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# Understanding scrupulosity: psychopathological and Catholic perspectives

Katherine Fohn Cobb

*University of Iowa*

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UNDERSTANDING SCRUPULOSITY: PSYCHOPATHOLOGICAL AND  
CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVES

by

Katherine Fohn Cobb

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts degree in Religious Studies  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2014

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Diana Fritz Cates

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Katherine Fohn Cobb

has been approved by the Examining Committee  
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree  
in Religious Studies at the May 2014 graduation.

Thesis Committee: \_\_\_\_\_  
Diana Fritz Cates, Thesis Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Kristy Nabhan-Warren

\_\_\_\_\_  
Melissa Anne-Marie Curley

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## INTRODUCTION

I first became interested in the relationship between psychology and religion when a close friend of mine developed debilitating religious habits after being confirmed in the Catholic Church. He was excited about his new-found faith and community, but as the frequency with which he attended Mass and Confession increased, his practice became increasingly intense. He spent more and more time ruminating about the culpability of his actions and inactions. If he had any inappropriate thoughts or sexual urges, he felt unclean and was convinced that he needed to go to confession. He washed his hands so frequently that they were usually chapped and flaky. He felt that knowingly spreading germs to others was a mortal sin. He took special care to fast an hour prior to Mass, as the Church recommends, in order that when he consumed the Eucharist at Communion his body would be a pure vessel. After taking Communion in Church he diligently checked his hands for the presence any crumbs of the Communion wafer because he believed, as the Catholic Church teaches, that Jesus is present in every speck of the Eucharist. These habits consumed him mentally and emotionally, and I soon watched his relationships with family and friends deteriorate as well.

His parents became increasingly annoyed that they had to take the time to drive him to all of his religious obligations, weekly Mass and Confession. He openly argued with his mother and encouraged her to discontinue taking her birth control pills because it was against Church teaching. He was certain that any hint of sexual arousal was so sinful that it would damn him to hell, which caused his long-term girlfriend to become increasingly frustrated by his lack of physical affection. As his religious preoccupations



increased, their relationship deteriorated and eventually ended. Although I did not realize it at the time, what I was witnessing in my friend was the development of scrupulosity.

In order to understand the phenomenon of scrupulosity, it is first necessary to create a working definition of the term. The term scrupulosity comes from the Latin word *scrupulum* meaning small, sharp stone. A scruple was also a unit of weight measurement in ancient Rome. Both of these definitions help to define scrupulous persons as ones who are extremely conscientious and exacting about the way they live. The small sharp stone is symbolic of the everyday pain and small irritations that constantly trouble those with scrupulosity, much as a stone in the shoe bothers someone who takes a walk. With respect to the idea of weight or balance, Father Thomas Santa describes scrupulosity as, “a habitual state of mind that, because of an unreasonable fear of sin, inclines a person to judge certain thoughts or actions sinful when they are not, or that they are more gravely wrong than they really are.”<sup>1</sup>

A person need not be religious at all in order to present with scrupulous tendencies, and scrupulosity can be found within all religious traditions, but this paper is geared specifically toward understanding severe scrupulous behavior that is associated with the practice of religion. I am concerned even more specifically with scrupulosity in the practice of Roman Catholics. Scrupulosity is a serious condition in which individuals are overly rigorous about spiritual matters and are especially plagued by doubt and fear concerning the state of their soul and their relationship to God. Although one can use the term “scrupulous” in various ways, the psychological and spiritual condition of scrupulosity, as I understand it in this paper, is by nature extreme and thus harmful to

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas M. Santa, *Understanding Scrupulosity: Helpful Answers for Those Who Experience Nagging Questions and Doubts*, Second Edition (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 2007), 7.

those who practice it.<sup>2</sup> Unless it is otherwise specified within the text, the reader can assume that any scrupulous person referred to is one with the very serious condition of scrupulosity, and throughout the paper I will use the terms “scrupulous,” “overly scrupulous,” and “severely scrupulous” interchangeably to refer to someone with this condition.

The condition of scrupulosity is often driven by doubt, fear, and feelings of guilt. Overly scrupulous Catholics usually fear committing mortal sins. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines a mortal sin as one “whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.”<sup>3</sup> The Catholic Church teaches that a person who dies with a mortal sin on his conscience deserves to be punished in hell for eternity. However, the punishment for committing a mortal sin can be remitted by receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation, more commonly known as Confession, which cleanses a person’s soul of mortal sin. Most Catholics might fear the torments of hell, but scrupulous individuals are particularly affected by this fear because of their excess doubt. Doubt clouds their minds regarding not only whether their actions have been sinful, but also whether they have been fully forgiven for their sins after attending Confession. They worry that they might have left something unconfessed that could still be counted against them. Many people who suffer from scrupulosity attend confession obsessively and confess the same sins multiple times to multiple priests

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<sup>2</sup> Several scholars have written on how individuals can become obsessional about religious practice to the point of harm. See Caroline Walk Bynum’s *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* or Robert Bell’s *Holy Anorexia* for accounts of how religious practice can take on the appearance of modern day anorexia and be potentially harmful to individuals. Ariel Glucklich’s *Sacred Pain* also addresses the topic of religion and harm more broadly.

<sup>3</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part Three, Section One, Chapter One, Article 8, IV. “The Gravity of Sin: Mortal and Venial Sin” verse 1857

without feeling any relief of their guiltiness. The Sacrament of Reconciliation, which traditional Catholics are expected to attend at least once a year and when in a state of mortal sin, thus becomes particularly difficult for Catholics with scrupulosity.

Although the fear, doubt, and guilt of the scrupulous individual have their roots in religious beliefs, and these emotions tend to be centered on what the individual views as religious practices, the emotions can bleed into every aspect of a scrupulous person's life. After all, almost any action can be interpreted as a sin. This can include anything from accidentally seeing a sexually suggestive commercial on television while flipping channels to unintentionally missing a word in a prayer and feeling as though they must repeat the prayer until it is exactly correct. Although all moral theologians would say that it is not sinful unintentionally to skip a word in a prayer, those with scrupulosity lay awake at night thinking about how long it will be until they can go to Confession to confess that very sin. As I mentioned in the introduction, my friend came to understand spreading germs to others as a sin.

These behaviors seem to suggest an obvious problem upon first examination. However, many religions promote behaviors that look unusual or even unhealthy to outsiders. Generally speaking, it is best to give religious practitioners the benefit of the doubt and grant that their religious practices are probably salutary for them and their group. In order to determine whether or not the behavior of those with scrupulosity is indeed harmful or maladaptive, it is necessary to assess the behavior of the average person in a particular religious tradition, in this case Catholicism, and see how it compares to the behavior of those with scrupulosity.

### **Differences between Scrupulous Behavior and “Normal” Religious Practice**

Psychiatrist David Greenberg has proposed five principles for understanding the difference between aberrant and “normal” or “average” religious practices. In this case I will be comparing scrupulosity with “average” religious practices inside Catholicism.<sup>4</sup> First, someone who presents with scrupulosity often has a fairly narrow focused behavior. While they may have many scrupulous behaviors, each particular behavior is closely focused. For example, a scrupulous person who washes his hands compulsively might explain that he is afraid that spreading germs to others is a sin. However, most of the time he will think nothing of spreading germs in other ways, for instance through sharing food with someone or sneezing. The hand washing behavior is the only type of compulsion regarding germs.

Second, persons with scrupulosity are usually concerned with matters that are of little significance to other members of their religious community. While a scrupulous person’s overall concern is sin, which almost everyone in a Catholic community is concerned about, the way in which they express this concern about sin is different from the rest of their community. For example, a scrupulous person might worry that accidentally dripping holy water on the ground is a grave sin. This behavior is not a typical concern of Catholics or others within their community and it is not viewed as a sin at all let alone a grave sin. Third, a scrupulous person’s religious obsessions or compulsions tend to interfere with other religious practices and usually prevent the

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term “normal” or “average” in quotes here in order to signal that it does not mean that there is absolutely no presence of disorder, but rather I wish to refer to what is relative, normal or average for the Roman Catholic population despite the fact that the U.S. Catholic population is so diverse and varied. I seek not to be able to put a finger on what is normal but rather what is clearly not normal or what is a clear deviation from the “average” Catholic’s practice.

person from performing her typical religious duties. Catholics typically receive Communion, or what they sometimes refer to as the Eucharist, on a weekly basis. However, Catholics are also instructed not to take Communion if they are in a state of mortal sin. Overly scrupulous individuals who do not receive Communion because they perceive themselves almost always to be in a state of mortal sin are letting their scrupulosity get in the way of typical religious duties. Fourth, scrupulous persons have some understanding that their desired actions are unusual because they often resist their own scrupulous actions, whereas persons who engage in average religious behaviors usually lack the painful sense that they have a problem. For example, a scrupulous person who believes that spreading germs to others is sinful may desire to wash her hands often. However, she recognizes that this action is abnormal and either discretely washes her hands or tries to resist the urge to do so. These kinds of precautions are not taken with normal religious behavior. Fifth, when an individual presents with scrupulous tendencies within the realm of religious practice, it is almost always accompanied by other obsessive-compulsive symptoms outside that religious sphere.<sup>5</sup> This can be viewed as a comparison point between those with scrupulosity and normal religiosity unless the average members of the religious community have some dimension of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) unrelated to their religiosity.<sup>6</sup> Although Greenberg's five principles do not illustrate the entirety of how individuals struggling with scrupulosity are different from the average members of their religious community they are helpful for

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<sup>5</sup> David Greenberg, "Are Religious Compulsions Religious or Compulsive?," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 38 (1984): 524–532 found in Joseph W. Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 123.

<sup>6</sup> Greenberg, "Are Religious Compulsions Religious or Compulsive?" found in Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease*, 123.

assessing the relative normalcy of any religious behavior and therefore helpful for assessing the specific problems of those with scrupulosity.

### **Scrupulosity as a type of OCD**

Before the recent increase in the perceived acceptability of mental health intervention, many people who experienced scrupulous tendencies sought advice and help from their pastor or priest who most likely had little knowledge of psychological processes. Persons with scrupulosity were usually thought to have overly sensitive consciences or excessive anxiety over sin. However, as the field of psychology gained popularity and acceptance, individuals began to see a strong similarity between scrupulous behaviors and those associated with OCD. The American Psychiatric Association defines OCD as the presence of either obsessions, compulsions, or both. Obsessions are defined as “recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or images that are experienced, at some time during the disturbance, as intrusive and unwanted, and cause marked anxiety and distress.”<sup>7</sup> Often the person attempts to suppress or ignore these thoughts or neutralizes them with another action, such as a compulsion. Compulsions are defined as “repetitive behaviors (e.g., hand washing, ordering, checking) or mental acts (e.g., praying, counting, repeating words silently) in response to an obsession or according to rules that must be applied rigidly.”<sup>8</sup> These physical or mental behaviors are aimed at preventing or reducing distress or anxiety, although the behaviors are irrational and do not generally effect the desired change.

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<sup>7</sup> William M. Greenberg, “Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder,” *MedScape*, September 23, 2013, <http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/1934139-overview>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Increasingly, the term scrupulosity is used within the mental health field to refer to those with religious manifestations of OCD. Religious authorities, like Father Thomas Santa, also classify scrupulosity as a pathology that biologically related to the mechanisms of OCD. Although simply acknowledging a link between scrupulosity and OCD is nowhere near sufficient enough to explain the origins of scrupulosity nor what perpetuates it, at present most religious communities are undecided as to how scrupulosity develops and if its development is due to factors like one's religious community's or one's brain biology.<sup>9</sup> However, the consensus among both mental health and religious professionals is that religion does not cause OCD; rather, it provides one environment in which OCD can manifest itself.<sup>10</sup>

There are several challenges in assessing the prevalence of scrupulosity. The Yale-Brown Obsessive-Compulsive Scale measurement is the gold standard for assessing OCD, but it lacks questions that are detailed enough to assess religious scrupulosity. It contains two global questions on religion, one about fear of religious violations and another about fear of moral violations, but answering just two questions positively is not enough to affirm the presence of scrupulosity, as different types of scrupulosity within different religious contexts can be very nuanced.<sup>11</sup> The Penn Inventory of Scrupulosity (PIOS), was developed specifically to measure the presence of scrupulosity; however, it

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<sup>9</sup> On the retreat weekend Father Santa conceded that scrupulosity is somehow related to OCD although he did not go into details about *how* he believes it is related. I will speak to Father Santa's use of the word pathology to describe scrupulosity later in the paper.

<sup>10</sup> David Greenberg and Jonathan D. Huppert, "Scrupulosity: A Unique Subtype of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," *Current Psychiatry Reports* 12, no. 4 (2010): 288; Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease*, 124; Jonathan D. Huppert and Jedidiah Siev, "Treating Scrupulosity in Religious Individuals Using Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy," *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 17 (2010): 385.

<sup>11</sup> Huppert and Siev, "Treating Scrupulosity," 384.

was developed with a non-clinical sample of individuals and is not sensitive enough to detect scrupulosity among people with OCD. This means that a person who has already been shown to have OCD would test positive for scrupulosity as measured by the PIOS even when they do not actually have scrupulosity. It is also narrowly based on a Christian belief system and has shown that it is not sensitive enough to detect scrupulosity in Jewish or Muslim populations.<sup>12</sup>

Although these measurements are flawed for detecting scrupulosity, it is still possible to give a rough prediction of how many individuals suffer from scrupulosity. Miller and Hedges cite several studies that have assessed the presence of scrupulosity within the OCD population and determine that based on this previous research anywhere between 5.0-33.0% of the people with OCD can be determined to suffer more specifically from scrupulosity.<sup>13</sup> Approximately 1.0% of the population suffers from OCD at any given time and approximately 2.0-2.5% of the population experience OCD at some point in their lifetime.<sup>14</sup> Miller and Hedges note that if it is assumed that scrupulosity is present in just 5.0% of persons with OCD, then on the low end of the spectrum scrupulosity could affect somewhere around 100,000 individuals in the United States.<sup>15</sup>

There are other problems in relying on these statistics to determine the frequency of scrupulosity. Religion and psychology have often been at odds with each other,

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<sup>12</sup> Greenberg and Huppert, "Scrupulosity: A Unique Subtype of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," 284.

<sup>13</sup> C.H. Miller and D.W. Hedges, "Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis," *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 22 (2008): 1043.

<sup>14</sup> M.A. de Mathis et al., "What Is the Optimal Way to Subdivide Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?," *CNS Spectrums* 11 (2006): 762-74 cited in Miller and Hedges, "Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis," 1043.

<sup>15</sup> Miller and Hedges, "Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis," 1043.



especially since the era of Freud who deemed religion a “universal obsessional neurosis.”<sup>16</sup> Because scrupulosity presents in religious settings, those people who present with it may fear seeking psychological help or may choose instead to be counseled by their pastor. Those who choose to cope with scrupulosity through pastoral means alone do not aid the assessment of the prevalence of scrupulosity. Father Santa noted in conversation that in his home parish of about 1,500 two or three individuals have shown signs of scrupulosity.

Despite not knowing the exact prevalence of scrupulosity, we can know that those who struggle with it face many hardships. Not only are they troubled by mental health issues generally, their religious practice is affected as well. They may refrain from normal and beneficial religious practices due to their scrupulosity. Given the close connection between scrupulosity and OCD, many authors have recognized the value in consulting professionals in other fields. Many psychologists and psychiatrists believe that when treating a person with scrupulosity, it is helpful to consult clergy or members of the person’s family who are also religious, but not scrupulous.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, many religious authority figures hold that it is perfectly acceptable for those with scrupulosity to seek psychological help.

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<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. IX (1906–1908) (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), 115–28 found in Joanna Bourke, “Divine Madness: The Dilemma of Religious Scruples in the Twentieth-Century American and Britain,” *Journal of Social History*, 2009, 589.

<sup>17</sup> Greenberg and Huppert, “Scrupulosity: A Unique Subtype of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder,” 287; Huppert and Siev, “Treating Scrupulosity,” 384, 387; David Greenberg and Eliezer Witztum, “Problems in the Treatment of Religious Patients,” *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 45 (1991): 554–65; David Greenberg, Eliezer Witztum, and Jean Pisante, “Scrupulosity: Religious Attitudes and Clinical Presentations,” *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 60 (1987): 29–37; Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease*, 82.

In doing research on scrupulosity I found many resources that examined it from a psychological perspective and several authors referred to stories of religious figures, such as St. Ignatius Loyola or Martin Luther, who appeared to have struggled with scrupulosity in their day. However, there was little evidence or literature about people dealing with the problem of scrupulosity from within the Catholic Church and the modern religious context. Wanting properly to compare the psychological discourse with an updated religious one, I came across a book written by a priest, Father Thomas Santa, titled *Understanding Scrupulosity*. The book was related to a monthly newsletter published by an organization called Scrupulous Anonymous. The book contained general information about scrupulosity in addition to a large collection of question-and-answer correspondences between those suffering from scrupulosity and priests affiliated with Scrupulous Anonymous.

