

A Confessor's Companion

TENDER
CONSCIENCE
and
SCRUPULOSITY

Rev. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR



Catholic. Pastoral. Trusted.

Helping the Scrupulous Penitent Find Peace

Some people of God are unable to believe that God loves and accepts them. No word calms their aching spirits, and assurances of God's grace have seemingly little or no effect. The manifestations of scrupulosity are most often experienced by penitents during the sacrament of reconciliation.

The good news is that you needn't be a professional therapist or even well-schooled in personality disorders to help penitents with OCD-based scrupulosity. You just need to be able to recognize the disorder when it is manifested and be willing to take the next steps.

This handbook for confessors provides the pastoral applications that are necessary to help the penitent truly celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. And instead of a chamber of torture, the confessional will be a place to experience the outpouring of God's grace and mercy.

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Preface

I hope this book will be a pastoral help for those who accompany a scrupulous person on his or her healing journey. Although it is primarily intended for the priest confessor, this book is also appropriate for any therapist, spiritual director, mentor, friend, or family member who is willing to walk with a scrupulous person on the journey toward healing.

This book is the result of thousands of individual spiritual-direction sessions with men and women who suffer with the scrupulous disorder. I have engaged in the ministry of spiritual direction for the scrupulous for more than thirty years, during which I have written a monthly newsletter, *Scrupulous Anonymous*. I have answered daily the urgent questions of people who contact me. I have conducted numerous retreats and days of recollection, and I have filmed more than fifty videos on a variety of subjects that speak to the scrupulous condition. I have engaged in individual counseling, averaging two consultations a day and group work on the weekends. It has been a real privilege to work with the scrupulous, but it has not even begun to reach the core group of people who suffer with this disorder. People with scrupulosity are often alone and ignored, in the shadows of day-to-day living, quietly and desperately hoping for some kind of relief that never seems to come.

I believe the most effective path to ministry for scrupulous people is one that is both local and personal—face to face when possible. If the local parish priest, spiritual director, or therapist

can gain an understanding of and sensitivity to the scrupulous condition, then miracles can happen. Real healing is possible, but it will take quite a bit of intensely focused pastoral care, not to mention an abundance of God's grace.

It is painful to try to understand, perhaps for the first time, the ravages of scrupulosity. It is challenging, particularly for priest confessors, to accept and that what they think they know about the disorder is often inadequate. It will be hard to resist the urge to comfort and reassure and instead to choose the necessary pastoral remedy that will enable the scrupulous person to experience the grace of God. At times, the pastoral remedy may seem insufficient; at other times, it may seem to lack empathy. It is not. Scrupulosity is very serious, and it requires a very disciplined application of pastoral care.

The confessor, therapist, spiritual director, or friend must carefully choose how best to apply the pastoral care outlined in these pages. Not everything is appropriate for every scrupulous person. Carefully listening to and discerning the truth(s) that are shared with you—often from the most vulnerable and intimate actions, events, and even memories—will help you guide the scrupulous person to where they need to be for healing. I firmly believe that your best efforts are completely dependent on the grace of God, and all you are doing is enabling a path for that grace to become animated.

When I first started working with the scrupulous more than thirty years ago, I never thought it would become a lifelong ministry. I never thought I was to be more than a placeholder in the long line of Redemptorist directors of Scrupulous Anonymous. That, however, seems not to have been God's plan, and I must admit that I am grateful.

Through this ministry, I have encountered some of the most compassionate and loving people. Men and women who are generous, kind, discerning, prayerful, and deeply spiritual but also who do not believe, even for a minute, that they are good and loving. Scrupulosity is a voice that always condemns. That always tells them what is wrong or incomplete in their lives. That is never satisfied with any of their efforts. That always promises clarity and certainty as the reward for engaging in the obsessions and compulsions it demands. But it is a lie. Nothing that scrupulosity proposes is in the least bit truthful. It is a cruel lie.

