Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

November 2026
Vol. 63, No. 11

A MINISTRY OF
THE REDEMPTORISTS SINCE 1964

Uneven Pastoral Care

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A common experience among people who suffer from scrupulosity, and one I often hear about, is uneven pastoral care. This is not because confessors are deliberately unhelpful— far from it. Rather, many are simply not adequately prepared to minister effectively to scrupulous people. Confessors may believe they understand the disorder, but, too often, they do not. Their seminary formation and the lack of continuing education and formation have not sufficiently prepared them for this specialized ministry.



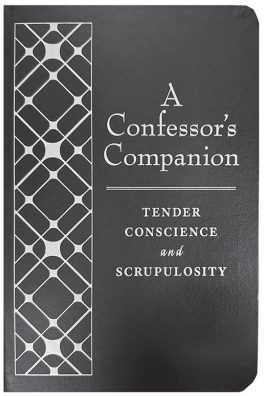
The confessor's first pastoral response to the scrupulous person is often shaped by the traditional understanding of scrupulosity as a tender conscience. This understanding commonly forms the basis of a priest's pastoral training regarding scrupulosity. As a result, the usual remedy is primarily catechetical: the confessor directs the penitent away from assuming mortal sin, explains the necessary conditions for mortal sin—grave matter, deliberate choice, and offense against God—and encourages the penitent to apply the definition of sin more accurately.

A second response, also based on the idea of a tender conscience, is to direct the scrupulous person to seek guidance from only one confessor. For the scrupulous, multiple confessors are not helpful and usually create confusion. Within this model, when it is applied well, the person gradually learns about sin, the purpose of the sacrament of reconciliation, and the healthy practices associated with it. Over time, attentive pastoral care can help form the tender conscience into a healthy one, so that scrupulosity is effectively managed and, in many cases, eventually disappears.

This is the traditional and virtuous pastoral approach to ministering to a person with a tender conscience. But what happens when the person is not suffering from a tender conscience, but from a disorder? What happens when the penitent is suffering from obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)? In that case, the traditional

pastoral response is not only unhelpful, but it can be harmful. It fails to address the real issue. OCD is not a spiritual problem that can be resolved by the usual pastoral remedy; it is a mental disorder. Catechesis, however thorough or well intended, may only make the experience more complicated and confusing.

This is where pastoral care becomes uneven. When the confessor cannot accurately recognize what is happening, he may apply the traditional pastoral response that he believes is necessary and helpful. As a result, both he and the penitent can become frustrated as they are drawn into the ritual patterns of OCD. Some confessors, to their credit, remain patient and compassionate, which is at least comforting, even if it is not ultimately helpful. In fact, the confessor may unintentionally reinforce the OCD by offering reassurance: "No, that is not a sin," "No, you do not need to go into that much detail," or, the most common response, "You do not need to keep confessing sins you think you remember. God has already forgiven them."



A Confessor's Companion: Tender Conscience and Scrupulosity
Rev. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR
Available from Liguori Publications.

Even when OCD appears within the sacrament of reconciliation, it is not fundamentally about sin. The penitent is using the language of sin to express anxiety and suffering. The careful sorting of mortal, grave, and venial categories is less a moral judgment than a reflection of the shame, guilt, and doubt the person is experiencing. Any relief the penitent feels after confession usually fades quickly, because the sacrament of reconciliation is meant to forgive sins, not to heal the emotional suffering caused by a mental disorder.

One unfortunate and relatively recent source of uneven pastoral care for scrupulous penitents is the belief held by some priest confessors that references to OCD or a mental disorder is simply an expression of "modernism." As a result, they reject any pastoral approach that departs from the traditional understanding of scrupulosity. This is deeply unfortunate, because the suffering encouraged by this view is profoundly troubling.

Another troubling aspect of uneven pastoral care for scrupulous penitents—one that has been reported to me—occurs when a confessor withholds absolution because he believes there is "no firm purpose of amendment." When I first encountered this response, I was speechless. I could not understand how any priest, faced with a person who is clearly suffering, could respond in this way. If anything, the person's distress reveals a deep desire for amendment. Scrupulous people despise sin; they are not nurturing it.