As I further researched Scrupulous Anonymous and how they advocate dealing with scrupulosity, I learned that Father Santa conducted retreats every so often that were geared toward helping those struggling with scrupulosity. As part of my research process I attended one such retreat led by Father Santa. This retreat weekend allowed me a perspective on how those inside the Catholic Church, whether it be laypersons or the clergy, both struggle with and attempt to eliminate their scrupulosity. As a result, a significant portion of my paper will be based on my experiences at this weekend retreat, and I will refer to it throughout the document. I recognize that there are serious limits to what can be generalized from such experiences; however, given the paucity of reflection on this problem, it is worthwhile simply to get a serious conversation started.

When Scrupulous Anonymous, or SA as it is sometimes referred to, was formed roughly fifty years ago, scrupulosity was understood as the condition of having an overly sensitive conscience. However, it has evolved over the years and has incorporated modern psychology's understanding of scrupulosity. The organization, now headed by Father Santa, understands scrupulosity as a form of OCD although it does not seek to treat it in the same manner that OCD is usually treated. On the retreat weekend I discovered that SA accepts the psychological treatments that are used to combat OCD while recognizing that because scrupulosity affects spiritual or religious practices, it is necessary to treat scrupulosity from a religious perspective as well. After twenty years of experience with the SA organization, Father Santa has developed his own advice for those struggling with severe scrupulosity and has decided to teach it via these retreats. This paper concerns how scrupulosity is handled within the religious context of the Catholic Church. However, because several methods of pastoral treatment are based on or incorporate psychological techniques, it is first necessary to understand scrupulosity within the realm of psychology. The first section of this paper seeks to understand scrupulosity within the field of psychology where it is most often viewed as a form of psychopathology related to OCD. I will outline the features of scrupulosity as determined by the psychological field, how it develops, how scrupulosity differs from OCD, and how it is treated as a psychopathology.

Secondly, in order to understand the background for the Scrupulous Anonymous organization, it is necessary to assess the Catholic context in which the organization resides. Given that scrupulous individuals struggle with fear, doubt, and guilt, I will assess the areas of religion that influence these emotions, most notably the Catholic

Church's conception of persons as inherently sinful. I will discuss the religious rituals of the Confiteor, which means "I confess," and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which are used to acknowledge and mitigate this sinfulness. Related to the discussion of fear within the Catholic Church is the issue of negative God-images, where one understands God as a figure who incites fear rather than love, and the Catholic dialogue surrounding sex, especially as it relates to punishment. The final portion of the second section will address the Second Vatican Council and reactions to it. I will argue, as other authors have done before me, that the Second Vatican Council brought about a new understanding of sin and therefore a new emphasis on the sacraments that were most important in Catholic life.

Finally, I will turn to the organization of Scrupulous Anonymous and how it uses both the psychological understanding of scrupulosity as a manifestation of OCD and the new understandings of sin and the sacraments that came about through the Second Vatican Council to help heal those struggling with scrupulosity. It is my view that the organization Scrupulous Anonymous, and specifically Father Santa's teachings focused on a new understanding of the Catholic sacraments, could not exist without a thorough understanding of the psychological underpinnings of the disorder and the new perspectives within Catholicism that were brought about through the Second Vatican Council.

## CHAPTER I

### SCRUPULOSITY AS A PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

Many mental health professionals classify scrupulosity as a sub-type of OCD. The prevalence of scrupulosity has been assessed in relation to OCD, which occurs in approximately 1.0% of the U.S. population.<sup>18</sup> Miller and Hedges recognize that it is possible only to speculate about current levels of scrupulosity, but based on recent clinical research it is probable that 5% to 33% of the OCD population suffers from scrupulosity.<sup>19</sup> However, as Miller and Hedges also acknowledge, measuring the occurrence of scrupulosity is inherently problematic given that persons may seek unrecorded religious guidance rather than psychological or psychiatric help for the issue.

#### **Clinical Features of Scrupulosity**

Miller and Hedges list several clinical features of scrupulosity. Cognitive features of scrupulosity consist of “dysfunctional thought patterns regarding moral issues and religious themes.”<sup>20</sup> As Santa notes, scrupulous persons often have an unreasonable fear of sin that causes them to judge their actions as sinful even when they are not. Miller and Hedges note the debilitating doubt and uncertainty that accompanies scrupulosity, which Ciarrocchi and Rapoport also regard as a central aspect of the condition.<sup>21</sup> In addition to feeling excessive fear and doubt, persons with scrupulosity often ruminate on their own thoughts, display negative cognitive styles, fixate excessively on religious issues, and

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<sup>18</sup> de Mathis et al., “What Is the Optimal Way to Subdivide Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?”; Miller and Hedges, “Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis.”

<sup>19</sup> Miller and Hedges, “Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis,” 1043.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1044.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1045.

have poor insight or awareness, meaning that because their life is so governed by rules they have determined for themselves that they have no idea of what is like to live a typical person's life, let alone practice religion in the typical fashion.<sup>22</sup>

Persons with scrupulosity also display specific behaviors. Most typically, they engage in compulsive confession, which may or may not come in the form of the Catholic Sacrament of Confession. Confession is pursued in order to resolve feelings of guilt, but it is usually ineffective in relieving the scrupulous individual's mental pain. Therefore, the confession of sins is performed repeatedly, to one or more religious authorities, but to little positive psychological avail.<sup>23</sup> What some psychologists regard as magical thinking can also be present in scrupulous individuals, as when they pray or confess compulsively in order to prevent a dreaded event from occurring.<sup>24</sup>

Those with scrupulosity often experience high levels of anxiety regarding past events and how these may affect the future.<sup>25</sup> In addition, afflicted people may experience disabling hopelessness in reaction to their perceived sins and failures. This may result in anhedonia, apathy, or emotional numbness.<sup>26</sup> Scrupulosity can also affect a person's

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 1045–46.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 1046.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.; Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease*, 23–24.

<sup>25</sup> Miller and Hedges, "Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis," 1046; Jonathan S. Abramowitz, "Treatment of Scrupulous Obsessions and Compulsions Using Exposure and Response Prevention," *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 8 (2001): 79; Greenberg, Witztum, and Pisante, "Scrupulosity: Religious Attitudes and Clinical Presentations," 34; William Van Ornum, *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies: Understanding and Healing Scrupulosity and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipft & Stock Publishers, 1997), 3.

<sup>26</sup> Miller and Hedges, "Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis," 1046; Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease*, 96–97; Greenberg, Witztum, and Pisante, "Scrupulosity: Religious Attitudes and Clinical Presentations," 35; Cheryl Zerbe Taylor, "Religious Addiction: Obsession with Spirituality," *Pastoral Psychology* 50 (2002): 307.

social life. The affective distress that accompanies scrupulosity often causes persons to withdraw from others both psychologically and physically.<sup>27</sup> Also, an eccentric conception of religion can strip a person with scrupulosity of connections and validation from other members of his or her religious community.

One man who attended the Scrupulous Anonymous retreat weekend revealed to the group that despite numerous attempts, he could not talk to his wife of twenty-five years about his scrupulosity because she did not understand how he could possibly have so much anxiety and difficulty with the performance of ordinary religious rituals. Others expressed similar sentiments of not having many people in their lives who truly understood them. At the beginning of the weekend Father Santa addressed this issue and encouraged the group members to share and take advantage of this rare circumstance in which they were surrounded by others who authentically understood their experiences. Hedges and Miller quote Rogers' description of social isolation and behavior that can result from it:

To share something that is very personal with another individual and it is not received and not understood [or to feel like one can never share at all], this is a very defeating and a very lonely experience. I have come to believe that such an experience makes some individuals psychotic. It causes them to give up hoping that anyone can understand them. Once they have lost hope, then their own inner world, which becomes more and more bizarre, is the only place where they can live. They can no longer live in any shared human experience.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Miller and Hedges, "Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis," 1047; Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease*, 96–97; Greenberg, Witztum, and Pisante, "Scrupulosity: Religious Attitudes and Clinical Presentations," 35.

<sup>28</sup> C.R. Rogers, *A Way of Being* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 14 quoted in Miller and Hedges, "Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis," 1047.

It is quite possible that the isolation that results from scrupulous behaviors and conceptions can cause a person to become unmoored from his or her social foundation, an effect that increases as one continues to struggle with scrupulosity over time.

### **Development of Scrupulosity**

There are varying psychological opinions as to the causes of scrupulosity and the manner in which the condition typically develops. Although the Freudian psychodynamic approach has largely been deemed inadequate by professional psychologists, there is the possibility that early childhood experiences play a part in the development of scrupulosity. Miller and Hedges propose that existential psychology can provide insights into scrupulosity. Although nearly everyone faces existential dilemmas at various times in their lives, some people respond to the stresses of life in highly unproductive or dysfunctional ways, which tragically generate more stress. It is possible that a sense of meaninglessness is a factor in the cause of scrupulosity or a consequence of it. Death, along with its seemingly arbitrary timing and the mystery of the afterlife, is an inherently uncertain process. The thought of death evokes anxiety in most people, but in the scrupulous this anxiety is often complicated by thoughts of the terrifying things that could happen to them after they die.<sup>29</sup>

Behavioral psychology provides the insight that external events can shape the human psyche. Classical conditioning may play a role in scrupulosity's development in cases where people consistently experience negative emotions while participating in religious rituals or activities.<sup>30</sup> Many respondents to a Scrupulous Anonymous survey and

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<sup>29</sup> Miller and Hedges, "Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis," 1048.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



attendees of the Scrupulous Anonymous retreat recounted strongly negative experiences of the sacrament of confession in Catholic school. Operant conditioning, in which behaviors are maintained or changed in light of the pleasure or pain associated with their consequences, may also play a role in the development of scrupulosity.<sup>31</sup> Eschatological beliefs, such as being punished in hell or rewarded in heaven, may play a role in maintaining scrupulous behaviors.

Abramowitz and colleagues argue from a cognitive or cognitive-behavioral standpoint that the experiences of guilt, doubt, confusion, and poor insight may themselves become mental objects about which the scrupulous person cannot stop thinking.<sup>32</sup> A phenomenon known as thought-action fusion, where one views thoughts as morally equivalent to the outward actions that reflect or express those thoughts, is common among individuals with OCD. While there is a significant amount of literature that suggests that thought-action fusion is related to all forms of OCD, Greenberg and Huppert cite evidence that relates moral thought-action fusion specifically to scrupulosity. In moral thought-action fusion within a religious context, a person typically has intrusive thoughts about sinning, and he experiences the thoughts themselves as moral failures and almost the equivalent of having acted on the sinful thoughts. A verse from the Gospel of Matthew could, for the scrupulous Catholic, reinforce moral thought-action fusion. “You have heard that it was said ‘You shall not commit adultery’; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 1049.

her already in his heart.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Rassin and Koster found in their study that religiosity was directly correlated with the phenomenon of thought-action fusion in a non-clinical sample of Christian students.<sup>34</sup>

Freud notes with respect to obsessive actions and religious practices that they both display ritualized behavior in response to disturbing natural impulses and guilt. He argues “one might venture to regard obsessional neurosis as a pathological counterpart of the formation of a religion, and to describe that neurosis as an individual religiosity and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis.”<sup>35</sup> Others have attempted to classify scrupulosity as a type of “religious addiction.” Although there is little empirical evidence to support their conclusions, the concept of addiction captures the fundamental features of scrupulosity.<sup>36</sup> There are slight variations in the differences between scrupulosity and addiction, which will be discussed later in this paper as an alternative approach to scrupulosity. Finally, given that there are specific neurobiological processes associated with OCD, these may also affect the development of scrupulosity.

#### Scrupulosity as Differentiated from OCD

There are many reasons for understanding scrupulosity as a type of OCD.<sup>37</sup> Fallon and colleagues conceptualize scrupulosity as the presence of OCD in people with an

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<sup>33</sup> Matthew 5:27-28; Greenberg and Huppert, “Scrupulosity: A Unique Subtype of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder,” 283.

<sup>34</sup> E. Rassin and E. Koster, “The Correlation between Thought-Action Fusion and Religiosity in a Normal Sample,” *Behavior Research and Therapy* 41 (2002): 361–368; Kate Lowenthal, *Religion, Culture and Mental Health* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 84.

<sup>35</sup> Freud, “Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices,” 50.

<sup>36</sup> Miller and Hedges, “Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis,” 1049.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan S. Abramowitz et al., “Religious Obsessions and Compulsions in a Non-Clinical Sample: The Penn Index of Scrupulosity (PIOS).”, *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 40 (2002): 825–38; B.A. Fallon

intensely religious background.<sup>38</sup> However, there are also several reasons that scrupulosity should be classified separately from OCD.

First, there has been an increasing trend among clinicians to differentiate between types of OCD. This is reflected in the new fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders recently published in 2013. The category of Obsessive Compulsive and Related Disorders contains several disorders whose features do not overlap substantially enough to warrant collapsing them into one sub-category.<sup>39</sup> Scrupulous persons tend to suffer unique cognitive symptoms. Typically, they experience poorer insight into others experiences and more magical ideation than persons with other types of obsessions. These symptoms present themselves even when OCD severity levels are controlled for.<sup>40</sup> In addition, those with scrupulosity are preoccupied with qualitatively different concerns. In contrast to typical OCD obsessions, those with scrupulosity often engage in thoughts and actions that make sense to co-religionists within a shared religious context, but these thoughts and behaviors are taken to extremes or performed in a compulsive manner in ways that are not widely accepted by the other members of the community. The most common compulsions among the scrupulous,

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et al., “The Pharmacotherapy of Moral and Religious Scrupulosity,” *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* 51 (1990): 517–21.

<sup>38</sup> Fallon et al., “The Pharmacotherapy of Moral and Religious Scrupulosity.”

<sup>39</sup> de Mathis et al., “What Is the Optimal Way to Subdivide Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?”; J Grohol, “DSM-5 Changes: Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders,” *Psych Central.com*, 2013, <http://pro.psychcentral.com/2013/dsm-5-changes-obsessive-compulsive-and-related-disorders/004404.html>.

<sup>40</sup> D.F. Tolin et al., “Fixity of Belief, Perceptual Aberration, and Magical Ideation in Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder Patients.,” *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 15 (2001): 501–10.

frequent confession and compulsive prayer, are extreme expressions of otherwise widely-accepted religious behavior.<sup>41</sup>

Scrupulous persons also respond differently to common treatments for OCD. Certain authors suggest that scrupulous persons are less responsive than other people with OCD to behavior therapy and to Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs), which are considered standard treatment for OCD.<sup>42</sup> Miller and Hedges recognize that at the very least therapeutic techniques need to be adjusted in order to treat religious matters with due sensitivity.<sup>43</sup>

After recognizing these distinctions, Miller and Hedges propose five criteria for the diagnosis of scrupulosity that are distinct from the criteria for OCD.

- (A) One or more of the following symptoms must be present:
- (1) Excessive or inappropriate guilt or worry regarding moral or religious issues.
  - (2) Excessive or inappropriate confusion or doubt regarding moral or religious issues.
  - (3) Excessive or inappropriate rumination regarding moral or religious issues.
  - (4) Excessive or inappropriate observance of moral or religious practices.
- (B) Symptom(s) cause clinically significant distress or impairment in religious, academic, work, or social functioning.
- (C) Symptom(s) do not occur exclusively during a mood, psychotic, or developmental disorder and are not better accounted for by another Axis I or II disorder.
- (D) Symptom(s) are unresponsive to authoritative guidance and reassurance when obtained (e.g., from parents or religious authorities).

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<sup>41</sup> Miller and Hedges, "Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis," 1052.

<sup>42</sup> P. Alonso et al., "Long-Term Follow-up and Predictors of Clinical Outcome in Obsessive-Compulsive Patients Treated with Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors and Behavioral Therapy," *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* 62 (2001): 535–40; D. Mataix-Cols et al., "Use of Factor-Analyzed Symptom Dimensions to Predict Outcome with Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors and Placebo in the Treatment of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 156 (1999): 1409–16; D. Mataix-Cols et al., "Obsessive-Compulsive Symptom Dimensions as Predictors of Compliance with and Response to Behavior Therapy: Results from a Controlled Trial," *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 71 (2002): 255–62; A. Kaplan and E. Hollander, "A Review of Pharmacologic Treatments for Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," *Psychiatric Services* 54 (2003): 1111–18.

<sup>43</sup> Miller and Hedges, "Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis," 1053.

(E) Symptom(s) are not due to culturally accepted consequences of immoral behavior or are disproportionately excessive or enduring, as defined by the patient's cultural or religious group.<sup>44</sup>

These criteria from Miller and Hedges focus on the excessiveness of certain thoughts or practices relative to the typical thoughts and practices of the majority of the people within the same religious group. By contrast, the principles that David Greenberg sets forth for determining standard religious practice from scrupulosity focuses on the narrowness of the condition, as when a person obsesses over saying a prayer exactly right but does not obsess about many other aspects of his or her religious practice. As mentioned previously, Greenberg's principles are helpful for determining the relative normalcy of specific behaviors although it must be remembered that atypical scrupulous behavior most likely demonstrates an underlying cognitive distortion about sin and punishment which can be identified through Miller and Hedges diagnostic criteria for scrupulosity. Both perspectives offer valuable insight.

