

# Catholic

## UPDATE

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## Crippled by Fear

### UNDERSTANDING THE SCRUPULOUS MIND

A REDEMPTORIST  
PASTORAL PUBLICATION

**Have you ever encountered  
someone who seems  
incapable of making daily  
life decisions with finality?**

Someone regularly overcome with questions, feelings of guilt, anxiety, and fear? Perhaps you or a family member battle uncontrollable thoughts or persistent compulsions. It's an age-old problem, traditionally understood—particularly in reference to faith and spirituality—as “a tender conscience,” or “the doubting disease.”

However, priests and spiritual directors have long recognized this disorder as a debilitating problem called scrupulosity.

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If we took a random sample of Catholics and asked, “What is scrupulosity?” we’d likely find that, for the small number who are even familiar with the term, most of them consider scrupulosity to be an uncommon problem affecting few people. In reality, great saints have spoken of and counseled their followers on the topic for many years. Saints Alphonsus Liguori and Ignatius of Loyola lived with it. And a fair number of our Catholic brothers and sisters are plagued by intrusive and senseless ideas and the images and impulses often associated with the disorder. Scrupulosity affects all ages, both genders, and all education levels. The effects also extend to the afflicted individual’s family, friends, and his or her confessor and spiritual director. As we further explore the nature of scrupulosity, consider what it means to those afflicted with it and learn how we as a community of faith can respond.

### What Is Scrupulosity?

Scrupulosity is the quality or state of being scrupulous, which means strict, exact, punctilious, or careful. “Joe is a scrupulous accountant” and “Jane is scrupulously honest” are high compliments, but Catholic moral theology states scrupulosity is a spiritual or psychological state of morbid anxiety and fear, even panic, about sin and evil in one’s life. It’s an abiding sense of guilt that one is almost always in the state of sin.

*Scrupulous* comes from a Latin word meaning “a small sharp stone.” A scrupulous person’s spiritual journey may be aptly compared to a hiker with a pebble in his or her shoe that makes every step painful. While accurate, that example doesn’t fully describe scrupulosity.

## Ten Commandments *for the* Scrupulous

Fr. Thomas Santa, C  
they don’t guarante  
scrupulosity to guid

**1** Without exception, you shall not confess sins you have already confessed.

When you refuse to engage the feeling of doubt and thereby resist the urge to animate and energize your scrupulosity, the wave of anxiety passes. Doubt-generated anxiety deprives us of the peace of Christ, our birthright through grace. Yes, it’s difficult, fearsome, and takes practice. But it can be achieved.

**2** You shall confess only sins that are clear and certain.

Many people with scrupulosity think that those who don’t suffer are somehow completely free of doubt. This is a myth. Doubt is natural and normal. It doesn’t equal sinfulness, it indicates humanness. Offer confessions without hesitation, excuse, or innumerable details. If the confessor doesn’t ask for clarification, have every confidence that you have been clearly and certainly understood.

**3** After confession, you shall not repeat your