Unfortunately, despite the sincere efforts of many, the conditions that lead to uneven pastoral care remain. A person suffering from scrupulosity may still encounter a priest confessor who is not helpful. If this happens to you, my best advice is to choose another confessor and avoid an encounter that does not bring healing or help. I understand that circumstances can make this difficult, but it remains the better choice. You deserve healing, not further suffering.

Uneven pastoral care is not deliberate. In all my years of priestly ministry, I have never encountered a priest who would choose suffering over healing; that is never the intention. Still, there remains a significant gap in the pastoral care needed for scrupulous penitents. This ministry requires skills that go well beyond the basic formation often provided in seminary. Awareness has improved in recent years, but we still have a long way to go to ensure the excellence in pastoral care that scrupulous people need and deserve. ☼

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.

We Need Your Support for Scrupulous Anonymous

Dear *Scrupulous Anonymous* Reader,

We're reaching out to ask for your support in keeping alive our free newsletter for people who suffer from scrupulosity.

Since 1964, the Redemptorists and the staff who publish *Scrupulous Anonymous* have been providing valuable resources, coping strategies, and a sense of community for those affected by scrupulosity, but we rely on donations to continue offering it at no cost.
Your generous gift will help pay for the cost of printing and mailing the newsletter as well as the cost of ScrupulousAnonymous.org, where the archive of newsletters is available for everyone.

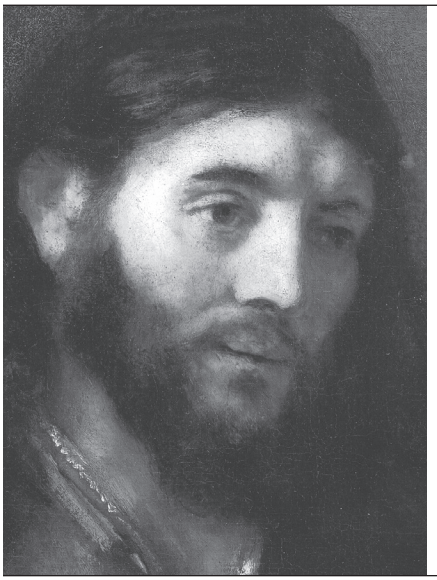
Your contribution, no matter the amount, will help us keep this resource accessible to those who need it most. Please consider donating and making a difference in the lives of people who suffer from scrupulosity.

Thank you for your kindness and support.

Yours in Christ,
Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR

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Thank you for supporting our ministry.



Head of Christ, attributed to Rembrandt van Ryn

Prayer of Blessing

"Lord, catch me off guard today.
Surprise me with some moment of beauty
or pain
So that at least for the moment
I may be startled into seeing that you are
here in all your splendor,
Always and everywhere,
Barely hidden,
Beneath,
Beyond,
Within this life I breathe."

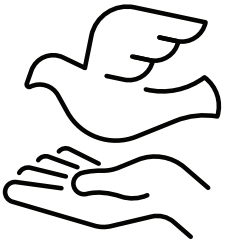
—Frederick Buechner

Mailbox

NEWSLETTER@LIGUORI.ORG

Q. ***I currently lack the strength and will to go to confession because I fear I may omit details that are necessary. As a result, my absolution will be invalid. I need peace.***

A. This is all generated by scrupulosity. You will never be able to satisfy the need for details that scrupulosity demands. If a priest needs more details from you to understand what you are confessing, he will ask you for clarification. If he does not ask for more details, you can presume that you are fine. Your confession is valid, no matter what you feel.



Q. ***I work in a hospital, and when we are discussing patients, we are expected to use their preferred pronouns. Is it a sin to use their preferred pronouns?***

A. No, it is not a sin. We live in a secular society, and there are certain expectations and norms. Politeness and respect are two such norms. Using a person's pronouns is not approval; it is respect. Do not make it more than it is. You have enough to worry about.

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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