disengaged. ✨

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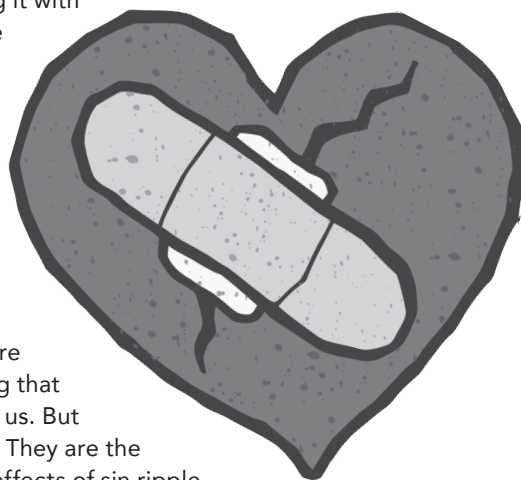
The Beauty of Our Wounds

The Japanese technique known as *kintsugi* involves piecing together shattered pottery and binding it with gold lacquer. Rather than trying to hide the flaws in a piece, this art form recognizes that flaws themselves are part of an object's beauty. Our wounds—and especially the ways we react to them—are precious scars that make us unique, beautiful children of God.

Well-meaning platitudes can undercut this central truth of human existence. When people say, "God's ways are not our ways," "God has a plan," or "God never gives us more than we can handle," it's easy to start thinking that God gave us this pain on purpose to torment us. But the wounds we suffer are not the will of God. They are the reality of living in a fallen world in which the effects of sin ripple outward.

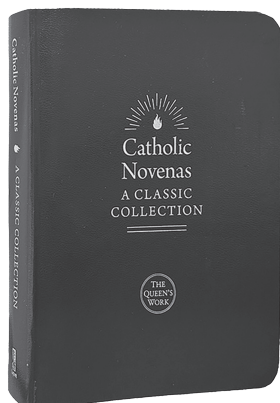
One thing is true, though: God can use our pain—our broken places—to do something

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beautiful within us. As he stitches us back together with the gold of his love and healing, we become more sensitive to the richness life has to offer. We learn a profound gratitude for all that is good, beautiful, and holy, as well as empathy and compassion for others.

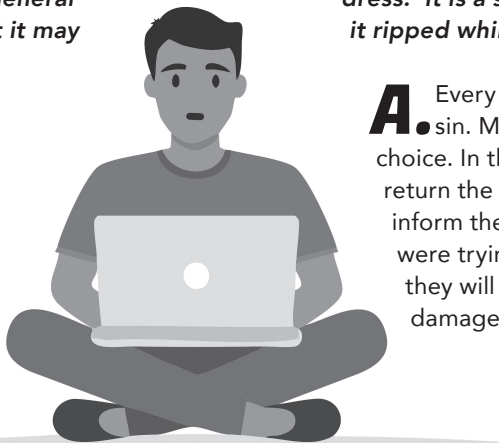
God does not abandon us to despair. If we give him the space to work within us, he can transform our pain. We may not recognize it until years later, if ever. But trusting that God's hand is at work, even in suffering he did not wish upon us, can free us to hope for the future.



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Q. I am going to confession today and wonder if I need to include that I ask AI questions, looking for answers. I only ask general questions, but I am worried that it may be a sin.

A. It is not a sin to use AI to answer appropriate questions. However, because you are a scrupulous person, I would advise you to maturely limit your questioning, regardless of the resource. You do not need the reassurance that you think you need. Learn to live with the questions.



MUHAMMAD AFANDI / UNSPLASH

Q. I bought a dress, but it ripped when I was trying it on. I do not like the dress. It is a sin now to return it because it ripped while I was trying it on?

A. Every choice or action is not a sin. Most of the time, it is just a choice. In this case, it is not a sin to return the dress, but you do need to inform them that it ripped when you were trying it on. More than likely, they will not accept it because it is damaged.

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.)

For books, booklets, pamphlets and more, visit [Liguori.org](#).



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