Unfortunately, if you are a Catholic who struggles with scrupulosity, your suffering is perhaps even more intense. Catholic moral teaching covers every possible question. This is the result of hundreds of years of meditation, scholarly thinking, and lived experience, all of which is beneficial for the person who needs help to understand sin and how it affects his or her life. For the scrupulous person, however, it is not a help; it is a system that torments them at every turn. Every exception, every nuance, every discernible application—often effortlessly used by people without scrupulosity—is just one more rigid rule and regulation. One more obstacle, one more overwhelming challenge, one more burden. If you are scrupulous, you know this all too well as the truth and as your day-to-day experience of life.

Rev. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

*“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

(cited in *Three Hundred Years of Psychiatry, 1535-1860*)

Introduction

On many occasions, Pope Francis of blessed memory stated that priests are called to be “ministers of mercy.” He referenced this calling in discussions on the priest’s role in the sacrament of reconciliation. He gently reminded priests that the mercy of Jesus is a primary focus in all aspects of their vocation. As a priest and confessor, I understand that my brother priests appreciate the former Pope’s perspective. We strive to pastorally apply mercy, understanding, and reconciliation in and out of the confessional.

Most people of God appreciate the efforts of their priests and perceive the sacrament of reconciliation as a reminder of God’s love, which is a life-giving and grace-filled love. Yet, despite their priest/pastor/confessor’s best ministerial efforts, some people of God are unable to believe that God loves and accepts them. No word calms their aching spirits, and assurances of God’s grace have seemingly little or no effect.

Their inability to accept and believe in God’s saving mercy isn’t the result of stubbornness or hardness of heart. Rather, it is usually the manifestation of *scrupulosity*, a disorder that floods the mind and heart with “a thousand frightening fantasies,” as Dr. Joseph W. Ciarrocchi so powerfully described in his book *The Doubting Disease*.

The manifestations of scrupulosity are most often experienced by priest and penitent during the sacrament of reconciliation. The penitent's disconnected, pain-filled voice fills the darkness of the confessional. What's intended to be a sacramental celebration is instead something much less than what the penitent hoped for or imagined. Instead, priest and penitent witness the penitent's recitation of perceived sin after perceived sin, frequently punctuated with expressions of doubt and numerous questions. It is tortuous for both priest and penitent.

I deliberately describe the experience as “disconnected” because the priest struggles to connect with the penitent, and the penitent is struggling to connect with the priest as a “minister of mercy.” The penitent performs a complex ritual that expresses a sustained struggle marked by anxiety, guilt, and profound loneliness. The expressionless confession of a litany of sins—most of which are only *perceived* failures of commission or omission, rooted in the fear of sin—is the final step in the ritual.

Unfortunately, when the confession has concluded and the ritual completed, the penitent experiences no assurance of mercy, no experience of inner calm and peace, and no conviction of reconciliation or God's mercy. Instead, a new obsessive or compulsive ritual begins. Moreover, the priest also experiences a different type of frustration and is often perplexed about how he might respond with understanding and compassion.

Although people with scrupulosity enter the confessional hoping to experience relief from their torment, they also understand that mechanical recitation of perceived sin is useless. This is where the disconnect occurs: They want to no longer be in this situation, but they're caught up in the ritual. Both priest and penitent witness the power of an experience each would prefer to avoid.

What I'm describing isn't the traditional "tender conscience" type of scrupulosity routinely discussed in seminary classes on the ministry of reconciliation. A tender conscience, although painful, isn't permanent. Patience and good catechetical training will eventually win out; anxiety and doubt will be significantly reduced; and the penitent will be able to enjoy and truly celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation.

The type of scrupulosity I am referring to is a manifestation of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Priests must be able to recognize the difference between a person with a tender conscience and a person with OCD-based scrupulosity. Priests must understand that OCD is a behavioral and emotional disorder with many specific manifestations, only one of which is religious scrupulosity. This is not a matter of opinion. It is not a statement of so-called "wokeness" or an indication of "modernism." What I am describing is mental illness, not spiritual weakness.

The good news is that you needn't be a professional therapist or even well schooled in personality disorders to help penitents with OCD-based scrupulosity. You just need to be able to recognize the disorder when it is manifested and be willing to take the next steps.

