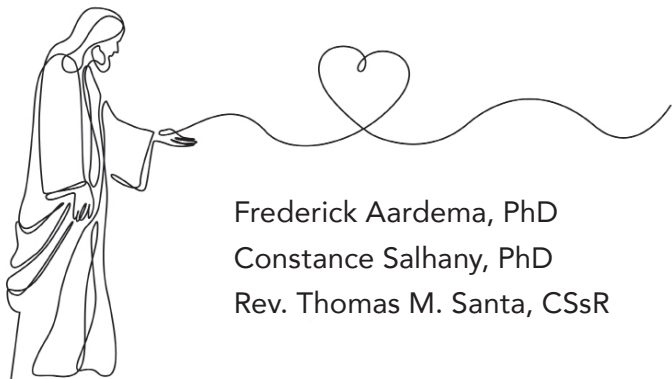


Revisiting Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous

*Through the Lens of
Inference-Based Cognitive
Behavioral Therapy*



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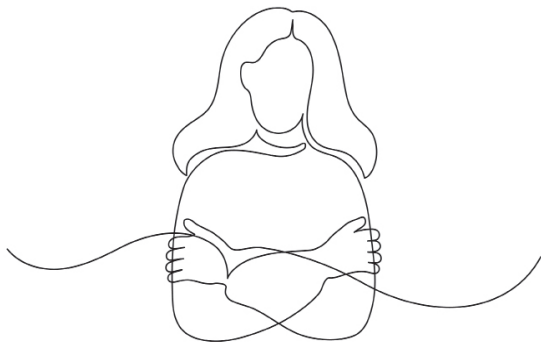
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*"They repent when they have not sinned and
accuse themselves without form or matter;
their virtues make them tremble, and in their
innocence they are afraid."*

JEREMY TAYLOR, THE RULE OF CONSCIENCE
(DUCTOR DUBITANTIUM), 1660

INTRODUCTION

Continuing a Pastoral Legacy Through the Lens of I-CBT

Rev. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR's *Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous* has long served as a practical guide and source of relief for those suffering from scrupulosity. Building on Rev. Donald Miller, CSsR's 1968 version, Fr. Santa updated and refined these principles—in 1996 and again in 2013—for modern audiences, offering pastoral wisdom to help people navigate the relentless doubts that define this condition. This article revisits Fr. Santa's commandments through a contemporary psychological lens—specifically, ***inference-based cognitive behavioral therapy (I-CBT)***—as a way of continuing his legacy of compassionate guidance.

Scrupulosity is not only a spiritual struggle but also a recognized form of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), characterized by intrusive doubts about sin, morality, confession, personal worthiness, or spiritual failure. Historically, scrupulosity may be the earliest documented form of OCD, with descriptions dating back to early Christian and medieval writings. As discussed in the 2007 article “*The Menace Within: Obsessions and the*

Self” by Dr. Frederick Aardema and Dr. Kieron O’Connor, early spiritual texts often describe individuals tormented by blasphemous or forbidden thoughts, accusing themselves of sins they had not committed—a phenomenon that closely parallels modern understandings of OCD. Jeremy Taylor’s previously quoted seventeenth-century observation captures the essence of this experience: the tragic tendency to mistake innocence for guilt and virtues for flaws.

While obsessional doubts feel like moral warnings, I-CBT shows that they are rooted in reasoning and imaginative distortions—a confusion between imagination and reality—rather than in genuine spiritual failings. Fr. Santa’s pastoral writings resonate with this perspective, as he consistently emphasizes clarity, trust, and the futility of endless self-accusation.

When the *Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous* were first written, their advice aligned with the predominant clinical treatments of the time, such as exposure and response prevention (ERP) and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). These approaches remain widely used and effective. In recent years, however, I-CBT has emerged as a novel, evidence-based treatment for OCD that shifts the focus from exposure and habituation to the reasoning errors at the heart of obsessional doubt.

I-CBT is rooted in the understanding that OCD is fundamentally a disorder of false and artificially created doubt, disconnected from present reality and sensory experience. As Dr. Frederick Aardema, co-founder of I-CBT, has described, obsessional doubt arises from inferential confusion—a process by which imagined, hypothetical possibilities are mistaken for real threats or moral failings.

While all evidence-based approaches seek to help individuals stop giving obsessive doubts undue importance, I-CBT offers a unique explanation for how these doubts come to feel relevant in the first place. A key contribution of I-CBT is its focus on how individuals with OCD mistake abstract, hypothetical possibilities for real probabilities, treating these imagined scenarios as if they were relevant moral doubts. Instead of engaging with the content of these doubts, I-CBT helps individuals step back from the obsessional narrative and reconnect with the evidence of their senses and their authentic experience.