### **Treatment of Scrupulosity**

In order fully to understand the psychological condition of scrupulosity, it is important to examine how scrupulosity is treated by the people who seek to alleviate the suffering of the scrupulous. Treating scrupulosity with any type of therapy is inherently problematic because scrupulosity is bound up with the practice of religion, and religion is a complex phenomenon. It is easy for clergy or one's spiritual community inadvertently to reinforce scrupulous behavior because the latter so closely resembles devout religious behavior when it is viewed irrespective of the problem of obsessive and debilitating repetition (which can be hidden) and without an awareness that, for the scrupulous

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 1052–53.

individual, the behavior brings little or no satisfaction. Huppert and Siev compare the reinforcement of scrupulous behavior with the reinforcement that is often given to a bulimic or anorexic person. Losing weight is a desirable behavior that is praised by many in American society. Praising or rewarding in any way bulimic or anorexic persons who lose weight inadvertently reinforces their pathological behavior.<sup>45</sup> Actions of clergy or religious authorities, such as telling a person that he is in danger of going to hell for his impure thoughts, might be damaging to a person with scrupulosity.<sup>46</sup>

Many people who are either devoutly or scrupulously religious have difficulty surrendering their religious behavior to instruction from a psychologist or psychiatrist, especially when religion and psychology have had such a tumultuous past.<sup>47</sup> This is why many mental health practitioners employ the help of clergy in treating scrupulosity. Several authors have suggested that consulting clergy can be helpful in the therapeutic process.<sup>48</sup> Ciarrocchi notes from his personal experience as a therapist that collaboration with clergy is extremely useful. He explains that when a client is weary of the “ethical legitimacy” of a certain exposure task, he is asked to take a list of planned exposures to a clergy member and ask permission to perform the actions. This strategy relieves the mental health professional of the perceived need to prove his or her theological

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<sup>45</sup> Jonathan D. Huppert, Jedidiah Siev, and Elyssa S. Kushner, “When Religion and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder Collide: Treat Scrupulosity in Ultra-Orthodox Jews,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 63 (2007): 382.

<sup>46</sup> Huppert and Siev, “Treating Scrupulosity,” 387.

<sup>47</sup> Bourke, “Divine Madness,” 589.

<sup>48</sup> C. Elliott and A.S. Radomsky, “Blasphemous Obsessions in Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD): Collision or Cooperation between Psychology and Spirituality?,” *Counseling and Spirituality* 27 (2008): 51–69; David Greenberg and Gaby Shefler, “Ultra-Orthodox Rabbinic Responses to Religious Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder,” *Israel Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences* 45 (2008): 183–92; Huppert, Siev, and Kushner, “When Religion and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder Collide”; Huppert and Siev, “Treating Scrupulosity.” Greenberg and Witztum, “Problems in the Treatment of Religious Patients”; Greenberg, Witztum, and Pisante, “Scrupulosity: Religious Attitudes and Clinical Presentations.”

knowledge and legitimacy. It also provides the client with assurance that his religious sensibilities are being respected and that his actions are not morally prohibited (although, as noted, finding such assurance is of special difficulty for a scrupulous individual).<sup>49</sup>

#### Exposure Response Prevention Therapy

The most widely-used treatment for OCD is Exposure Response Prevention (ERP) Therapy. It is a form of cognitive-behavior therapy that bases its techniques in the theory that patients' thoughts and emotions can change as a result of changing their behavior. ERP consists of exposure to a stimulus that causes the patient anxiety. However, instead of allowing the patient to complete the compulsive actions that alleviate the anxiety, the patient is prevented from performing this response. Eventually the anxiety response the patient experiences will dissipate without performing the compulsions. When repeated consistently, this technique teaches a patient that the anxiety will subside naturally without performing the compulsions and the level of anxiety will reduce each time it returns until ideally the anxiety disappears.<sup>50</sup>

The exposure component of ERP can be conducted in two ways: in-vivo or imaginal. In vivo, a Latin phrase meaning "within the living," involves directly exposing a person to the stimulus that causes him to have an anxious response. A simple example of this might be exposing a person who is afraid of snakes to a live snake. It is important for the patient and the clinician to create a hierarchical list of anxiety-producing situations in order to ease the patient into the situation. For example, the first step in overcoming fear of the snake might be simply for the snake to be in the same room as the

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<sup>49</sup> Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease*, 82.

<sup>50</sup> Huppert and Siev, "Treating Scrupulosity," 382.

patient in a cage. The patient would perform this in vivo exposure until she feels like she is able to master her anxiety when the snake is in the room in the cage. Then the patient and clinician would agree to move to the next step in the hierarchy, which might be that the snake is in the same room as the patient but is being held by another person. Eventually the situations would progress to the point where the patient is able to hold the snake and experience little to no anxiety.

Clinicians treating scrupulosity can use this same process with a different set of exposures, depending on what the person's specific anxieties are. A scrupulous person who feels that he needs to recite prayers word for word lest he be damned to hell might be asked to purposefully make a mistake in one of his prayers. Or perhaps the person's therapy would begin simply by hearing *someone else* make a mistake in the prayer without correcting that person. The client may have never allowed himself to experience the anxiety that comes with making a mistake without engaging in compulsive behavior, so he has probably never let the anxiety subside naturally. He has never felt the uncertainty about the state of his soul reverberate long enough for him to resolve it without going to confession. Therefore, the in vivo instruction to complete a prayer with a mistake in it or listen to the mistake made by someone else also comes with the instruction that the patient should not perform any ritual or compulsion in an effort to alleviate his anxiety. In vivo exposure is sometimes difficult to conduct because not all situations might be reproducible in real life. This is where the technique of imaginal exposure is useful.

Imaginal exposure consists of asking a patient to imagine herself in certain situations. This is usually done through a type of guided meditation with the therapist.



Again, the imaginal exposures are performed in hierarchical order, beginning with the least anxiety producing. Imaginal exposure may even be the first step in a realistic in vivo exposure. For example, a client who is afraid of snakes may first be asked simply to imagine being in a room with a snake that is in its cage. Imaginal exposure can be especially helpful when treating scrupulous patients, given that the goal is not to force a patient to commit sins, but only to allow for the possibility of sin. With scrupulous patients careful considerations and explanations must be used to reassure patients that their therapist is not attempting to get them to sin, but only to accept the anxiety that might come with the uncertainty of a potentially sinful situation. A person with scrupulosity might avoid certain activities, like going to the pool, because the activities come with the risk of touching another person in a bathing suit inappropriately, which might be regarded as a sin. It might be possible to instruct this client to go to the pool and experience the anxiety surrounding the experience, but it might not be practical to instruct the person to touch another person in a bathing suit, especially if he thinks that performing this action is a sin. In this case he might be instructed to imagine brushing up against another person in a bathing suit and be asked to experience those levels of anxiety without doing anything to alleviate the anxiety.

Mental health practitioners acknowledge that it is not generally helpful to push a patient to sin. First, it is not ethical to force a patient to perform what he believes to be a sin. Second, it is not clinically useful because it will not cure the patient. It may even overwhelm the patient with anxiety to the point where he quits therapy altogether. Mental health practitioners state that it is clinically useful enough for the patient to merely accept the *risk* of sin. Huppert and Siev suggest having a patient say to himself “I am taking a

risk of sinning and therefore I may burn in hell.” This will still provide the patient’s response of anxiety.<sup>51</sup> Huppert and Siev believe that risking the possibility of sin is a necessary part of person’s life if they are not to be consumed with obsessively avoiding certain behaviors.<sup>52</sup>

It also may be necessary in a the therapeutic process to ask a patient temporarily to stop engaging in what are generally considered to be positive religious actions, such as praying. Abramowitz recounts an encounter with a patient who admitted to praying to God before his therapy sessions to be forgiven for his future sins because he was “asked to perform sinful behavior” as part of his treatment. The therapist discussed with the patient that this action was contrary to the aim of therapy because he was preemptively praying to relieve his anxiety and therefore was not actually exposing himself fully to the anxiety. He was asked by the therapist to stop praying like this during the treatment process.<sup>53</sup> Other scrupulous patients may seek out confession for forgiveness of their actions. Confession acts as an anxiety-relieving technique that the patient may be asked to refrain from engaging in for an amount of time. It is important to explain to patients why refraining from certain religious actions is useful for them and that it will eventually reduce the anxiety they feel when engaging in ambiguous actions. If at a point in the future the anxiety associated with the actions does not appear, it may be permissible to engage in these actions again.

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<sup>51</sup> Abramowitz, “Treatment of Scrupulous Obsessions and Compulsions Using Exposure and Response Prevention,” 84; Huppert and Siev, “Treating Scrupulosity,” 386.

<sup>52</sup> Huppert and Siev, “Treating Scrupulosity,” 386.

<sup>53</sup> Abramowitz, “Treatment of Scrupulous Obsessions and Compulsions Using Exposure and Response Prevention,” 82.

The overall goal of ERP therapy is to have scrupulous patients accept the presence and thereby reduce the power of anxiety experienced when engaging in normal religious activities.<sup>54</sup> A person who engages in compulsive actions to overcome anxieties is not fighting against these anxieties, but is instead succumbing to them. In order for ERP therapy to have its full effect the patient must understand that focusing disproportionately on avoiding the risk of sin gives power to one's anxiety and it detracts from the larger religious goal of having a positive relationship with God and thus finding some contentment in life. In the next section I will discuss how the psychological technique of ERP is similar to the pastoral techniques used to treat those with scrupulosity within religious traditions.

#### Pastoral Treatment

Given its multidimensional nature, treating scrupulosity is especially difficult and requires an intimate understanding of both theology and psychology. Joseph Ciarrocchi, praises a 1959 book titled *Moral Theology* written by Jone and Adelman, for its tactful integration of religious context and mental health techniques. Ciarrocchi refers to it as a “clerical best-seller on moral theology,” and explains that it was used as a manual for training priests until the Second Vatican Council of the mid-1960s. While much of Catholic practice was changed after the Council, the principles at the foundation of *Moral Theology* are still important and especially instructive for helping those with scrupulosity.

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<sup>54</sup> As mentioned earlier in the Five Principles of David Greenberg, “normal” can be defined in relation to one's religious community. Abramowitz also highlights that it may be helpful for a family member or religious authority to be involved in designing the ERP exposures for the patient to ensure that the exercises are permitted and are relatively normal actions that should not be associated with the levels of anxiety the patient is currently experiencing. *Ibid.*, 84.

Jone and Adelman provide several strategies to use in the pastoral care approach to treat scrupulosity, which closely mirror the behavioral techniques used by mental health professionals to treat OCD. One of the strategies that Jone and Adelman recommend is having the scrupulous person choose other, conscientious persons as models for their behavior. Ciarrocchi identifies this strategy as the psychological principle of modeling. Choosing a conscientious person within one's religious community as a guide for reasonable behavior allows a scrupulous person to stop agonizing over whether her actions are good enough.

Jone and Adelman also recommend that scrupulous individuals purposefully place themselves in uncomfortable, anxiety-producing situations. Ciarrocchi cites Jone and Adelman's example of a person who has "impure" thoughts when looking at innocent persons or objects. If this is the case then he is encouraged to "look attentively at such things and becomingly at such persons and pay no attention to resultant emotions."<sup>55</sup> This type of strategy is used in the behavior technique of direct exposure. Successful behavioral exposure requires that it be prolonged and the person experience some level of anxiety. Eventually a person who consistently exposes himself to anxiety will experience habituation, and the stimuli that once caused anxiety will lose their power for the individual. Ciarrocchi uses the example of a person who lives near an area where construction is taking place. At first the sounds might be disturbingly loud and distracting, but given enough time the person will eventually undergo habituation and the noise of the construction will become only background noise.<sup>56</sup> However, this process

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<sup>55</sup> Heribert Jone and U. Adelman, *Moral Theology* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1959), 42 quoted in Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease*, 50.

<sup>56</sup> Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease*, 74–75.

takes time. Ciarrocchi notes that exposure to anxiety must be repeated and prolonged in order for the anxiety to subside.

Jone and Adelman state that a person struggling with scruples should pick a spiritual director and commit to following the direction of that one person without question. Often a scrupulous person will jump from one advisor to another when he has not been given enough reinforcement that his actions are acceptable. Asking a person to restrict herself to one spiritual advisor prevents her from receiving the assurance that she is looking for and keeps her in an uncomfortable emotional state until healthy anxiety-reducing habituation can set in.

Experiencing uncomfortable anxiety and blocking its expression in obsessive behavior is crucial to combating scrupulosity. Another form of blocking that Jone and Adelman recommend is that a person struggling with scruples not repeat his confessions or prayers multiple times. Often scrupulous people repeat behaviors to reduce their anxiety, so preventing them from doing this is another example of where the behavioral technique of blocking is employed.<sup>57</sup> The psychological reasoning for blocking is to ensure that the people do not relieve their anxiety through a behavior, but instead let it subside naturally until the point where habituation sets in and the situation is no longer anxiety producing. Ciarrocchi gives an example of a person who is anxious that his child will suffocate in the middle of the night while sleeping so he compulsively checks on the child all night long, which seems to relieve him of this anxiety. When blocking is employed, the parent is asked not to check on his child in the middle of the night and simply experience his anxious feelings. Because the anxiety-relieving compulsion is

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 50.

blocked, habituation has time to set in and the person will eventually experience relatively little or no anxiety at all about his child suffocating at night. While this process is difficult for a patient to execute, the counselor usually works in small steps towards the most difficult or most anxiety-producing situations over the course of several weeks or months. Therefore, the process might begin with just asking the person to begin by checking one less time per night for a few weeks until his anxiety levels off.

Jone and Adelman also propose the “duty to act contrary to scruples, for one might otherwise sin by pride, self-will and disobedience.”<sup>58</sup> This idea, often called “doing the opposite” is the foundational principle on which all of the other principles used to combat scruples are built. It is described in the works of St. Ignatius of Loyola.<sup>59</sup> Ignatius wrote a section in his *Spiritual Exercises* titled “Notes on Scruples” containing advice for those experiencing scruples while undergoing the exercises. Ignatius himself experienced difficulties with scruples following his powerful religious conversion and writes from firsthand experience. In his case, although he knew he had completed a full confession after his conversion, it seemed to him at times that he had not confessed certain things and experienced significant anxiety about his confessions.<sup>60</sup> He describes in *The Spiritual Exercises* that a scruple is fundamentally an error of judgment and provides the example of a person who experiences worry about having sinned after stepping on two pieces of straw that overlapped to form a cross. The essential characteristic of a person plagued with scrupulosity is the unrelenting doubt about the moral repercussions of one’s

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<sup>58</sup> Jone and Adelman, *Moral Theology*, 42; Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease*, 50.

<sup>59</sup> Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease*, 52.

<sup>60</sup> Saint Ignatius (of Loyola), *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola, with Related Documents*, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 35.

ambiguous actions. Regardless of whether the person thinks he has or has not sinned he feels guilty in his heart; he feels like a sinner.<sup>61</sup> In his *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius recommends that when a person is aware of his own capacity for “self-deception,” when he is aware of his doubtful and scrupulous tendencies, he should “act in a way diametrically opposed to the temptation.”<sup>62</sup>

Ciarrocchi also points out that sometimes blocking may consist of not doing an action, like not checking on a sleeping child. However, it is also possible that blocking may require the action of “doing the opposite.” If a person is obsessively afraid of sharp objects and usually compulsively avoids them, “doing the opposite” might require that she purposefully place herself in a situation where she encounters a sharp object. It would also require blocking the compulsive action that usually follows her encounter with sharp objects. Father Santa uses the language of doing the opposite when he discusses individuals with paralyzing anxiety. He quotes St. Alphonsus Liguori who says, “Scrupulous persons tend to fear that everything they do is sinful. The confessor should command them to act without restraint and to overcome their anxiety... The confessor may command the scrupulous to conquer their anxiety and disregard it by freely doing whatever it tells them not to do.” Father Santa explains that the fear and anxiety that the persons experiences in regards to their actions should not be taken as a sign that the action is sinful. Rather these emotions are simply the signs of the person’s scrupulosity.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises: Text and Commentary: A Handbook for Retreat Directors, Volume 4* (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 1998), 243.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 245–46.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas M. Santa, “Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous (2013),” *Scrupulous Anonymous Newsletter*, 2013, [http://mission.liguori.org/newsletters/pdf\\_archive/Ten\\_Commandments\\_for\\_the\\_Scrupulous\\_2013.pdf](http://mission.liguori.org/newsletters/pdf_archive/Ten_Commandments_for_the_Scrupulous_2013.pdf).

It may seem problematic to demand that a person perform an action that is directly contrary to their instinct to avoid sin. As will be discussed later, Father Santa acknowledges this issue but also recognizes that it is almost always the case that a scrupulous person fears performing an action that is not actually sinful; therefore, his confessor is not asking his to commit a sin but rather perform an action that the scrupulous person fears is sinful.

### **Joseph Ciarrocchi's Understanding of Scrupulosity**

Joseph Ciarrocchi, a former priest with a master's degree in theology, completed his doctorate in clinical psychology at the Catholic University of America and has written various works integrating spirituality and religion with behavioral psychology. His book on scrupulosity, *The Doubting Disease*, contains many portions that might be of help to a mental health practitioner, such as worksheets and manual-based instructions. It also provides a wealth of background information about scrupulosity and stories of Ciarrocchi's patients who struggle with the problem.

