

UNDERSTANDING SCRUPULOSITY

QUESTIONS AND
ENCOURAGEMENT

Third Edition

Thomas M. Santa, CSsR



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Introduction

This is a pastoral book, not a professional tome; the difference is essential. I have no psychological training, so I'm not qualified to write a professional work on scrupulosity. However, many years of practical and pastoral experience with people with scrupulosity have taught me a great deal.

When the initial anxiety of a scruple comes to a person's awareness, a priest or counselor is often able to dismiss it with reassurance, but sometimes a priest or counselor isn't available. This book, which represents fifty years of questions and answers from the *Scrupulous Anonymous* (SA) newsletter, will be beneficial at such moments to people with scrupulosity. In that sense, this is a pastoral book.

This book will also be helpful to the priests and counselors who are often the first point of contact for people with scrupulosity, so I hope it will be required reading for seminarians and others preparing for counseling positions or ministry. In that sense, my effort in these pages is professional.

Before I became priest-director of SA, I was convinced scrupulosity was dying. I assumed that because Catholics place less emphasis on the sacrament of reconciliation and on rules and regulations as a result of the revision of canon law under the direction of St. Pope John Paul II, fewer and fewer people

would have scrupulosity. I assumed scrupulosity was a problem for elderly people and for people accustomed to the way we used to do things.

However, my correspondence and the retreats I conduct have led me to believe that new SA members are not just the elderly, nor are they necessarily being counseled by priests, who spend less time in the confessional than they used to. Psychologists, social workers, spiritual directors, and supportive family members and friends are often the “ministers of first resort” for people with scrupulosity.

Some people with scrupulosity give up hope of finding help, simply choosing to suffer quietly. For a person with a very active case of scruples, finding someone who is willing to listen is like trying to find a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean. People with scrupulosity are so desperate for help that they cling to the person reaching out to them, and in their desperation they soon swamp the boat. There seems to be no end to the questions, the details, and exceptions. Many people with scrupulosity have been subjected to impatience in the confessional, avoidance in public places, and being hung up on in frustration.

My contribution to this project has been to organize the questions and answers (which have been edited to accommodate the book format), provide commentary, and introduce each section. The questions come from people with the disease, and the answers come from the Scrupulous Anonymous priest-directors of the last fifty years: Redemptorist Frs. Thomas E. Tobin, Donald Miller, Daniel Lowery, John Farnik, Louis Miller, Joseph Nolen, and Victor Karls.

In addition, I must single out Fr. Patrick Kaler. For many SA members, Fr. Kaler was the only person they could turn to for help and understanding. In my opinion, Fr. Kaler “earned” sainthood because of this ministry. The many phone calls always graciously accepted, the volume of letters meticulously answered, and the daily prayers and sacrifices he freely offered were an inspiration. I’ve never pretended to follow in his footsteps.

INTRODUCTION

Now, a personal note: I've been the editor of the *SA* newsletter longer than any previous priest-director. This edition of *Understanding Scrupulosity* reflects the expertise I've developed over those years as well as the advances researchers have made in treating obsessive-compulsive disorder. If readers of the previous editions notice information in this third edition that contradicts advice provided by previous priest-directors, they can rest assured that the new information follows the pastoral direction I believe to be most helpful.

Finally, I must thank some very special people. The first is my sister, Theresa Czarnopys, who initially made sense of twenty-five years of questions and answers. She was very patient with my many changes and unreadable scribbled notes. In a very real sense, her name belongs on the cover of this book.

I also wish to thank Patricia DeClue. Pat helped me prepare 165 issues of the *SA* newsletter. She made sure that what I wrote made sense; if it didn't, she gently brought it to my attention. When Pat moved on, Maureen Connolly stepped in and didn't miss a beat.

In closing, I must thank the members of SA. I can't begin to say how much I appreciate each of you. If this book contributes to your sense of peace, my work has been worthwhile.

Rev. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR
Minneapolis, Minnesota
2016

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PART ONE

DEFINING
THE PROBLEM

Chapter One

What Is Scrupulosity?

When I was a newly ordained priest, I received an unusual phone call within the first few days of my arrival at my first parish assignment. It was a woman asking a question I was unprepared to answer: “Should I serve tomato soup or vegetable soup for dinner?” I stood in the rectory, phone in hand, frantically trying to determine whether this was a crank call or an important question only the pastor should answer—or whether I was missing something. I finally blurted, “Make the tomato soup.”

I chose tomato soup because it was my preference. In fact, that was the only thing I understood about the entire conversation. Something else was undoubtedly going on, but I was missing it.

Later, through the wise counsel of another priest, I discovered that I had experienced my first call from a person with scrupulosity. The woman, well known by the priests on staff, had called me because she was “paralyzed” in front of her cupboard, trying to make a decision she understood to be a serious choice that might offend God, or if not God then certainly her family or perhaps her dinner guests. The priest who answered the phone became the person who was going to help her.

Later, through many more such experiences, I learned that the choice of “what soup might be more pleasing to God” is an extreme

manifestation of scrupulosity. I also learned that there was probably more at work with the woman that day than scrupulosity and that to be an effective minister I'd have to learn more about it. It wasn't enough to flippantly answer, "Make the tomato soup." Something more was going on, and it deserved my attention and my respect.

What is scrupulosity? The simplest answer, and perhaps the traditional answer, is that it's an age-old problem that was long understood as a "tender conscience." Great saints have spoken about it and have counseled their followers about it. Still others, such as St. Alphonsus Liguori and St. Ignatius of Loyola, had it. Many people understand scrupulosity to be a religious problem, and others see it specifically as a Catholic problem.