There is essentially no difference in the psychological and emotional roots of OCD from one person to the next. What differs is the manifestation. Many people with OCD focus on a fear of germs or forgetting to lock the door, turn off the oven, or perform some other routine task. People with OCD often have more than one manifestation, although one concern tends to dominate. In OCD scrupulosity, the questions and doubts focus on sin. Even though the penitent is using the language of sin, they are not describing sinful choices or behaviors. They describe anxiety, guilt, and shame and use the language of sin to explain what they

are experiencing. Unfortunately, they often do not understand the difference; they believe they are talking about sin and their relationship with God. As a confessor, you need to know the difference and understand the reality.

OCD tries the patience of both priests and penitents, especially if the wrong pastoral remedy is applied. Empathy, not catechetics, is required. If OCD scrupulosity could be managed with catechesis, the penitent could have been healed long ago. Men and women with OCD scrupulosity are some of the best-catechized people in the world! They are totally dedicated to researching their faith and do not hesitate to crack open the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or the *Code of Canon Law* to quell their persistent doubts and clarify their questions. Sadly, they painfully discover that knowledge and content satisfy nothing. More information produces more questions, fueling the disorder instead of healing it.

So, what should you do? What is the most helpful pastoral response? That is the purpose of this book. My hope is that it will benefit you as a confessor in making the pastoral applications necessary to help penitents with OCD scrupulosity truly celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation.

Please note that in the pages that follow, I refrain from repeatedly referencing “OCD scrupulosity.” For the sake of clarity, and because this is intended as a pastoral companion and not a psychological journal, I simply designate the disorder as “scrupulosity.” Please also note that this pastoral companion does not replace the traditional and very wise direction of the saints through the centuries who have helped us understand the tender conscience. The material presented here is not meant to be applied to those with a tender conscience; it is for those men and women who are tormented by OCD scrupulosity.

In a 2013 homily, Pope Francis reminded the people of God that the confessional is not intended to be a torture chamber. If a priest is aware of the ravages of OCD and is willing to apply the correct pastoral advice and direction, he can substantially reduce the pain and suffering of scrupulosity. And instead of a chamber of torture, the confessional will become a place for the scrupulous to experience the outpouring of God's grace and mercy.

CHAPTER ONE

The
Traditional
Understanding
of Scrupulosity

When I talk to priests, it isn't uncommon for the subject of scrupulosity to come up, because many of them know that I minister to people who suffer with the scrupulous condition. Often, the first reaction is an "eye roll" and an expression of sympathy: "I really do not know how you do this day in and day out."

This response is not disrespectful, but it is revealing. The revelation effectively summarizes at least two perceptions: first, the familiarity that the priest confessor has with scrupulous people; second, the frustration the priest confessor often experiences in the encounter.

Although all priest confessors have some kind of experience with scrupulosity, most have no real understanding about what they are encountering, so they default to what they know. However, what they know can be woefully inadequate. Their seminary training, for the most part, introduced them to the concept of a "tender conscience." The traditional pastoral care for a person with a tender conscience is for the person to place all of his or her trust in the direction of the confessor and resist the urge to ask for reassurance from other confessors. This is sound advice if this is truly a person with a tender conscience, but it is incomplete advice if there is something else—such as the scrupulous disorder—going on.

The traditional understanding of scrupulosity as a manifestation of a tender conscience refers to a conscience that is highly sensitive to right and wrong and often inclined toward deep moral seriousness, humility, and a strong desire to avoid sin. It is not necessarily problematic from a psychological perspective, but it can develop into a problem if not formed well or guided well.

A tender conscience is:

- easily moved by moral or spiritual concerns.
- quick to feel guilt or remorse when the person believes he or she has done wrong.
- deeply attuned to the will of God and the demands of love and justice.
- often found in holy people, saints, and sincere Christians who fear offending God.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10). A tender conscience often springs from holy reverence, not irrational fear.