#### Developmental Scrupulosity

Ciarrocchi identifies three types of scrupulosity. Developmental scrupulosity occurs when a person experiences a notable evolution of conscience. Two varieties of developmental scrupulosity can occur, depending on the age of the person and the social context. Adolescence is usually the first context in which developmental scrupulosity presents itself. An adolescent may present with scrupulous behavior as she begins to define her own personal spirituality and morality but is not yet secure in her judgment. The second context is one of conversion. An individual might present with developmental scrupulosity after conversion or recommitment to her religion. It is not



uncommon for those who lived self-indulgent lifestyles before their conversion to develop severe scruples while seeking to correct their errant ways and deepen their commitment to their religion. Several famous religious individuals are believed to have suffered from developmental scrupulosity after their conversions or recommitment to their religion. Ciarrocchi specifically mentions Martin Luther and Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who both developed severe scruples. Another publication written by Trent Beattie, *Scruples and Sainthood*, features six saints of the Catholic Church who suffered from bouts of severe scrupulosity.<sup>64</sup> The most important feature of developmental scrupulosity is that it usually dissipates with time, even without intervention, which is what distinguishes it from other types of scrupulosity.<sup>65</sup>

During my weekend retreat experience I met a man named Nick whom I believe suffers from developmental scrupulosity. Although Nick is just a few years older than I am, he has already experienced three lifetimes worth of life-changing events. He shared many personal stories throughout the weekend. Within the first few hours of the retreat he announced that he was a recovering alcoholic and drug addict who was homeless for a year not too long ago. He proudly recounted the story of how, once he had turned his life around, he won primary custody of his five children, one of whom he adopted during the

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<sup>64</sup> The list of Catholic saints includes Saint Ignatius of Loyola as the oldest case of scrupulosity. The other saints listed are Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal, Alphonsus Liguori, Therese of Lisieux, and Katharine Drexel.

<sup>65</sup> Jonathan D. Huppert and Jedidiah Siev, "Treat Scrupulosity in Religious Individuals Using Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy," *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 17 (2010): 382–392; Jonathan D. Huppert, Jedidiah Siev, and Elyssa S. Kushner, "When Religion and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder Collide: Treat Scrupulosity in Ultra-Orthodox Jews," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 63 (2007): 925–941; C. Elliott and A.S. Radomsky, "Blasphemous Obsessions in Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD): Collision or Cooperation between Psychology and Spirituality?," *Counseling and Spirituality* 27 (2008): 51–69; David Greenberg and Gaby Shefler, "Ultra-Orthodox Rabbinic Responses to Religious Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," *Israel Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences* 45 (2008): 183–192; Jonathan S. Abramowitz, "Treatment of Scrupulous Obsessions and Compulsions Using Exposure and Response Prevention," *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 8 (2001): 79–85.

custody battle with his ex-wife. He described his involvement with several church ministries including running a retreat, singing at mass, serving as a sponsor for those converting to Catholicism and putting in time at his church's adoration chapel, which consumed much of his time. He also described his other daily rituals that usually included waking up around three-thirty in the morning so he had enough time to do his prayers and daily devotions, get his kids to where they needed to be and get to work. He explained that since he drives a truck for a living he has enormous amounts of time to listen to books, some of which he listens to several times. He expressed much excitement about listening to his new book, the narrated version of the Gospels. Nick also told me that recently he has been trying to cut back on his involvement in ministries because he notices that when it comes between his children and his spiritual exercises, it is his children who suffer.

Nick is a religiously dedicated man devoted to not only diligent practice of his faith but also learning more about it. He has a thirst for knowledge. But with this knowledge also comes a sense of superiority. He desires to be in control of every situation, having examined it from all angles before engaging in it. Perhaps this stems from his previous habits of addiction that he was enslaved to before he became sober. The tendency to attempt to control one's environment with knowledge and understanding of rules is a common characteristic of a scrupulous person. The more knowledge one gains, the less often he can be wrong about what his religion allows him to do or not do. However, it is usually the case that regardless of how much information is accumulated, one's anxiety is never actually relieved.

### Milieu-Influenced Scrupulosity

The second type of scrupulosity is milieu-influenced scrupulosity. This is a type of scrupulosity that can be taught. In milieu-influence scrupulosity scruples are imparted, usually inadvertently, through the structures of one's family or religious education. Fear and emotionality are strong elements in milieu-influence scrupulosity. Many who develop scruples under these conditions have encountered teachings about God's harshness, vengefulness or quickness to anger, which cause them to fear that God will condemn them to hell. This usually associates God with the emotion of fear rather than the emotion of love. Although this type of scrupulosity is a behavior that is learned through modeling, not all members of a particular group may be susceptible to it. Two brothers living within the same household, hearing the teachings of a strict, God-fearing father, may not both develop scrupulosity. In order for scrupulosity to be learned the person must have certain predisposing characteristics. This is also the case with adolescent or developmental scrupulosity. Not all persons who convert to a stricter religion or experience a rededication to their faith experience scrupulosity.

Entertaining images of God that are punishing and harsh is thought to have an impact on many scrupulous tendencies. Harsh God-images can be acquired in a strict teaching setting or with the development of improper attachment styles between a child and his or her parents. The influence of one's God-image will be discussed more fully in a later section. Given that religious individuals are more likely to present with scrupulosity if they suffer from OCD, the latter is a significant predisposing factor.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Greenberg and Huppert, "Scrupulosity: A Unique Subtype of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," 287. Greenberg and Huppert also suggest that OCPD (Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder) could predispose a religious person to develop scrupulosity, although there is an ongoing debate about how OCPD and OCD overlap that complicates the issue significantly (286).

However, it is important to highlight that many studies support the conclusion that religion does not cause vulnerability OCD. This would seem to refute Freud's claim that religion is a "universal neurosis." Rather, those who present with OCD and are religious are especially vulnerable to the development of developmental and milieu influenced scrupulosity.

Ciarrocchi identifies three possible outcomes for individuals who present with milieu-influenced scrupulosity. Some affected individuals accept this type of scrupulosity as normative for their religious group; others view the development of this type of scrupulosity as negative and leave that particular religious environment or religion altogether; and individuals sometimes remain within their original religious environments but develop new and adaptive attitudes toward their authority figures.<sup>67</sup> In explaining how to tell the difference between milieu-influenced scruples and other types, Ciarrocchi cites moral theologian Vincent M. O'Flaherty, who wrote his own influential book on scrupulosity. O'Flaherty states that if a religious counselor interviews one hundred students at a religious college he should expect to find one or two cases of scrupulosity. If he finds more than one or two cases, it can be assumed that there may be factors, for instance a particular teacher or philosophy being taught, that are the cause of the increased prevalence of scrupulosity.<sup>68</sup>

At the weekend retreat I attended many individuals attempted to implicate the teachings of strict, pre-Second Vatican Council, Catholic school nuns in the development of their scrupulosity. Father Santa was adamant that their scrupulosity had nothing to do

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<sup>67</sup> Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease*, 121–23.

<sup>68</sup> V.M. O'Flaherty, "Therapy for Scrupulosity," *Direct Psychotherapy* 28 (1973): 221–243 ; Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease*, 124.

with the nuns and their teaching methods or Catholicism in itself, which I believe to be both true and untrue. At the time he was explaining this, he was gently correcting those who were identifying the root cause of scrupulosity as the strict nuns who taught them in school. Father Santa was trying to emphasize that it was not possible for these nuns to give them the type of scrupulosity that they have experienced their entire lives. While I do believe that in some way these nuns may have induced a type of milieu-influenced scruples, as the stereotype of pre-Vatican II nuns seems to portray, once the person has left Catholic school those types of scruples should disappear. The retreat attendees are persons who have struggled with scrupulosity for quite some time after Catholic school. While it is possible that both developmental and milieu-influenced scrupulosity have the ability to develop into clinical scrupulosity, the most serious type of scrupulosity that will be explained soon, it is only possible for this to occur if the person has certain pre-disposing characteristics that make him particularly vulnerable to clinical scrupulosity. The most notable pre-disposing characteristic is having OCD or Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD), which is characterized not by specific obsessions or compulsions but rather enduring patterns of excessive and rigid perfectionism. So while it can be that the retreat attendees who attended Catholic school and were taught by strict nuns at a young age developed milieu scruples while under the nuns' tutelage, it cannot be that these nuns are at fault for these individuals' life-long scrupulosity. Some other driving force took over and maintained their scrupulosity once they left Catholic school. I will speak more to this topic later in the paper when examining the philosophy and methods of Scrupulous Anonymous.

### Clinical Scrupulosity

The third and final type of scrupulosity that Ciarrocchi describes is clinical scrupulosity, which is a psychological condition that is serious and injurious enough to yield a specific clinical diagnosis. This type of scrupulosity is usually associated with OCD and appears as a rather dominant part of a person's psychological makeup. It does not fade away with age or spiritual maturity or with the modification of one's religious surroundings. Ciarrocchi recognizes that it is debatable whether religion predisposes people to develop OCD or whether individuals with OCD tend to be attracted to religion and find ways within a given religion to manifest their OCD. He concludes that most likely both are true. In the case of milieu-influenced scruples, fear-driven preaching does predispose some individuals to develop religious obsessions. However, in the case of clinical scrupulosity, religious messages and practices generally provide the "backdrop" for a patient to express his or her already-present obsessive-compulsive tendencies.<sup>69</sup> Ciarrocchi states that specific anxiety disorders are not hereditary, but a predisposition to generalized anxiety is inheritable. Thus, it is a person's cultural and environmental context that determines whether and in what form a particular disorder appears.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease*, 123–124.

<sup>70</sup> David H. Barlow, *Anxiety and Its Disorders: The Nature and Treatment of Anxiety and Panic* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1998); Ciarrocchi, *The Doubting Disease*.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CATHOLIC BACKDROP

#### **Religious Harm within Catholicism**

Perhaps the most interesting thing about religion is that it has the capability to do serious harm to persons. Religion is often portrayed by both religious and non-religious sources as something to be respected, valued and maintained in every culture. However, it can be argued that every religion shoulders the responsibility for some grievous act of harm toward human beings at some point in its history. For example, the crusades are generally recognized as a series of events in which Christian authorities and their delegates caused unspeakable bloodshed. Damage has been done by religions to individuals on a micro level as well. This damage can be emotional, spiritual, or sometimes physical. For example, some feminist authors argue that the cultural practice of mandating Muslim women to wear a hijab or a burka may be detrimental to their development as full persons.

It is physical damage towards persons that is hardest to ignore; its effects are often readily observable with the senses. From Catholic saints who would scourge their bodies and sleep on wooden boards wearing shirts of haircloth to the Taoist Vegetarian Festival, of Phuket, Thailand where devotees participate in ritual acts of extreme cheek piercing, fire-walking and self-mutilation, there are numerous ways to participate in a religion that many would consider extreme and harmful. The question to be asked is whether or not these religions are, in any significant respects, harmful to their own devotees.

Catholicism arguably provides an environment in which harmful practices that resemble OCD can develop, which is why a notable portion of the scrupulous population

is Catholic. As stated earlier, religion probably does not cause OCD or scrupulosity, but it provides an opportunity for these tendencies to express themselves and intensify. There are specific areas of religion, for instance the strict teachings of Catholic nuns on the problem of mortal sin, the threat of eternal damnation, and the need for frequent confession, which may promote the development of pathological behaviors in persons who are prone to OCD.

Several studies show that there is a positive correlation between religious involvement and high levels of anxiety for those whose have extrinsic religious motivations. Extrinsic religious motivations may include social or economic gain as well as avoidance of punishment. The direct relationship between religious involvement and anxiety is also displayed in individuals who exhibit negative religious coping tendencies where God is perceived as a punishing, distant, abandoning, or powerless figure. Koenig notes that religious teachings about the afterlife and eternal consequences of sin often plague those vulnerable to anxiety with feelings of doubt and guilt about even the most miniscule actions.<sup>71</sup> Clark proposes that in these cases the religious behavior may be strongly motivated by the desire to alleviate feelings of anxiety and guilt, which is classified as extrinsic motivation. Guilt can often become an obsession for individuals who console themselves by compulsively completing ritual acts in attempt to assuage their feelings of guilt.<sup>72</sup> Most often in scrupulosity feelings of guiltiness morph into feelings of anxiety regarding the state of one's soul and the fear of eternal damnation.

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<sup>71</sup> Harold G. Koenig, "Religion, Spirituality, and Anxiety Disorders," in *Religion and Spirituality in Psychiatry*, ed. Philippe Huguelet and Harold G. Koenig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 129.

<sup>72</sup> E.T. Clark, *The Psychology of Religious Awakening* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) found in Peter Hill, Evonne Smith, and Steven J. Sandage, "Religious and Spiritual Motivations in Clinical Practice," in *The*



There are several practices within the realm of Christianity, and more specifically Catholicism, that can support the development of scrupulosity. This does not necessarily render the Catholic Church and its teachers culpable for the presence of scrupulosity. The way in which doctrine and practice are taught has changed in significant ways in just the last fifty years within Catholicism. Figures within and outside the Church would most likely agree that the Catholic Church has developed a more pastoral approach that is more attuned to developing whole, balanced and well-adjusted human beings. This is quite a contrast to the pre-Vatican II image of an authoritarian, doctrine-spouting Catholic hierarchy that frequently threatened the congregation with punishments of hell at the slightest misstep. While this is not necessarily the reality of what it was like to be a Catholic in the 1950's or 60's, both popular culture and children who were raised in that era often remember it this way. It is important to examine certain practices of the Catholic Church that may lead those with predisposing conditions or tendencies to develop undue guilt, anxiety or other maladaptive emotions.

#### The Confiteor

In *The Handbook of Religion and Mental Health* Nancy Clark Kehoe discusses the Confiteor, one of the prayers recited at the beginning of the Catholic mass and sometimes, in somewhat different terms, in Lutheran and Anglican ceremonies, as one particular element of a religious ceremony that could have disastrous effects on persons with predispositions towards scrupulosity. “Confiteor” is Latin for “I confess.” It is necessary to note that the translation of the Confiteor used in Mass has changed since Kehoe wrote her book chapter. During the Second Vatican Council a Consilium was

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*Psychology of Religion and Spirituality for Clinicians*, ed. Jamie Aten, Kari A. O'Grady, and Everett L. Worthington Jr. (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 84.

commissioned to revise the Mass. Several changes, including the use of the vernacular language, were implemented. The Latin text of the 1970 revised Confiteor begins, “Confiteor Deo omnipotenti, et vobis, fratres, quia peccavi nimis cogitatione, verbo, opere, et omissione: mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa,” which can literally be translated “I confess to almighty God, and to you, brothers, that I have sinned exceedingly in thought, word, deed, and omission: through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.” However, these were not the words recited by the congregation in Mass. One of the goals of revising the Mass was to simplify it and make it easier for the congregation to celebrate. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, or Sacrosanctum Concilium, mandated that elements that were duplicated within the Mass were to be discarded.<sup>73</sup> Thus, the repetition of the phrase “through my fault” was eliminated in the 1970 version of the Mass.

In 2001 the Holy See issued the Instruction *Liturgiam authenticam*, which called attention to errors in the current translations of liturgical texts into various vernacular languages. This document decreed that a new translation of the Mass was needed in order to be more faithful to the Latin Mass set forth after the Second Vatican Council. This document stated that translation was not to be “a work of creative innovation as it is of rendering the original texts faithfully and accurately into the vernacular language.”<sup>74</sup> It was also to ensure the unity of the Catholic Church and the preservation of traditions. The

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<sup>73</sup> Pope Paul VI, “Sacrosanctum Concilium [Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy]” (Vatican Press, December 4, 1963), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html).

<sup>74</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, “*Liturgiam Authenticam: On the Use of Vernacular Languages in the Publication of the Books of the Roman Liturgy*” (Vatican Website, March 28, 2001), [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccdds\\_doc\\_20010507\\_liturgia\\_m-authenticam\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20010507_liturgia_m-authenticam_en.html).

International Commission on English in the Liturgy oversaw the retranslation of the English liturgy over a period of ten years. The changes were approved by the Vatican in 2010 and adopted into practice on the first Sunday of Advent in late 2011.<sup>75</sup> The English translation of the Confiteor as published in the 2011 Catholic Missal is as follows:

I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do; through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault; therefore I ask blessed Mary ever-Virgin, all the Angels and Saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God.

Not only has the repetition of one's fault returned to being repeated three times, but also beating of one's breast during the three recitations of "through my fault" has returned. At the time of the changes to the Mass in 2011 many congregations overviewed the new words to say and new actions to perform, but the changes have also been indicated on pew cards for those who do not regularly attend Mass. Even the pew cards indicate that one should perform this breast-beating action three times. This is a reaffirmation of a practice that dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> Century and the time of St. Augustine of Hippo.<sup>76</sup> The action of beating on ones breast with a closed fist was never formally discarded but fell out of practice with the changes to the liturgy post-Vatican II. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops defines this chest striking as a "symbolic tapping of the chest with a clenched fist over one's heart, signifying remorse" and indicates that the inspiration for this gesture comes from the tax collector in the Gospel of Luke who asked God for mercy while beating his breast. Theological justification for this

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<sup>75</sup> Catholic News Agency, "Cardinal George Announces Vatican Approval of New Roman Missal," August 20, 2010, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/cardinal-george-announces-vatican-approval-of-new-roman-missal/>.