Importantly, I-CBT is value-neutral. It does not attempt to challenge or alter religious beliefs or moral values, nor does it require exposure to unwanted thoughts or acceptance of anything contrary to one's values. Instead, it targets the process by which OCD hijacks reasoning,

creating confusion between imagination and reality. This makes I-CBT highly compatible with faith traditions, as it helps individuals reconnect with the clarity of direct experience, restoring peace and trust while allowing them to step out of the false, imagined doubts that distort their practice of faith.

The aim of this article is to provide insights on Fr. Santa's commandments through the lens of I-CBT, highlighting the natural complementarity between his pastoral wisdom and I-CBT's focus on correcting reasoning and imaginative distortions. Many of Fr. Santa's observations—such as his emphasis on what is “clear and certain” and the pointlessness of repetitive confession—resonate strongly with I-CBT's approach to obsessive doubt.

Faith, at its heart, involves trust—even when complete certainty is absent. Scrupulosity, by contrast, demands answers to doubts that were never real to begin with. By integrating Fr. Santa's spiritual guidance with I-CBT's reasoning-based framework, we aim to help people distinguish between genuine moral reflection and OCD's false alarms, freeing them to live and practice their faith with confidence, compassion, and peace.

FATHER SANTA'S TEN COMMANDMENTS AND I-CBT

A Shared Focus on Clarity and Trust

Fr. Santa's *Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous* offer practical, pastoral guidance for quieting the endless cycle of "what ifs" that plague those with scrupulosity. His commandments encourage trust, clarity, and an honest acceptance of what is real and certain instead of hypothetical fears or imagined sins. I-CBT shares this same foundation, although it approaches the issue from a psychological rather than theological standpoint.

I-CBT views scrupulosity as a problem of reasoning and imagination rather than a problem of belief. Obsessional doubt does not arise from genuine moral failings but from a reasoning error in which abstract, hypothetical possibilities are mistaken for real threats. For example, a person may begin to doubt whether he or she has offended God not because of any concrete action or evidence, but because the person's imagination constructs a "what if" scenario that feels compelling. This confusion is not about faith or values; it arises when an unjustified doubt replaces direct experience with imagined possibilities, giving these doubts a false sense of urgency and relevance.

In this way, I-CBT complements Fr. Santa's guidance. While the *Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous* invite individuals to let go of unnecessary guilt and encourage them to trust in God's mercy, I-CBT equips them with tools to help them recognize and break out of the obsessional narrative that fuels doubt. Both perspectives emphasize the importance of clarity—seeing what is actually present rather than what is imagined—and both encourage a return to trust, whether that trust is placed in divine grace, in one's own senses, or in the reality of the present moment.

COMMANDMENT 1

**You shall not confess sins
you have already confessed.**

Fr. Santa emphasizes that a confession made sincerely and clearly is valid the first time. For the scrupulous person, however, OCD generates obsessional doubt—a sense that the confession “didn’t count” or “wasn’t complete,” which drives the urge to repeat it. In I-CBT terms, this urge is not a sign of unresolved sin but the result of reasoning and imaginative distortions in which the mind gives weight to imagined scenarios (“Maybe I left something

out,” or “What if I wasn’t fully honest?”) as if they were real evidence. This is often called reverse reasoning, where a feeling of doubt (“I don’t feel forgiven”) is mistakenly treated as proof that forgiveness did not occur.

I-CBT highlights that obsessional doubt is artificially created—it arises not from genuine moral discernment but from a reasoning and imaginative process disconnected from the senses and from reality. The sense of incompleteness or lingering anxiety after confession is not a moral warning but a symptom of OCD’s obsessional narrative. Each repetition of confession attempts to resolve a problem that never truly existed.

Resisting the urge to re-confess is, therefore, an act of trust in what is real and complete rather than in the imagined imperfections that OCD presents. By not repeating confession, the individual steps out of the obsessional narrative and aligns with what he or she knows to be true: that the original confession was valid. I-CBT reframes this stance as choosing evidence from the here-and-now (the fact of having confessed) over “what if” thinking. As Fr. Santa writes, “When you refuse to engage the feeling of doubt...the wave of anxiety passes.” Recognizing that the doubt is artificial, not a true moral signal, is a key step in breaking OCD’s cycle of false reasoning.