For many years, mental-health professionals dismissed scrupulosity as a symptom of neurotic behavior and treated it accordingly. Scrupulosity has been long recognized by priests, rabbis, and spiritual directors. Only recently has it been understood as a possible subtype of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Recent studies suggest that approximately 3 million people in the United States have OCD; it has been further asserted that approximately 6% of this group (about 180,000 people) have religious scrupulosity.

Scrupulosity has two distinct manifestations: developmental and emotional.

For the most part, developmental scrupulosity can be traced to a specific time in adolescence during which the person became excessively focused on sin and its consequences. Those who first experience scrupulosity as an adult can often trace it to a powerful conversion experience, for example, at the conclusion of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) process. More often than not, people with developmental scrupulosity can experience relief, if not a complete "cure," with the help of a kind and patient confessor. We might best understand developmental scrupulosity as the manifestation of a "tender conscience."

Emotional scrupulosity, on the other hand, is a more enduring form of the disorder. The manifestation is primarily obsessive when

the person has a persistent intrusive and senseless idea, image, or impulse. The manifestation is primarily a compulsion when the person feels compelled to carry out a repetitive action. The person often understands the compulsion to be senseless, for example, repeatedly washing hands, checking locks, reciting prayers, or performing a specific ritual action associated with religious practice.

Emotionally rooted scrupulosity requires professional help. It's not possible to pray oneself out of emotional scrupulosity, and a patient and gentle confessor cannot help rationalize the behavior. Prayer and a gentle confessor are important and useful, but behavior modification and drug therapy are required—and highly effective.

From the pastoral perspective, the best way to understand scrupulosity is to recognize its manifestation. Most people with scrupulosity describe it as “thoughts that cannot be shaken,” being possessed by “a thousand frightening fantasies,” or being constantly and unrelentingly “pricked by a pin.”

Joseph Ciarrocchi, PhD, author of *The Doubting Disease* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), identified the core experience of scrupulosity as “an intrusive idea, often associated with a sinful impulse, which the person abhors but cannot shake.” Good people from all walks of life find themselves possessed by a thought or desire that won't go away. Even when they realize they're obsessing over a particular thought or idea, they can't summon the logic or rational argument that would help. They continue to obsess, and they continue to be robbed of the peace they long for. The thought continues to disturb them through no fault of their own.

Since the obsessive thoughts are associated with faith and spirituality, the entire experience of faith is marked with anxiety and fear instead of peace and strength. People with scrupulosity are doing all they can to believe and be hopeful, but they just can't shake the sense of impending doom, disappointment, or eventual condemnation.

SYMPTOMS

TENDER CONSCIENCE/ DEVELOPMENTAL SCRUPULOSITY

Question: Where does the word *scrupulous* come from?

Answer: It comes from a Latin word meaning “a small, sharp stone.” If you walk with a small stone in your shoe, it is annoying. Scruples can be annoying too. They should not be neglected.

Fr. L. Miller, CSSR

Question: How does scrupulosity differ from ordinary worry?

Answer: Many years ago my moral theology professor, Fr. Hugh O’Connell, said that scrupulosity is a habitual state of mind that, because of an unreasonable fear of sin, inclines a person to judge certain thoughts or actions to be sinful when they aren’t, or to judge that they’re more gravely wrong than they are. Note the emphasis on an unreasonable fear of sin. If a person merely mistakenly believes an action to be wrong, but in fact the action is not wrong, he doesn’t necessarily have scrupulosity. Scrupulosity involves an emotional condition that interferes with the proper working of the mind and produces a judgment not in accordance with truth, but with fear.

Fr. Kaler, CSSR

Question: How can a person know she has scrupulosity?

Answer: Scrupulosity has been termed “the doubting disease.” People with scrupulosity find it difficult to trust their ability to make decisions. They constantly examine their motives, thoughts, and feelings. It doesn’t matter what the decision is about. The anxiety is created in the act of making a decision and trusting that decision. Therefore, it follows that people with scrupulosity will also doubt whether they have the disease, just as they sometimes

wonder whether they're in serious sin, have correctly performed a penance, are capable of praying in a way that is acceptable to God, and so forth. In each instance they must learn to trust the advice and counsel of a single confessor or spiritual director.

Fr. Santa, CSsR

Question: How can I tell if I have religious scrupulosity?

Answer: With religious scrupulosity, we're not talking about mere perfectionism, concern about minutiae, or a preoccupation with neatness and order. People with religious scrupulosity are in a much more perilous situation. They fear they have offended or will offend God. They fear that sins of the past, present, or future will never be forgiven. For a person who is sincerely religious, nothing could be worse. Self-loathing, as bad as it is, is nothing compared to the conviction that God loathes you. It's a living hell, a terrible disease. It doesn't tell the truth about you or about God. Each person's scrupulosity has unique characteristics. But people with the above-mentioned traits and who are terrorized by sin have scrupulosity.

Fr. Kaler, CSsR

Question: You say people with scrupulosity tend to see serious sin in almost everything. If it's true that we sin whenever we think we're sinning, then people with scrupulosity must be guilty of a multitude of offenses against God, and there is no hope unless they are cured of their scrupulosity. Is there error in this reasoning?

Answer: The error may be in your understanding of the very nature of sin. Sin doesn't happen by accident. It has several basic elements, one of which is sufficient reflection. A person must be clearly aware of the seriousness of the action and the choice to carry it out. This knowledge or advertence implies the ability to evaluate and appreciate moral values. It is, as it were, knowledge with a twist. It demands insight into moral values. Because people with scrupulosity tend to evaluate moral questions not as the Church