<sup>76</sup> Father John Zuhlsdorf, "Quaeritur: When during Mass Should People Strike Their Breasts?" *Fr. Z's Blog*, November 17, 2011, <http://wdtprs.com/blog/2011/11/quaeritur-when-during-mass-should-people-strike-their-breasts/>.

action is that it is good to acknowledge our sins.<sup>77</sup> The famous Catholic priest and author Romano Guardini wrote in his 1955 *Sacred Signs*,

To brush one's clothes with the tips of one's fingers is not to strike the breast. We should beat upon our breasts with our closed fists. ... It is an honest blow, not an elegant gesture. To strike the breast is to beat against the gates of our inner world in order to shatter them. This is its significance... 'Repent, do penance.' It is the voice of God. Striking the breast is the visible sign that we hear that summons. ... Let it wake us up, and make us see, and turn to God.<sup>78</sup>

The future Pope Benedict XVI also wrote in his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*:

We point not at someone else but at ourselves as the guilty party, [which] remains a meaningful gesture of prayer. ... When we say mea culpa (through my fault), we turn, so to speak, to ourselves, to our own front door, and thus we are able rightly to ask forgiveness of God, the saints, and the people gathered around us, whom we have wronged.<sup>79</sup>

#### Conception of Persons in Light of Their Sinful Nature

The message from theologians and pew cards alike is clear: we are sinners. Sin is a concept that is central to Christianity; for many traditional theologians, it was humanity's sinful nature that necessitated Jesus Christ, the central figure of Christianity, to be crucified.<sup>80</sup> The original sin that Adam and Eve incurred in the Garden of Eden was passed on from generation to generation and is indelibly a part of every human being when he or she is conceived.<sup>81</sup> Christian tradition holds that each person carries the stain

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<sup>77</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Commentary on the New People's Parts" (Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis), accessed February 9, 2014, [http://www.archspm.org/\\_uls/resources/Commentary-New-Peoples-Parts.pdf](http://www.archspm.org/_uls/resources/Commentary-New-Peoples-Parts.pdf).

<sup>78</sup> Romano Guardini, *Sacred Signs* (St. Louis, MO: Pio Decimo Press, 1956) quoted in Father John Zuhlsdorf, "Quaeritur: When during Mass Should People Strike Their Breasts?"

<sup>79</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2000), 207 quoted in Father John Zuhlsdorf, "Quaeritur: When during Mass Should People Strike Their Breasts?"

<sup>80</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican Website, 2000), Section 615, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/ccc\\_toc.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/ccc_toc.htm).; Ibid., Section 602.

<sup>81</sup> CCC, Section 404–406.

of original sin until he or she is baptized.<sup>82</sup> Even Jesus' ministry begins with his own baptism, although he was born without original sin.<sup>83</sup> It cannot be overemphasized that, in the eyes of many theologians, Jesus was crucified because of our sinful nature. The Catholic Church teaches that all sinners, including all Christians, carry the responsibility for Jesus' death. The Catechism of the Catholic Church even uses the language that sinners authored the sufferings of Jesus.<sup>84</sup> The Catechism also encourages persons to emulate the sufferings of Christ. Christians are encouraged to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and urged to pick up their own cross and suffer as Jesus did.<sup>85</sup>

### Guilt and Shame

The reality of these teachings is that many Catholics are inundated from a young age with messages about how at the core of their being they are bad. Infants are baptized because they need to be cleansed from the dark stain with which they are conceived and born. For many Christians, awareness of their sinful nature causes them to feel shame and guilt. Although these two emotions are often used interchangeably in colloquial English, Amber Martinez-Pilkington writes convincingly that these terms are different. She cites the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, which defines guilt as "culpability of choice made in favor of something that ought not to be."<sup>86</sup> Martinez-Pilkington compares this definition of guilt to one used in psychology and determines that the feeling of guilt is induced

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., Section 977.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., Section 602. Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-23

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., Section 598.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., Section 618.

<sup>86</sup> Catholic University of America, *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967). Quoted in Amber Martinez-Pilkington, "Shame and Guilt: The Psychology of Sacramental Confession," *The Humanistic Psychologist* 35 (2007): 205.

when one feels one has broken a moral or social code.<sup>87</sup> In contrast, the definition of shame as given in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* consists of, “the overpowering feeling that inward harmony and satisfaction with oneself are disturbed... Shame differs from guilt first and foremost because it has a greater affective quality.”<sup>88</sup> The experience of shame is more intense and painful than the feeling of guilt. Whereas guilt is a judgment on whether rules have been transgressed, shame reflects this action onto the person as a whole. A person experiencing shame often experiences feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem. Psychologist Eric Erickson proposes that guilt is the more mature emotion since one usually experiences shame prior to experiencing guilt in the developmental process.<sup>89</sup> Martinez-Pilkington urges her readers to take the effects of shame seriously and states that shame can have both devastating psychological and physical consequences for persons. Women and men experience shame differently, and Martinez-Pilkington cites a study that found that women are more prone to experiencing depression as a result of their shame, while men are more likely to experience rage.<sup>90</sup> In addition to depression and rage, shame has been linked to forms of physical violence and addictive behavior.

Martinez-Pilkington cites an article by Rebecca Thomas and Stephen Parker who seek to understand shame and guilt from a theological perspective by focusing on the narrative of Adam and Eve in Genesis. Thomas and Parker acknowledge the distinction

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<sup>87</sup> Martinez-Pilkington, “The Psychology of Sacramental Confession,” 205.

<sup>88</sup> Catholic University of America, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Quoted in Martinez-Pilkington, “The Psychology of Sacramental Confession,” 207.

<sup>89</sup> R. Thomas and S. Parker, “Toward a Theological Understanding of Shame,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 23 (2004): 178.

<sup>90</sup> C. Poulson, “Shame: The Master Emotion” (University of Tasmania’s School of Management’s Working Paper Series, 2003), [http://www.utas.edu.au/management/\\_files/20\\_03pap.pdf](http://www.utas.edu.au/management/_files/20_03pap.pdf). cited in Martinez-Pilkington, “The Psychology of Sacramental Confession,” 207.

between shame and guilt has too often been overlooked, and there is a theological need to re-define shame, especially “debilitating” shame, apart from guilt.<sup>91</sup> Thomas and Parker note the position of John Hick, who attributes the dominant guilt narrative of Christianity to Saint Augustine. However, Thomas and Parker state that there are alternatives to the Augustinian perspective on the Genesis story and discuss an approach by Irenaeus, a Christian thinker who was more inclined to accept the imperfections in the world. Irenaeus interprets the story of Adam and Eve as a developmental journey, which is suggestive of Eric Erickson’s model of shame and guilt. Thomas and Parker also note that Irenaeus’ account focuses on the relational aspect between God and Adam and Eve indicating that the shame experienced by Adam and Eve signified a break in their relationship with God. According to Irenaeus, God’s actions in the Genesis passages indicate that the proper remedy for Adam and Eve’s shame is the restoration of their relationship with God. They can then move past the emotional experience of shame and experience the appropriate emotion in regard to their transgression: guilt.<sup>92</sup> Therefore Martinez-Pilkington holds that the first step in therapeutically addressing shame is restoring relationships. Martinez-Pilkington states that, once this shame is treated therapeutically, if a person continues to experience appropriate guilt for wrong-doing then the Sacrament of Reconciliation is an appropriate way to resolve that guilt. However, if the feelings of guilt persist after a person comes to an understanding of shame and attends confession, a psychopathology may be present.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Thomas and Parker, “Toward a Theological Understanding of Shame,” 177.

<sup>92</sup> Thomas and Parker, “Toward a Theological Understanding of Shame.” Cited in Martinez-Pilkington, “The Psychology of Sacramental Confession,” 209.

<sup>93</sup> Martinez-Pilkington, “The Psychology of Sacramental Confession,” 209.

Christians who acknowledge their sinful nature as a result of the fall of Adam and Eve must be careful in interpreting their culpability. It is surely a difficult task to acknowledge one's sinful nature as a human being and even one's guilt as a particular individual without falling into the emotion of shame. This space between the acknowledgment of guilt and the feeling of shame must be carefully negotiated by religious and parental figures in religious instruction if mental health is to be maintained. Often Catholic individuals seek recourse for their emotions of both shame and guilt through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, more commonly known as Confession. It is necessary to give short explanation of this sacrament order to understand the role it performs in the lives of many Catholics.

### **The Sacrament of Confession**

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that sin is undesirable because first and foremost it is “an offense against God, a rupture of communion with him.”<sup>94</sup> This idea of a ruptured relationship is seen in the way Irenaeus interprets the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. Their first emotion is one of shame and they hide from God. Thomas and Parker note that God's first reaction is to re-establish a connection with the couple by asking, “Where are you?”<sup>95</sup> Theologically, sin is a break in one's relationship with God. It may or may not be accompanied by *feelings* of guilt (regarding a particular action or inaction) or shame (regarding the core of one's person). For Catholics, this relationship can be properly repaired only through Confession.

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<sup>94</sup> CCC, 1440.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas and Parker, “Toward a Theological Understanding of Shame,” 179.



Even with the Sacrament of Baptism for the forgiveness of original sin, human beings are still prone to sin. The Catechism quotes the apostle John who says, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”<sup>96</sup> The Catechism affirms the ability of the Church to forgive sins that are committed after baptism through the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, which also goes by its more popular name: Confession.<sup>97</sup> Although the sacrament of Reconciliation technically consists of three distinct parts and the actual confession of sins is only one of these three parts, which I discuss below, it is common for Catholics to focus mostly on the action of divulging sins they have committed to a priest and thus to refer to the entire process as Confession. It is this sacrament, designed to take away sin and alleviate related feelings of guilt and shame, which can trigger OCD-prone Catholics to develop scrupulosity. In order to understand the ways in which many Catholics think about Confession and why it is a trigger for the scrupulous, a short history of the sacrament is necessary.

Catholics typically use the verse wherein Jesus presents the apostle Peter with the keys to heaven and says, “Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven,” as biblical justification for the practice of confession.<sup>98</sup> Jesus is also says to his apostles after his resurrection, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained,” in the Gospel of John.<sup>99</sup> However, the practice of confession as

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<sup>96</sup> 1 John 1:8 quoted in *CCC*, Section 1425.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, Section 979, 980, 986, 1485, 1486.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, Section 1444.; Bruce Manning Metzger and Roland Edmund Murphy, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford University Press, 1991), Matthew 16:19; Mathew 18:18; 28:16–20.

<sup>99</sup> *CCC*, Section 1485.; Metzger and Murphy, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, John 20:23.

most Catholics know it did not develop until the seventh century. Previously, confessions consisted of public penance, which included fasting, wearing sackcloth, smearing oneself with ashes, bowing before the righteous, and waiting long periods of time, even years, for reconciliation.<sup>100</sup> The sacrament of Reconciliation as it is practiced now consists of three parts. Contrition is the first action, which involves the person having remorse for the sin committed and making the commitment not to sin again.<sup>101</sup> The second action entails the actual confession of sins to a priest. Admission of one's sins allows one to take responsibility for them, rather than shifting blame to someone else.<sup>102</sup> The final state of reconciliation is satisfaction for one's sins. The Catechism explains that the worldly consequences of sin are not repaired through the penance one is required to do. If a person steals something from another person, justice requires he they return the other person's possessions. However, there are consequences of this sin that go beyond the worldly concerns, which include damaging the relationships with ones neighbor, with God and with oneself. The Catechism teaches that the absolution given at the end of a penitent's confession absolves him of sin, but the penitent must still do something more to heal the relational and spiritual wounds he has caused himself. This is why the performance of penance is required.<sup>103</sup> Penances are assigned by the priest according to the nature of one's sin and can include performing actions such as "prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, [or] sacrifices."<sup>104</sup> Thus, the

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<sup>100</sup> CCC, Section 1447.; William L. Northridge, *Psychiatry in Pastoral Practice* (London: Epworth Press, 1938), 199.

<sup>101</sup> CCC, Section 1451.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., Section 1455, 1456.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., section 1459.

Catholic sacrament of Reconciliation that often goes by the name Confession contains two additional actions, contrition and penance, which are to be completed one before and one after the actual confession of sins.

According to Catholic doctrine, it is necessary for individuals who have committed a mortal sin (the most serious of sins) to attend Confession. Until absolution has been given, a person who has committed a mortal sin is prohibited from receiving Communion. The Eucharist, or Holy Communion, is a centrally important aspect of Catholic ritual practice, and to be kept from it is to be kept from an experience of intimacy with God and bonding with others. Other than on the occasion of mortal sin, Catholics are obligated to go to Confession at least once a year. The Catechism states that although it is not necessary, Confession of “everyday faults” is good practice and is “strongly recommended.” It is believed that the more frequently one receives forgiveness from God, the more forgiving one will be.<sup>105</sup>

Despite the exactness of this sacrament and the bestowal of absolution and forgiveness upon the penitent, there is still a price to be paid for sin. The Catechism expounds the double nature of sin and its double consequence. The Catholic Church teaches that if a person dies without confessing mortal sins he receives “eternal punishment” in hell. When sin is forgiven through the Sacrament of Confession, one has re-established the possibility of being united with God in heaven and one is no longer guilty for that sin. However, the enactment of sin also causes human beings to form “unhealthy attachments to creatures,” and these attachments need to be broken. The

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., section 1460.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., section 1458.

Church teaches that Divine justice requires a painful effort of having to break these attachments and separate from what one wrongly loves. This painful effort, called “temporal punishment”, can be completed in this life or the next. The penance assigned by priests after Confession is one way of expiating this temporal punishment, even though one’s sins have been forgiven. Although a person may die free from mortal sin, his soul is most likely still tainted by venial (minor) sin and he may still carry some attachments of sin not fully atoned for on earth even though he was fully forgiven. This person does not deserve eternal punishment in hell, but still must be cleansed of any sin and attachment in order to be worthy of heaven. The Church teaches that God, in his Divine mercy, provided human beings with the gift of Purgatory, which is a realm of the afterlife in which one can be “purged” of one’s sins.<sup>106</sup> Although it is not common practice today, the Catholic Church teaches that one can be granted an indulgence for the purpose of helping persons complete their purification. These indulgences do not forgive sins, they only lessen the temporal punishment. Certain religious authorities can grant indulgences to those who perform pious actions in specified ways.<sup>107</sup>

It is common for scrupulous persons to incessantly seek knowledge about Church teaching in order to constantly be in the right, especially when it comes to doctrine about punishment for sin and the afterlife. It is my understanding from talking to many strictly adherent Catholics who suffer from scrupulosity that they understand the need for Purgatory and therefore they are aware of the Church teaching on temporal punishment for sins. Whether they truly understand the teaching is another matter. Temporal punishment is also a notion necessary for explaining the practice of indulgences, which

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., section 1472, 1473.

<sup>107</sup> “Indulgences,” Catholic University of America, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*.

fervent Catholics often find themselves defending due to the abuses of it in the Medieval Era.

### Preparation for Confession

Guides for examination of one's conscience were a primary source of instruction for how to approach the Sacrament of Confession. Before the Second Vatican Council, the examinations included fairly clearly-defined categories of sin that. A Franciscan pamphlet from 1960 printed mortal sins in all capital letters, supposedly in order to emphasize that the penitent person should ruminate more on these serious sins and be sure to confess them.<sup>108</sup>

Also before the Second Vatican Council there many, laypersons and clergy, were concerned with the details and particularities of sins. It was also common practice for priests to expand the definition of what sin encompassed when reprimanding persons in the confessional. One priest claimed that washing the family car on Sunday in “full view” of the neighbors was doubly sinful because it was wrong in and of itself, a violation of the Sabbath, and it was also a scandalous *display* of disobedience to the commandment.<sup>109</sup> Other pre-Second Vatican Council Catholic publications identified special sins, such as the failure to pray in times of temptation, the half-hearted performance of religious duties, and the practice of gossip as sins that required forgiveness through the sacrament of Confession.