What makes a tender conscience confusing to both the penitent and the confessor is the perspective offered by the saints who said that a well-formed and spiritually mature tender conscience can:

- lead to greater compassion and moral integrity.
- foster repentance and humility.
- guard against rationalization or complacency.
- inspire deeper prayer and dependence on grace.

However, this is where pastoral sensitivity is required, because there are potential dangers associated with a tender conscience. If not properly formed or if distorted by anxiety, a tender conscience can:

- trigger OCD scrupulosity.
- lead to excessive self-blame or fear of damnation.
- undermine trust in God’s mercy.
- become overly focused on perfection, minor faults, or imagined sins.

Tender Versus Scrupulous Conscience

Aspect	Tender Conscience	Scrupulous Conscience
Sensitivity	High, but balanced by trust and love	Extreme, often dominated by fear
Focus	On love, repentance, and growth	On guilt, punishment, and self-doubt
Moral Judgment	Accurate and formed by truth	Inaccurate, often confused or rigid
Spiritual Fruit	Peace, humility, closeness to God	Anxiety, despair, spiritual paralysis

It will come as no surprise to the priest confessor that the person who exhibits a tender conscience will be well versed in their condition. People with scrupulosity and those with a tender conscience spend hours doing research about their condition. By the time they encounter the priest in the confessional, they aren't necessarily there to play out their scrupulous ritual; rather, they're seeking pastoral counseling and guidance—and they will have done their homework beforehand! For example, they may have researched the Church's saints who struggled with a tender conscience:

St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696–1787)

- Patron of the scrupulous and moral theologians.
- Struggled with scrupulosity in his early life but developed a theology centered on God's mercy and the gentle guidance of conscience.
- Advised the scrupulous to “go against” their fears when not grounded in clear reason or Church teaching.

“A single act of perfect love is enough to make a soul holy.”

St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897)

- Known for her “Little Way” of trust and love.
- As a child, she was deeply conscientious and felt distress over small faults but matured into a saint who surrendered everything to divine mercy.
- Her spirituality liberated her conscience from anxiety and centered it on God's love, not perfectionism.

“What pleases him is to see me love my littleness and poverty.”

St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556)

- Early in his conversion, he became overly scrupulous and despairing of salvation.
- Through discernment, he learned to distinguish between true movements of the Spirit and those rooted in anxiety or deception.
- His *Spiritual Exercises* help the faithful properly form and guide their consciences.

“It is not hard to find God, if only one desires to find Him.”

St. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380)

- From a young age, she had a profound desire not to offend God in even the smallest ways.
- Her tender conscience was balanced by an extraordinary boldness in loving God and serving the Church, even confronting popes when necessary.

“Be who God meant you to be, and you will set the world on fire.”

St. John Vianney (1786–1859)

- Possessed a deep sensitivity to sin and spent long hours in the confessional, guiding others gently.
- Though he sometimes doubted his worthiness, he placed his trust entirely in God’s grace and mercy.

“The saints did not all begin well, but they ended well.”

For the purposes of this pastoral companion, the basic information provided is more than sufficient for the effective pastoral direction of the priest confessor and his relationship with the penitent who manifests a tender conscience. If, upon reflection, it is the discerning and informed opinion of the priest confessor that there is no psychological component (i.e., obsession, compulsion, panic, anxiety, etc.), he can be assured that the traditional pastoral remedy for the person with a tender conscience can be applied.

However, if the discernment indicates the presence of a psychological disorder, it is irresponsible to apply the traditional remedy. It is irresponsible because the confessor is effectively enabling the disorder and prolonging the suffering of the penitent. He may believe otherwise and even have a strong conviction that he

is doing all that is required, but that does not change the reality. Something more is required.

As people of faith, we of course believe in the power of prayer, the ordinary manifestation of God's grace and love, and the possibility of miracles. Acknowledging the presence of a disorder does not contradict what we believe. At the same time, we have a responsibility to use the gifts that the Lord has given us in service to the people of God. I believe the implementation of a pastoral remedy that goes beyond the Tradition is sometimes necessary. It does not have to be the first choice, but it does need to be one of the options if we are to serve the people of God responsibly.