



# Understanding Scrupulosity

RELIEF AND  
ENCOURAGEMENT

Rev. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR



Catholic. Pastoral. Trusted.

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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 sixty-five years of questions and answers from the *Scrupulous Anonymous* (SA) newsletter, will be beneficial to people with scrupulosity at such moments. 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 ministry or counseling positions. 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 Catholic practice of the sacrament of reconciliation was not as fervent as it once seemed to be, and as a result of the revision of canon law under the direction of Pope St. John Paul II

(1983), fewer and fewer people would struggle with scrupulosity. I assumed that 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 informed me 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 flood the boat. There seems to be no end to the questions, the details, and the exceptions. Many people with scrupulosity have been subjected to impatience in the confessional, avoidance in public places, and being cut off in conversation because of frustration.

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

I am pleased to 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 he always graciously accepted, the volume of letters he meticulously answered, and the daily prayers and sacrifices he freely offered were an inspiration. I've never pretended to follow in his footsteps.

On 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 pastoral insight I've developed over the years as well as some of the advances researchers have made in treating obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). If readers of the previous editions find information in this 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. In other words, follow the direction offered in this updated edition; it will be more useful and helpful.

When I began the laborious process of revising this current edition, I agreed with a suggestion that the text be reviewed by Dr. Caitlin Claggett Woods, PhD, C.Psych ([www.anxietyottawa.com](http://www.anxietyottawa.com)). Dr. Woods is a true champion for people who suffer with OCD and scrupulosity, never tiring in her efforts to compassionately serve the needs of this community of faithful men and women. Because of her caring and expertise in reviewing the text, this edition is now much more useful and helpful.

I am aware that other people also need to be singled out for their contributions. My sister, Theresa Czarnopys, initially made sense of numerous years of questions and answers. She was very patient with my many changes and unreadable scribbled notes.

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

## Chapter One

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# 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 prank call or an important question only the pastor should answer—or if 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 determine the correct response to the task at hand. She understood it to be a serious choice that

might offend God—or, if not God, then certainly her family or her dinner guests. The priest who answered the phone became the person who was going to reassure her and provide the direction she believed she required.

Later, through many more such experiences, I learned that the choice of “which soup might be more pleasing to God,” as it is presented here, 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 deeper was occurring, 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, suffered and struggled with the disorder. Many people understand scrupulosity to be a religious problem, and others see it specifically as a Catholic problem.

Scrupulosity has been long recognized by priests, rabbis, and spiritual directors. For many years, mental-health professionals dismissed scrupulosity as a symptom of neurotic behavior and treated it accordingly. Only more recently has it been understood as a sub-type of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Studies suggest that approximately three million people in the United States have OCD; it has been further asserted that approximately 6 percent 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 per-

son became excessively focused on sin and its consequences. Someone who first experiences scrupulosity as an adult can often trace it to a powerful conversion experience; for example, at the conclusion of the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults (OCIA) process. Often, people with developmental scrupulosity can experience relief, if not a complete “cure,” with the help of a kind and patient confessor. We can 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 yourself out of emotional scrupulosity. Prayer and a gentle confessor are important and useful, but behavior modification and medication therapy are also required—and highly effective.

From a pastoral perspective, the best way to understand scrupulosity is to recognize its manifestation. 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 W. Ciarrocchi, PhD, author of *The Doubting Disease*, 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 thoughts or desires that won't go away. Even when they realize they're obsess-

ing 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 thoughts continue to disturb them through no fault of their own.

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

### **The Real Suffering of Scrupulosity**

Over the years, different authors have offered various descriptions of the scrupulous disorder. Many have been helpful and insightful, while others have provided a false sense of relief or identification of the experience by not accurately integrating the spiritual, psychological, and moral implications of the disorder. A more recent description, one that seems to be widely embraced, is the designation of scrupulosity as "the doubting disease." This description accurately focuses attention on a condition of the disorder that is easily observable. Anyone who experiences scrupulosity understands that it is the experience of doubt, resulting in "a thousand frightening fantasies."

I have used various descriptions of scrupulosity interchangeably over the years. Now, after dedicating myself to years of intense counseling sessions and group spiritual direction with men and women who struggle with this disorder, I have redirected my thoughts. I prefer another description of the scrupulous disorder that may more accurately define the real suffering that is experienced.