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<sup>108</sup> James M. O’Toole, “In the Court of Conscience: American Catholics and Confession, 1900-1975,” in *Habits of Devotion: Catholic Religious Practice in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. James M. O’Toole (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 146.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

In the pre-Council era, many religious magazines ran Question-and-Answer columns, which reveal Catholics over-preoccupation with even the smallest of sins and their dualistic conception of every action as categorically sinful or not. It is possible that this is just a sign of the times, so to speak, that everyone was preoccupied with details about sins. It probably more likely that there was a higher population of scrupulous persons at this time because of little understanding of what scrupulosity was and how to aid those with it and, in a time where questions were not able to be searched on the internet or discussed in chat rooms, we see evidence of them reaching out for answers in Catholic publications. O'Toole notes a 1949 issue of *Messenger of the Sacred Heart* which addresses the question of whether getting a haircut on a holy day is sinful. The publication also specifies exactly how much grocery shopping is permitted on holy days.<sup>110</sup> Although several theologians instructed priests on how to dissuade parishioners from developing scrupulosity, the rigorous practices of the Church seemed to promote the opposite. Religious authorities' lack of knowledge regarding OCD and its role in contributing to the development of and possibly the predisposition to scrupulosity caused them to continue giving unintentionally harmful advice to scrupulous persons. When a question arose about the difference between the temptation to sin and the sin itself, the *Messenger* published an answer stating that it is always sinful to perform an act that one is uncertain about. Performing an act of doubtful permissibility displays a willingness to do the wrong thing.<sup>111</sup> This encouragement of laypersons to default to an understanding of actions as sinful unless proven permissible is particularly telling of the attitude toward

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

sin that reigned during this time. This type of attitude could have been incredibly influential on persons with OCD tendencies. Even if one priest were to reassure them of their guiltlessness, if there was doubt, then anxiety would be triggered.<sup>112</sup>

During this time, there was also an overemphasis on repeating the details of one's sins within the confessional. A 1930's book that taught elementary school students how to make a proper confession instructed the children to tell how many times they had committed each sin.<sup>113</sup> Some priests expressed frustration with the frequent generalization of sins and particularly sexual sins, both in nature and in number, by teenagers.<sup>114</sup> One reason for encouraging the penitent to divulge detailed numbers in the confessional was to help priests allot proper penance. Although there are no precise rules on how to allot the penance one received for reparation of the harmful consequences of each particular sin, the Catechism states that the priest must impose penance that corresponds with the "gravity and nature" of the sins committed.<sup>115</sup> Laypersons understood this general theory of proportionality as the idea that the "punishment should fit the crime."<sup>116</sup> Again, the penance is not for repairing the practical consequences of one's sin in the world, but it's purpose is to repair one's relationships and spiritual maladies.

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<sup>112</sup> One might be comforted to know that the exact opposite advice is given to scrupulous individuals these days by the Scrupulous Anonymous Ten Commandments.

<sup>113</sup> O'Toole, "In the Court of Conscience," 153.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>115</sup> CCC, Section 1460.

<sup>116</sup> O'Toole, "In the Court of Conscience," 157.

Stretching back a bit further in history, O'Toole references one of the earliest American catechisms from the 1840s that advised penitents to put themselves "in the sentiments of a criminal who is about to offer honorable amends for his crimes."<sup>117</sup>

Several authors have leveled charges against the institution of confession claiming that it has never quite rid itself of the legalistic and juridical idea of sin and payment for sin.

Patrick McCormick describes the process of an individual confession, the typical practice from the sixth century, on as such:

The penitent came before the priest-confessor, listing according to species and number the sin-crimes committed since his last confession. The confessor, listening as a judge to these self-accusations, would then ascertain the severity (misdemeanor, felony, capital offense) of the sins catalogued, assign a penance appropriate to the crimes and pardon the sinner. In this way the priest performed the three basic functions of a jurist confronted with a criminal. It is therefore not surprising that the Council of Trent understood confession and absolution in juridical categories.<sup>118</sup>

McCormick, like other authors, draws attention to the manuals used by priests and confessors to help determine what type of penance to assign based on the gravity of the sin.<sup>119</sup> McCormick believes that the juridical and legalistic models of sin focus too much on individuals who are considered in isolation from their broader social contexts. These models also leave little room for a theology of grace. Perceiving a sinner as a criminal leads to an excessive focus on punishment for sin and a neglect of the process of reconciliation.<sup>120</sup> McCormick makes note that manuals' model of sin contains four basic assumptions that oppose the theology of grace found in the gospels: the person sins as an

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>118</sup> Patrick McCormick, *Sin As Addiction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 62.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 62–63.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 64.



individual, rather than as a person who participates in a social or institutional practice that is itself sinful; the sinning individual is different from others in the level of his “willfulness”; this “willfulness” needs to be broken or punished; the individual’s crime of sin needs to be remedied through punishment or penalty, and it is the pain he suffers that will actually accomplish the work of redemption.<sup>121</sup>

Many Catholics find Confession helpful in cultivating empathy for others, and they find solace in confiding in another person about their weaknesses. I have talked to several Catholics who find reassurance of their salvation through Confession and the restoration of God’s saving grace. Martinez-Pilkington cites ones penitent who stated that he found “mercy, understanding, and forgiveness—no matter how often I confess the same tired stuff...I cannot wear out God’s mercy.”<sup>122</sup> Several studies have shown that Confession has positive psychological and even physiological effects on some subjects. Witvilet and colleagues discovered that confession imagery produced higher levels of self-forgiveness, decreased negative emotion, reduced guilt, and reduced muscle tension in subjects.<sup>123</sup> However, these positive effects of the Sacrament of Confession are not universal among religious individuals.

#### Difficulties with Confession

Scrupulous Catholics report significant problems receiving the sacraments, especially Confession. Many scrupulous Catholics take very seriously the mandate to be

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>122</sup> G. Temple, “Spiritual Direction in the Episcopal Church,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 30 (2002): 303 quoted in Martinez-Pilkington, “The Psychology of Sacramental Confession,” 213.

<sup>123</sup> C. Witvilet et al., “Please Forgive Me: Transgressors Emotions and Physiology during Imagery of Seeking Forgiveness and Victim Responses,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 21 (2002): 221; Martinez-Pilkington, “The Psychology of Sacramental Confession.”

cleansed of mortal sin through Confession before receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, and so they often forgo taking Communion because they have serious doubt about whether or not they have committed a mortal sin since the last time they went to Confession. There is also a mandate among Catholics to receive Communion at weekly Mass. This is why many scrupulous individuals attend weekly Confession on Saturday afternoons and weekly Mass on Sunday mornings. In addition to questioning if they are worthy to take Communion, they ruminate about the punishment they might receive if they are, as they so dreaded, not free from mortal sin and take Communion in this tainted state. Thus, it is the sacrament of Communion that brings about feelings of unworthiness for many.

Problems arise in regard to the sacrament of Confession because scrupulous persons believe that because the sacrament of Confession forgives them of their sins that it will also relieve them of their guilt and anxiety that surrounds their possible faults. Many scrupulous persons agonize over whether they have properly completed an examination of conscience and called to mind all of their sins they need to confess. They worry that they have forgotten to confess a sin or that they have somehow purposefully forgotten to confess a certain sin, which is a sin in itself. Although the Church teaches that if you have truly forgotten to confess a sin it is forgiven through the absolution the priest gives, scrupulous person still believe themselves to be blameworthy.<sup>124</sup> Scrupulous persons are so consumed by their perceived guilt that they cannot trust in the efficacy of the sacrament, their anxiety never goes away and the process of Confession serves only to stir up emotions of guilt and anxiety about sin and punishment. This is especially true

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<sup>124</sup> CCC, Section 1456.

when considering the influence the legalistic sense of sin the Catholic Church has adopted in the past.

William Van Ornum recounts in his book, *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies*, several survey responses from Scrupulous Anonymous newsletter subscribers about Confession and their difficulties with it. One man recalled that his scrupulosity began in seventh and eighth grade and developed to the point that he characterized his teen years as a “‘Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde’ life” stating, “Confession worked for a day or two. Then I had a sin or a bad thought. Then I gave up and felt I was going to hell. I went back and forth like this until I was twenty-one and got married.”<sup>125</sup> Given that he perceived his anxiety to disappear after he was married, it can be assumed that he felt like he was going to hell because of thoughts of an impure sexual nature or sexual sins. It may be that his marriage provided him with an approved outlet for these feelings and urges so he no longer felt like he was committing sinful acts. A forty-two-year-old man wrote:

Puberty intensified my scrupulosity during the sixth and seventh grades. I remember the anguish of going to confession to relate my impure thoughts and preoccupation with looking at the female anatomy. I thought every temptation was a sin. Confession relieved me and afterward I felt a peace with God. Then the cycle repeated.<sup>126</sup>

As evidenced in both testimonies, a scrupulous person may, for a time, feel some relief from his or her anxiety, but it tends to be short-lived. Eventually this cycle of anxiety and relief begins to break down and Confession is less and less effective for the purpose of relieving mental anguish. The scrupulous person begins to repeat confessions

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<sup>125</sup> Van Ornum, *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies*, 101.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

made previously or seeks another priest to make a confession to because he or she did not find the relief he or she was seeking. A housewife from Ireland recounted:

When I was eleven, I started repeating confessions to make sure they were perfect. If a priest was sympathetic, I thought he did not understand me. ...I did not know I had a treatable disease. I confessed to different priests who did not know anything about me. It got worse. I only went to Communion after confession and it had to be on the same day, in case I committed sins.<sup>127</sup>

When Confession is used like this it is effectively a cycle of addiction that the scrupulous person cannot remove herself from. She hopes that going to the Sacrament of Confession will soothe her anxiety, but it will soon leave her feeling empty and anxious, craving another fix of forgiveness. When a scrupulous person experiences relief from her guilt, if she receives relief at all, it is only after receiving the sacrament of Confession and being completely cleansed of any and all sins. This is the only moment in which a scrupulous person is assured of her salvation and eventual place in heaven. However, there is so much doubt constantly surrounding a scrupulous person that this guiltless feeling typically fades rather quickly and the only thing that has the ability to reassure her of her salvation is another trip to the confessional. In essence, the scrupulous person has no faith. Non-scrupulous Catholics may not have recently gone to Confession and may have even knowingly committed some minor sins, but for the most part they have faith and trust that because they have loved and served God that God's mercy will save them from hell. Scrupulous persons largely lack the ability experience the feelings of trusting in God's mercy. They may be able to explain Church teaching on God's saving grace and mercy, but it is very difficult for them to feel assured of their salvation based on this.

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 99.

Some respondents to Van Ornum's survey claimed to have learned to control their scrupulous tendencies and mend their relationships with God, but they continued to experience anxiety about Confession. "Confession continues to disturb me. I envy Protestants. They confess directly to God."<sup>128</sup> Another respondent expressed a similar sentiment. "Confession has been the bane of my existence. I wish I had been born a Methodist. If I didn't have a brother who was a priest, I might have turned Protestant."<sup>129</sup> Here are two women who feel practically trapped in their religion due to the mandatory yet excruciating process of confession. Although they are disturbed by the emotions it evokes, they feel as though they cannot disregard the practice of it altogether. Perhaps they fear that the Catholic Church and its ability to forgive sin is the only way they can be assured of their salvation, regardless of the resultant negative reactions.

When so much effort and so many emotions are invested in the process of Confession, it becomes a very sensitive process for scrupulous persons and a time of extreme vulnerability. Some blame their experiences within the confessional for making them even more scrupulous. The slightest criticism from a religious authority figure can send those who are already thinking obsessively about sin into a tailspin. One person related a story of a priest who chastised her within the confessional. "When I was about fourteen I went to confession. The old priest picked on me and made me feel worse. He lectured me severely on avoiding scrupulous behavior. He told me not to repeat prayers."<sup>130</sup> Although the priest may have had good intentions that instructing this

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 74.

teenager on what not to do would help her to refrain from that forbidden action in the future, his lack of compassion and his vigorous admonishment of her behavior most likely did nothing more than reassure her of her guilt and inherent shamefulness.

Several women who responded to Van Ornum's survey recounted their experiences with priests regarding birth control and the rhythm method within the confessional. One woman told a story about going to a priest to ask permission to practice the rhythm method of birth control. At that time she was in her early twenties and had had five children in five years. The priest lectured her and told her that practicing the rhythm method would create an "occasion of sin" for her husband and that her husband's sin would be on her conscience.<sup>131</sup> This woman was not asking for permission to use artificial contraception, but only permission to employ the rhythm method, which is now approved by the Catholic Church although it has been slightly revamped and now goes by the name Natural Family Planning. However, according to the instruction from her priest any attempt to control the process of conception or to engage in sex purely for enjoyment was innately tied to sin and therefore to the fate of her soul. The Vatican did not approve of mutual self-giving as a proper motivation for sex until after the Second Vatican Council and it is still the case that having sex for the purpose of pleasure is still highly suspect in the eyes of the Catholic Church.<sup>132</sup> Priests who threaten the punishments of sin are especially anxiety producing to people with overly scrupulous tendencies, and for this particular woman it resulted in her compulsively attempting to control any potential for sin in her life for many years.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>132</sup> Pope Paul VI, "Gaudium et Spes [Joy and Hope]" (Vatican Press, December 7, 1965), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

As mentioned previously, persons with scrupulosity who struggle with Confession will almost inevitably struggle with sacrament of Communion, as well their feelings of inadequacy. An eighty-year-old woman recounted her tortured struggle with the two entangled sacraments: “For thirteen years I managed to go to confession and Communion once a year to fulfill my Easter duty. By this time my scruples had become so bad, I didn’t go to Communion or confession for thirty-nine years. During all these years I was in constant anxiety, always praying and asking God to give me the mental ability to make a good confession. Eleven years ago I got sick and asked for a priest and made a general confession. After examining my conscience for about an hour, I immediately became anxious, feeling I had not taken enough time. I wished I had listed other sins. So this is how I am today.”<sup>133</sup>

### **God-Images and Parental Attachment Figures**

Many of Van Ornum’s respondents have noted being taught fearful theologies about God in school. Several recounted severe teachings within Catholic school that focused on punishment. “I have been scrupulous since childhood. Suddenly, there was this fear of hell. The schools talked about children who died and went to hell, and my grandmother gave me a prayer book that said there were many gates to hell.”<sup>134</sup> The college teacher from Scotland wrote: “I have never really been able to trust in the love of God. I am afraid that God will pull the carpet out from under me. This stems from being taught as a child, ‘God is watching you.’ ...My background was strict, and parents and church hammered religion into us. Everyone received a Ph.D. in Guilt. Everything you

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<sup>133</sup> Van Ornum, *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies*, 90.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

said, thought, or did, was sinful.”<sup>135</sup> One man wrote about nuns in his Catholic school that taught him what he regarded as a theology of fear rather than love. He admitted to asking himself, “With God being a monster so cruel, who would love such a Being?”<sup>136</sup> Another wrote, “I believe religious education instigated my scrupulosity. A focus on sin and its wages rather than on the loving-father concept of God fueled my fears.”<sup>137</sup> Although several of the respondents acknowledge that the nuns and teachers probably believed they were doing what was right for the children, and one respondent even speculated that one of the nuns was dealing with her own case of scrupulosity, Catholic education has nonetheless affected the lives of many scrupulous persons in largely negative ways.<sup>138</sup> It is notable that, around the time of the Second Vatican Council, Catholic education began to change and the punishment for sin was much less emphasized in schools. The language within the Catechism of the Catholic Church was also revised to deemphasize rules and regulations.<sup>139</sup> Nevertheless, Van Ornum notes the age statistics from his respondents and points out that, given their age, 26.6% of the survey respondents would have not experienced significant education from within the pre-Second Vatican Council Church, yet they still were afflicted by scrupulosity.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 75, 101.

<sup>139</sup> Father Santa recommends using the 1994 edition of the Catechism as it has healthy language for instruction.

<sup>140</sup> Van Ornum, *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies*, 181–82.



Respondents of all ages acknowledge that the home environment that they grew up in was rough and that their parents taught them harsh ideas about God. One respondent who recognized this relationship stated,

I grew up in a painful environment. I found ways to make myself happy. There was always underlying pain. My father is an alcoholic, a miserable one. When he drank, he argued and preached... When sober, he withdrew from everyone. You could never please him. I know my view of God probably came from this. My mother is narrow-minded, controls others, and acts like a martyr. Nothing I did was good enough to make my parents happy. I never knew what they expected of me.<sup>141</sup>

Another person recounted, “My father used harsh words for discipline. My mother stripped us naked and beat us with a belt. When she berated us verbally, I remember her saying: ‘Te va castigar Dios.’ This means, ‘God is going to punish you.’”<sup>142</sup>

Although only 6% of Van Ornum’s survey respondents reported coming from an abusive family origin, and another 6% of respondents reported that at least one parent was an active alcoholic, it seems that the could be important factor in the development of scrupulosity. Although Van Ornum provided statistical data on the survey he administered, he did not provide a copy of the actual survey; therefore, it is unclear whether or not persons were presented with objective criteria for alcoholism or abuse. Assuming that the survey respondents relied on their own subjective definitions of what it meant to grow up in an abusive family or have a parent who was an alcoholic, I suggest that Van Ornum’s numerical data may misrepresent the environments scrupulous persons were raised in and that many more individuals were raised in abusive or severely strict households than was reported. In addition, scrupulous persons have a tendency to be

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<sup>141</sup> William Van Ornum, *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies: Understanding and Healing Scrupulosity and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder*, q (Eugene, Oregon: Wipft & Stock Publishers, 1997), 181–182.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

strict persons and so may have underreported abuse that they perceived to be firm parenting styles. A scrupulous woman who described her initial conception of God as an “ogre waiting to pounce” recounts growing up in a “dysfunctional family” and describes her father as “probably” an alcoholic. It is not clear from Van Ornum’s book whether this person would have been counted in the 6% of respondents who indicated that at least one parent was an alcoholic. This woman also recalls that her mother was “unable to communicate love due to a deprived childhood.”

Several psychologists have argued that a person’s upbringing has the ability to influence her perceptions of God. Studies have shown that positive relationships with others and with oneself are correlated to positive images of God and positive perceived relationships with God.<sup>143</sup> Other studies have reported measurements where persons’ parental ratings are strongly correlated with their image of God.<sup>144</sup> Therefore, early relationships with parents and other significant attachment figures are a reliable predictor of how one will relate emotionally to God. If a person is raised by strict, authoritarian parents, not only will he tend to treat himself in a harsh way, but he will also perceive God as a severe authoritarian figure.<sup>145</sup> Siev, Baer and Minichiello reported that participants in their study who were scrupulous displayed a more negative concept of

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<sup>143</sup> Edward B. Davis, “Authenticity, Inauthenticity, Attachment, and God-Image Tendencies among Adult Evangelical Protestant Christians” (Doctoral dissertation, Regent University, 2010), <http://caps.net/communities/christian-psychoanalysts/cp-continued-learning>; Hill, Smith, and Sandage, “Religious and Spiritual Motivations in Clinical Practice”; Moshe Halevi Spero, *Religious Objects as Psychological Structures: A Critical Integration of Object Relations Theory, Psychotherapy, and Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

<sup>144</sup> Ian Birky and Samuel Ball, “Parental Trait Influence on God as an Object Representation,” *The Journal of Psychology* 122 (2001): 133–37.

<sup>145</sup> Hill, Smith, and Sandage, “Religious and Spiritual Motivations in Clinical Practice.”

God and experienced more severe symptoms of scrupulosity. They also found that a positive description of God was never correlated to severe cases of scrupulosity.<sup>146</sup>

Whether their scrupulosity was influenced from teachings in the school setting or attachment styles in their home life, it is notable that many of those with scrupulosity have harsh conceptions of God. This was not only reported among retreat participants that I observed by also by several of Van Ornum's survey respondents. "My image of God is a punishing God. I feel He watches my every move and waits for me to sin. He marks it in a book in Heaven. I cannot escape the punishment I know I deserve."<sup>147</sup>

Although Father Santa did not acknowledge the factor of a person's negative God image, whether it was taught by religious instructors or communicated to the person indirectly by the way his parents treated him, Fr. Santa did highlight that scrupulosity was often triggered by some traumatic or semi-traumatic event. He recounted a story from his own youth that triggered his small bout with scrupulosity. He described a situation in which he was having a typical brother-versus-sister fight while growing up. He yelled at his sister and stormed off, running up the stairs. When he tripped on one of the steps and fell his mother said to him, "See, that's God punishing you," and that was all it took to set him off. This of course is a small comment that his mother probably thought nothing of at

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<sup>146</sup> Jedidiah Siev, Lee Baer, and William E. Minichiello, "Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder with Predominantly Scrupulous Symptoms: Clinical and Religious Characteristics," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 67 (2011): 1194–95. Extensive literature exists about how therapists might be able to facilitate God image change. One strategy attempts to change ones attachment style directly by forming a healthy client-therapist relationship. This approach has been adopted from Freudian and Object-Relations Theories. Another approach follows a Cognitive-Behavioral pattern in which a therapist attempts to target beliefs that may be responsible for maladaptive God images. An additional strategy which encourages people to retell their own personal stories or read allegorical literature that might facilitate God image change are labeled Narrative-Experiential approaches. (Glendon L. Moriarty and Edward B. Davis, "Client God Image: Theory, Research, and Clinical Practice," in *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality for Clinicians: Using Research in Your Practice*, ed. Jamie D. Aten, Kari A. O'Grady, and Everett L. Worthington Jr. (Florence, KY: Routledge, 2012), 131–60.)

<sup>147</sup> Van Ornum, *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies*, 22.

the time, and most likely she did not intend to instill an increased sensitivity toward guilt in her child. Nonetheless, this is what triggered it. It is important to clarify here that this does not mean that this mother is blameworthy for her son's scrupulosity; but understanding that this event may have triggered scrupulosity helps clear up the picture of how scrupulosity operates. Instilling the idea of a punishing God or one who is vengeful toward a person when he has misbehaved can have psychological and spiritual consequences. Certain people may be exposed to this message repeatedly over time, some may react strongly to one life event.

### Sex

According to Father Santa, scrupulous tendencies usually begin to appear around puberty, although he did not provide an explanation as to why. There is evidence of this association in Van Ornum's survey respondents and also in various personal accounts of scrupulosity. Several of Van Ornum's scrupulous respondents noted particular difficulty with Confession in regards to sexual conduct. A college professor from Scotland wrote, "I grew up with a distorted conscience on sex. What if this is a sin? What if it isn't? I flitted from book to book looking for answers. I found none. Confessions were fitful and an ordeal. Because of sexual exploration at an early age, what was no more than a response to anatomy, I suffered horrific guilt. The clergy stressed hell and damnation. My only rest from a tortured mind was sleep. I felt filthy and dirty and different. I believe (sic) that God has done his duty to punish me. Not once did a priest utter a kind word. I became bitter toward the clergy yet in complete awe of them."<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 66.

This emotion of frustration and amazement toward the clergy was apparently a response to the priestly practice of celibacy. As a teenager, this man was frustrated with his own sexual desires and resented those who punished him for having these natural urges, but it seems that he simultaneously yearned to be able to control his sexual impulses as the clergy apparently did. These sexual urges were associated with punishment from God and from clergy.

Several others in Van Ornum's survey expressed similar anxieties. Another man wrote, "Puberty intensified my scrupulosity during the sixth and seventh grades. I remember the anguish of going to Confession to relate my impure thoughts and preoccupation with looking at the female anatomy. I thought every temptation was a sin."<sup>149</sup> Many other survey respondents recounted that their teenage years were particularly painful for them as they struggled to cope with their biological sexual urges that they understood to be sinful and against Catholic teaching.<sup>150</sup> This type of behavior is not exclusive to those with scrupulosity. It is fairly common for Catholic teenagers to struggle with issues of sexual morality. However, for those with overly scrupulous tendencies this struggle becomes a consuming obsessional quest to avoid any instance of sexual temptation. Ciarrocchi details encounters with scrupulous patients who avoid shopping mall food courts or television commercials in an effort to prevent being tempted by scantily-clad women or sexual imagery.

Although their specific temptations are slightly different, women also expressed difficulty in Van Ornum's survey with Confession as it related to sexual issues. One

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 16, 94, 101, 105–106, .

woman recounted that a priest told her that it was a mortal sin to kiss boyfriends on the lips, which she was very discouraged about. After a boyfriend whom she loved very much left her, she became depressed and saw a psychiatrist who did not understand her problem with Church teachings and told her to embrace her boyfriends anyway, which only induced feelings of guilt.<sup>151</sup> As previously mentioned, religious instruction can sometimes worsen a person's condition. Many reported that their sexual development, combined with the mandate of Confession, worsened their scrupulosity. "I would say that Confession as a teenager made me worse. My scruples began when I was about thirteen or fourteen. Confession became a terrible ordeal."<sup>152</sup>

The fact that scrupulosity commonly develops in response to experiences in Confession, or at the very least is worsened by these experiences, around the beginning of puberty, provides important clues to the nature of scrupulosity. Average Catholics are instructed on the Sacrament of Confession around the age of seven so that they can go to Confession before their First Communion. Taking Communion in a state free from mortal sin is very important to Catholics. However, for most people, their scrupulosity does not develop, or does not fully develop, until they begin puberty and they start to develop sexually. Something about scrupulosity does not click until the person starts to develop sexual feelings in conjunction with the mandate to confess these sexual urges. Perhaps it is that this type of sin is more invasive in person's minds. Sexual feelings are urges that at

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 99. The feeling of frustration with therapists is frequently reported among scrupulous persons who sought psychological help. While certain mental health practitioners may be more accommodating and sensitive to the issues that those with scrupulosity face, others are not as delicate. Without a sympathetic understanding of the issues facing scrupulous persons practitioners may ask too much of their patients and the patients will most likely respond by withdrawing from treatment. One many recounts a psychologist who suggested he sleep with a woman to overcome his issues with sexuality and afterward he discontinued therapy because he no longer trusted or respected his therapist. (Van Ornum, 87-88).

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 92.

times, especially in puberty, seem to enter a person's mind at random times without provocation or the desire to experience them. Before puberty, any sin that one commits can generally be characterized as voluntary. Once puberty begins, it is often hard to control one's sexual feelings or bodily responses. Due to hormonal development alone, young men experience involuntary erections and "wet dreams" or seminal emissions where they spontaneously ejaculate during hormonal release at various stages of sleep.<sup>153</sup> When teens are firmly taught that sex is sinful, they may start to feel that their sinful nature is out of control, and they may try to regain control by compulsively attempting to avoid any occasion of sin. In these cases strict religious teachings would play a significant role in the development of scrupulosity.

Obviously not every Catholic teenager, not even every rigorously devout Catholic teenager, experiencing the normal emotional and hormonal shifts of puberty responds with overly scrupulous tendencies. In light of that, we cannot implicate religion alone as the cause of scrupulosity. As mentioned previously, certain predisposing biological factors, such as the presence of OCD or OCPD, in addition to environmental factors, for example associating Confession with anxiety and punishment, being raised in an abusive household or developing negative and punishing images of God as a result of transference with authority figures, can all play a role in the development of scrupulosity. However, it is important to note that many of the environmental factors of scrupulosity are integrally tied to religion. Religion, and specifically Catholicism, does not always

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<sup>153</sup> "Concerns Boys Have about Puberty," *HealthyChildren.org*, accessed March 8, 2014, <http://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/puberty/pages/Concerns-Boys-Have-About-Puberty.aspx>; "Teen Guys and Questions About Erections," *WebMD*, February 3, 2012, <http://teens.webmd.com/boys/questions-about-erections>.

cause individuals to develop scrupulosity, but it is certainly a significant contributing factor in examining causes of scrupulosity.

The question that follows this conclusion is that if following these strict religious teachings is potentially harmful to individuals, especially those with other predisposing conditions, why do many continue to do so? The answers are surely as different as the millions of Catholics that exist around the world and may range from the desire to maintain a sense of familial belonging to the satisfaction one feels from following a strict system of beliefs and rituals. However, some have argued that the rhetoric that was employed so often in the pre-Second Vatican Council era centered on maintaining the emotion of fear.

### **The Discourse of Fear**

In their article, Kelly and Kelly discuss the discourse of fear that the Catholic Church commonly employed before the Second Vatican Council in an effort to shape the behaviors of Catholics and encourage virtuous actions. Many in the Church believed it was appropriate to use fear to guide Catholics to a sinless life.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, many respondents to Van Ornum's survey recount their gratitude for the affliction of scrupulosity and their fear of God because it has effectively kept them from straying into sinful behavior. "A fear of God has kept me on the straight and narrow path," reported one respondent.<sup>155</sup> Another respondent from Montreal stated, "Scrupulosity helps me fear God's punishment. It helps keep me in touch with God and religion."<sup>156</sup> However helpful

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<sup>154</sup> Timothy Kelly and Joseph Kelly, "American Catholics and the Discourse of Fear," in *An Emotional History of the United States*, ed. Jan Lewis and Peter N. Stearns (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 260.

<sup>155</sup> Van Ornum, *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies*, 88.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 105–106.



these individuals find their scrupulosity, it is clear from these testimonies that fear, not love, motivates their devotion to God. Kelly and Kelly examined manuals used to guide religious behavior, particularly regarding birth control and divorce, because they deemed sex to be the category of behavior that the Church hierarchy wanted most to control, and divorce, the use of birth control and Catholic opinion of both were all statistically documented well.<sup>157</sup> In their article they thoroughly discuss the perpetuation of fear through manuals for examinations of conscience, the process of calling to mind one's sins before entering the confessional, and other written guides that were distributed to Catholic youth. It is interesting to note that Kelly and Kelly chose these as their sources given that some respondents to Van Ornum's also mentioned these manuals. One woman mentioned specifically that she believed the manual *The Catholic Girl's Guide*, published in its first edition in 1906 but widely disseminated in subsequent editions, amplified her scrupulosity.<sup>158</sup> Kelly and Kelly discuss how the discourse of fear changed around the time of the Second Vatican Council and eventually was rejected. In order to properly discuss this an overview of the Second Vatican Council is necessary.

### **The Second Vatican Council**

The Second Vatican Council was called by Pope John XXIII in January of 1959. It was conducted from October 1962 through December 1965. During the proceedings of the council, Pope John XXIII passed away and the Council was closed under his successor, Pope Paul VI. The Catholic Church underwent a significant period of change during the time of the Council. Several practices within the Mass were altered, including

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<sup>157</sup> Kelly and Kelly, "American Catholics and the Discourse of Fear," 263–264.

<sup>158</sup> Van Ornum, *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies*, 94.

one of the most influential changes in Catholic history, which was changing the language of the Mass from Latin to the local dialect. Other indirect changes in attitude resulted, especially after the publication of the document *Gaudium et Spes* in December of 1965, which emphasized the cultivation of one's personal conscience in order to achieve fulfillment.<sup>159</sup>

Many people, laypersons and clergy alike, predicted that the Church would change its position on the issue of artificial contraception. In 1962 Pope John XXIII had called a special commission to reexamine the issue, and Pope Paul VI had expanded the commission's membership during the Council. After five years of meetings and debates, the council was divided, with the majority in favor of altering the Church's official teaching and allowing the use of artificial contraception.<sup>160</sup> Despite the commission's opinion, however, Pope Paul VI issued the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, which effectively reestablished the reigning Catholic teaching against the use of artificial birth control.

#### Reactions to *Humanae Vitae*

Given the fact that this document was published at a time when there was high expectation that the Church was going to change its teaching, there was a large and immediate reaction to the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, especially within the United States. Many priests in the United States openly dissented. Father Charles Curran quickly obtained the signatures of eighty-seven theologians who disagreed with the teaching, and the number of theologians who signed the statement eventually rose to over six hundred.

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<sup>159</sup> Kelly and Kelly, "American Catholics and the Discourse of Fear," 271.

<sup>160</sup> Patrick W. Carey, *The Roman Catholics* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 135.

Forty priests in the Archdiocese of Washington, DC publically protested the encyclical and were suspended from their clerical duties.<sup>161</sup> Not only was there dissent within the clergy, but among members of the public as well.

Even as early as 1955 polls showed that a large portion of Catholics already disobeyed the Church's ban on artificial contraception, and the reissuing of official Church teaching in the publication of *Humanae Vitae* did not seem to sway many.<sup>162</sup> Despite its publication, opinion polls from the 1970s and 80s report that many Catholics ignored the ban on birth control. One study reported that around 75% of American married Catholic women of average childbearing age reported that they used artificial contraception in some form.<sup>163</sup> In 1977 another poll demonstrated that 73% of Catholics believed that the Church should sanction the use of artificial birth control methods.<sup>164</sup>

As a result of open dissent and debate regarding the Church's ban on birth control, people's attitudes toward the Church as a whole began to change. James O'Toole recounts the story of a woman writing to the Catholic magazine *Sign* in 1968 as a concrete example of how the diverse and conflicting attitudes of the clergy affected individuals. This woman wrote that sometime in 1967 her pastor told her that she could stop confessing the use of birth control pills, most likely because her pastor believed that the Council would rule the use of artificial contraception acceptable. After using birth control for a year with the approval of her pastor, *Humanae Vitae* was published, and she

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>163</sup> Charles Westoff, "The Blending of Catholic Reproductive Behavior," in *The Religious Dimension: New Directions in Quantitative Research*, ed. Robert Wuthnow (New York, 1979), 33 found in Kelly and Kelly, "American Catholics and the Discourse of Fear," 276.

<sup>164</sup> Carey, *The Roman Catholics*, 163.

was thoroughly confused about what to do. She did not view giving up the practice of birth control nor returning to confessing it as sinful as satisfactory actions, and she wrote to *Sign* for guidance. O'Toole notes that the editors of the Q-and-A column were most likely just as confused as her because they responded, "Don't be surprised if you find it hard to understand why artificial contraception is oppose to the natural law," as though they also found it hard to understand.<sup>165</sup>

One of the respondents to Van Ornum's survey also indicated being led in different directions by different priests. A scrupulous man went to three different priests looking for answers on birth control. The first priest instructed him not to receive Communion without first discontinuing his and his wife's use of birth control. The second priest told him in an angry manner that the Church was out of touch with the modern world and that "recent studies indicated that 71% of Catholics use birth control," and questioned how God could condemn 71% of Catholics. The third priest replied with a sad look on his face that this was a difficult situation for many people and suggested that he listen to his conscience.<sup>166</sup>

The most notable effect of dialogue like this was confusion, but it was no minor confusion. It rattled the very foundations of Church teaching on sin. If an action could be judged acceptable by a priest, but condemned by the Magisterium, and both of these voices simultaneously preached the use of one's own consciousness, how was one to act as a proper Catholic?

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<sup>165</sup> O'Toole, "In the Court of Conscience," 179.

<sup>166</sup> Van Ornum, *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies*, 148.

### Catholic Use of Conscience

Lost in an era of confusion, most Catholics chose to turn inward to be guided by their conscience, which had been encouraged by the document *Gaudium et Spes*, although not without limits of proper Catholic teaching. George Gallup, Jr. and Jim Castelli reported that in 1987 77% of Catholics polled indicated that they favored the dictates of their conscience over papal doctrine in making moral decisions.<sup>167</sup> The decision many persons made to use their own conscience as their guide affected the way in which they interpreted official Church teachings. McNamara found that the teachings that Catholics encounter must be “both rational and reasonable” before most Catholics will follow them.<sup>168</sup> In 1995 Goodstein and Morin found that 93% of Catholics polled thought that a person who uses artificial contraception could still be a “good” Catholic.<sup>169</sup> Some priests refused to give absolution in the confessional if the person confessing the sin of using artificial birth control did not indicate his or her intention to discontinue this practice.<sup>170</sup> Many Catholics reacted to this policy by avoiding Confession altogether, a trend that will be discussed shortly.

Catholics using their conscience as the primary resource for determining right from wrong was not limited to the arena of sexuality. The debate over the moral permissibility of birth control had opened the doors to a rethinking of the very concept of

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<sup>167</sup> George Gallup and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90's* (New York, 1989), 18 found in Kelly and Kelly, “American Catholics and the Discourse of Fear,” 276.

<sup>168</sup> Patrick H. McNamara, *Conscience First, Tradition Second: A Study of Young American Catholics* (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), 159; Michelle Dillon, *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith and Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 82.

<sup>169</sup> Laura Goodstein and Richard Morin, “Love the Messenger, Not His Message,” *Washington Post*, 1995, 15; Dillon, *Catholic Identity*, 81.

<sup>170</sup> O'Toole, “In the Court of Conscience,” 162.

sin. As James O'Toole writes, "If sins, like contraception, were under reconsideration, so too was the presumption that sin was primarily a matter of personal transgression of divine or natural law."<sup>171</sup> O'Toole notes a 1976 examination of conscience encouraged penitents to ask themselves if they shared their possessions with the less fortunate, if they were doing what they could to help the victims of oppression and poverty.<sup>172</sup> This manual encouraged persons to examine the lack of virtuous actions in their lives instead of the presence of sinful ones. This omission-focused conception of sin was not confined to the scholarly literature. Many ordinary American Catholics began to think of their sins in a wider social context. In a question to *Sign* magazine post-Second Vatican Council one person asked if it was sinful for a housewife to buy non-union lettuce in the supermarket and carry it out past farm-worker picket lines. What persons were morally concerned with did not translate well to the Sacrament of Confession. One man from Wisconsin told *U.S. Catholic* in 1983 that his attitude toward sin had completely changed from his childhood understanding: "In my childhood everything was a sin...I now believe the only sins are those we commit against our neighbor—and those we allow our government to commit against our neighboring countries." Another writer affirmed this same idea in 1976 stating, "There really is no such thing as a private sin."<sup>173</sup> O'Toole notes the almost impossible nature of relating that which was morally important to a person to the Sacrament of Confession. How could Catholics find an adequate way to confess their

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

shared contribution to the evils of “smog...racism, imperialism, or buying non-union lettuce”?<sup>174</sup>

The Sacrament of Confession relied on a rather sharp distinction between mortal and venial sins committed by individuals. As the conception of sin began to expand to include more and more forms of communal sin, particular sins were not so easily categorized. Accordingly, specific requirements for being absolved of certain sins came into question. *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, a magazine written by and geared toward Catholic clergy, published an answer to a priest’s question in 1970 stating that there was no “definable origin” of right and wrong and that despite thorough understanding of the Bible and Church teachings, it is possible to have a legitimate disagreement about the nature of certain sins.<sup>175</sup> The existence of these disagreements is one of many contributing factors to the decline of attendance at Confession.

In addition, many Catholic laypersons and clergy expressed their frustration with the general sense of immaturity surrounding the proceedings within the confessional. In 1910 Pope Pius X lowered the age of First Communion to seven from about age twelve. Previously children learned about the Sacrament of Reconciliation at the age of twelve, but after 1910 children were instructed on how to confess at the age of seven. Around the time of the Second Vatican Council many Catholics agreed that their own and fellow Catholics’ conceptions of sin were childish and immature because their only real instruction occurred around the age of seven. “Must we forever go on confessing the way

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 178.

we did as grade-school kids?” a priest asked in the 1960s.<sup>176</sup> This same priest expressed his frustration that a middle-aged man confessed to him the sin of talking in church.

Perhaps as a result of being instructed on Confession at such a young age, one layman described it as “the sacrament of fear.”<sup>177</sup> A woman in 1965 lamented about Confession, “I have not matured in my approach to it since the second grade.” Theologian and auxiliary bishop of Detroit, Thomas Gumbleton, wrote in 1972 that the “average Catholic’s view of sin was infantile.”<sup>178</sup> Others noted that their confessions were always a matter of lists, rather than the expression of serious moral reflection. One woman confirmed that she had given up on the practice of going to Confession because it always seemed to emphasize matters of little significance to her. “The priests I encountered seemed so much more concerned with how often I was late for Mass than with my relationships with my children, my husband, or my neighbors.”<sup>179</sup>

Within the new understanding of sin in which there could be legitimate debate about right and wrong and dissatisfaction with Church teaching and proceedings, the Sacrament of Confession became increasingly obsolete.

#### Decline in Confession Attendance

In 1965 about 38% of Catholics reported going to Confession monthly. Ten years later in 1975 this number had dropped to only 17%. In addition, the number of those who reported that they “never” or “practically never” went to Confession increased from 18 to

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 168.



38% over those ten years.<sup>180</sup> This statistic was reaffirmed by a study conducted in the mid-1980s by the University of Notre Dame. The study, which surveyed 10% of all Catholic parishes in the United States, reported that 26% responded that they never went to Confession at all. Another 35% reported that they went once a year at most. However, this change in Confession practices did not correlate strongly with changes in other traditional practices. Only 6% of respondents reported that they never went to Mass, and only 11% reported that they did not regularly receive Communion.<sup>181</sup>

O'Toole notes several changes that occurred beginning in the middle of the twentieth century that influenced the expansion of the practice of Communion as the practice of Confession diminished. Traditionally the practice of frequent Confession had been strongly emphasized. An 1843 Catechism states, "a Christian who is careful of his salvation ought to confess once a month." However the practice of frequently receiving Communion was not encouraged. This same Catechism recommended receiving

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<sup>180</sup> Shirley Saldanha et al., "American Catholics--Ten Years Later," *The Critic* 33 (February 1975): 14–21; O'Toole, "In the Court of Conscience," 171.

<sup>181</sup> O'Toole, "In the Court of Conscience," 171. O'Toole cites this study as it was reported by Joseph Gremillion and Jim Castelli in *The Emerging Parish*. The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life, supervised by the three most recent directors of Notre Dame's Institute for Pastoral and Social Ministry and David Leege, the director of the Notre Dame Center for the Study of Contemporary Society, was conducted in three phases. Phase I consisted of mailing out questionnaires to pastors or administrators of 10% of the roughly 19,000 American parishes. In Phase II they chose to conduct an in depth study of 36 of the 1,099 parishes which replied to the questionnaires. In this second phase they sent questionnaires to 4,555 parishioners, 117 paid staff members, and 262 volunteers of the selected 36 parishes. They then sent two research team members consisting of a liturgist and a social scientist to each parish to develop ethnographic and historic reports on each of the 36 parishes. In Phase III the study's research was interpreted and communicated in several reports and publications. Joseph Gremillion, the director of Notre Dame's Institute for Pastoral and Social Ministry from 1983 to 1986 and Jim Castelli, who co-authored *The American Catholic People* with George Gallup, wrote *The Emerging Parish: The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Life Since Vatican II* which popularized the study's findings. The study differentiated between Core Catholics, who were registered with parishes, and self-defined Catholics, who responded that they were Catholic when polled by the National Opinion Research Center, Gallup, or the Michigan American National Election Surveys. There was a considerable difference in the numbers with 52 million Core Catholics and 67 million self-reported Catholics. The Notre Dame study address only Core Catholics. (Timothy Kelly, "American Catholics," *Journal of Social History* 23 (1989): 161–162.)

Communion only “as often as his confessor may deem advisable,” which might be less frequently than once a month.<sup>182</sup> With the movement of First Communion to the age of seven, the practice of receiving Communion became more prominent and commonplace. The first time that the number of people receiving Communion outnumbered the number of those going to Confession was reported by the Jesuit order for the 1907-1908, liturgical year and from then on those receiving Communion continued to outnumber those Confessing.<sup>183</sup>

#### Increase in Reception of Holy Communion

In 1954 Father Aloysius McDonough replied to a submitted question on behalf of *Sign* magazine and wrote that although the practice was not ideal, it was possible for persons to receive Communion weekly or even daily with only the required annual Confession, as long as they had not committed any mortal sins, only venial ones. However, by 1969, in the post-Second Vatican Council era, *Sign* magazine’s Father Cronan Regan responded that not only was one permitted to receive Communion without first having gone to Confession but that it should be “the most usual and normal procedure.”<sup>184</sup> As this trend toward Communion and away from Confession continued, the clergy began more widely to recognize the power in the Eucharist. In 1974 the National Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions prepared a paper on “the Eucharist as reconciliatory.” One of the theological advisors of the Commission affirmed Communion as “the primary celebration of reconciliation” and confirmed that the

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<sup>182</sup> O’Toole, “In the Court of Conscience,” 180.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 182. Although each “Sign Post” column was written by two different priests, both were priests from the Passionist order and writers for the Catholic magazine *Sign*.

sacrament of penance was “auxiliary” to the Christian life.<sup>185</sup> The laity, who had already begun to express their frustration and dissatisfaction with the Sacrament of Confession, embraced the idea of receiving forgiveness through Communion. A woman wrote to *America* magazine in 1976 that the Eucharist was “the sacrament of reconciliation par excellent,” and a man from Tennessee expressed his feelings that “forgiveness is in the Eucharist.”<sup>186</sup>

Although this has become a very popular attitude among Catholics, especially progressive Catholics that were pleased with the changes instated by the Second Vatican Council, there is still a large portion of conservative Catholics who are not dissuaded from attending Confession. The number of Catholics attending Confession monthly or even weekly has seen sharp decline but it has not been extinguished. Those who adhere to the “by the book” Catholic teachings are more likely to still attend Confession on a regular basis. Most persons with scrupulosity have this conservative and rule-following personality type, which is not harmful in itself. However, it becomes detrimental when the person is so reliant on following the rules that it is the primary method for relieving anxiety.

The new understanding of reconciliation through the Eucharist is what the Scrupulous Anonymous organization, and more specifically its director Father Thomas Santa, seeks to radically apply. I now turn to first an overview of the Scrupulous Anonymous organization and its philosophy on scrupulosity followed by an examination

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

of the methodology used by Father Thomas Santa to help those suffering from  
scrupulosity

### CHAPTER III

#### SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS

First, a brief outline of the history of the organization called Scrupulous Anonymous, or SA, is necessary. In 1963 the Redemptorist priest Father Thomas Tobin published an article in *Liguorian* magazine titled, “The Tangled Torment of Scrupulosity.” The article received tremendous feedback and response from those who read it, and Father Tobin was inspired to start a ministry for those who were interested. He began this ministry with a newsletter that was mailed to 186 people in March of 1964. A year later there were 4,539 subscribers or “members” of Scrupulous Anonymous. Father Santa explained on the retreat weekend that the organization was called Scrupulous Anonymous because readers were able to submit anonymous questions that were then answered in publications, not because it had anything to do with the model of Alcoholics Anonymous. The membership grew to about ten thousand subscribers around 1990 and has remained steady at that number.<sup>187</sup>

The organization’s newsletter is published through Liguori Publications, a ministry of the Redemptorist priests and brothers that publishes educational and pastoral books and magazines, the most notable of which is the *Liguorian* magazine.<sup>188</sup> While at the retreat center, which was run by the Redemptorist order, I noted that there were issues of the *Liguorian* on almost every table, including the desk in the private room where I

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<sup>187</sup> Preston Westly, “SA History,” *Scrupulous Anonymous Newsletter*, May 2007. Some have asked as to why the number of subscribers has not increased since 1990. Father Santa answered that there were several books on scrupulosity published in the 1990s that may have provided sufficient answers those seeking them. In addition, the newsletters began being posted on the Scrupulous Anonymous website as of January 2000 and all of the issues since then are accessible from their website. There are also answers provided by other sources on the internet.

<sup>188</sup> Liguori Publications, “About Liguori Publications,” *Liguori Publications*, Last updated 2014, <http://www.liguori.org/about-liguori-publications>.

stayed. The SA newsletter has had several directors over the years. Father Thomas Santa served as the director for ten years beginning in 1994. After taking a short break around 2005, he returned to direct the newsletter in 2010.

Although the understanding of scrupulosity has evolved over the span of the organization's existence, the current understanding that Scrupulous Anonymous holds is that scrupulosity is a pathology, plain and simple. This was emphasized repeatedly by Father Santa throughout the retreat weekend. He lamented the fact that there was no better word than this clinical term, but communicated that he used the term in order to emphasize that scrupulosity was a condition that resulted through no fault of the individual. A Scrupulous Anonymous newsletter detailing the SA history endorses an article titled "From Scruples to Scrupulosity" by Judi M. Bailey that states that scrupulosity is a type of obsessive-compulsive disorder that is "caused by a neuro-biological condition in the brain."<sup>189</sup> This same article endorses the use of medication as an option for the scrupulous. On the retreat Father Santa made sure to touch on the acceptability of prescription medication and therapy, just in case anyone was questioning whether it was sinful or not. He wittily asked the group, "If you had a heart condition and you were prescribed medication for it, would you take it? It's the same thing."

While Father Santa endorses that part of the cause for scrupulosity is a neuro-biological or psychological component, he also acknowledges that scrupulosity that might have lain dormant can be activated by ones religious education or participation in religious rituals. On the retreat he specifically singled out the Catholic ritual of Confession and explained that for those with scrupulosity it the most common trigger of

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<sup>189</sup> Westly, "SA History."

severe anxiety and scrupulous rituals. While I wish to enumerate the reasons as to why Confession elicits these anxieties for individuals, I first need to explain a bit more about the proposed techniques for treating scrupulosity that Scrupulous Anonymous and Father Santa endorse.

### **The “Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous”**

The “Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous” is the most popular and widely-read document within SA. Although it has appeared in several forms since its original publication, in its most basic form it is a set of ten recommendations for combating scrupulosity, especially as it relates to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Father Don Miller, whom Father Santa credits as the founder of SA, wrote the original document “Ten Commandments” in 1968, and it was well-received by the growing SA community.<sup>190</sup> The system of documents is slightly confusing because the original text “Ten Commandments” has been edited and reissued by Father Santa and other priests several times. In addition, there are other, related sets of ten commandments that are intended also to help with the problem of scrupulosity. Father Louis Miller, brother of Father Don Miller, published the “Ten Commandments for Peace of Mind” in 1978, which Father Santa first revised in the first edition of his book *Understanding Scrupulosity*. There is also a set of ten commandments that focuses on cultivating virtues rather than providing specific instructions for Confession; this text was first published by Father Santa in 2004 and then edited and republished by Father Preston Westly in 2007. Father Santa also wrote the “Ten Commandments of OCD-Based Scrupulosity” which

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<sup>190</sup> The article on the SA History written by Reverend Westly mentioned Father Don Miller as the author of this document, but made no mention of Father Don Miller’s leadership. Reverend Westly did mention that Father Louis G. Miller, whom Westly recognizes as the brother of Don Miller, became the director of the newsletter in January 1971. (Ibid.)

was published in the second edition of his book *Understanding Scrupulosity*. These commandments include such rules as “Do not be afraid of your sexuality,” and “Learn to laugh often and with enthusiasm.”<sup>191</sup> However, Father Santa recently finished revising the original “Ten Commandments” in December 2013 and has published the revision on the Liguori Publications website. He explains in the new publication that he wished to update the commandments based on a new understanding of scrupulosity, especially as it relates to psychology.

When Father Don Miller wrote the original commandments, he understood scrupulosity, as many other people did at that time, to be an affliction of an extremely “tender conscience,” and he believed that it could be treated by proper instruction on what was and was not a mortal sin. Yet Father Santa teaches that scrupulosity is a religious manifestation of OCD upon which simple pastoral instruction about the nature of sin will have no effect. While pastoral care and compassion are certainly necessary in the elimination of scrupulosity, Father Santa promotes an adapted form of Exposure Response Prevention Therapy in which persons habituate themselves to the feelings of anxiety brought about by not going to Confession. Although Father Santa admits he has not had any formal psychological training, he has consulted with and been advised by several psychologists in an effort to further his understanding of scrupulosity as OCD and better aid the scrupulous population. It is clear from the 2013 version of the “Ten Commandments” that Father Santa is invoking psychological language, even in this pastoral document that is directed toward the average layperson.

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<sup>191</sup> Santa, *Understanding Scrupulosity: Helpful Answers for Those Who Experience Nagging Questions and Doubts*.



In the introduction to the updated commandments he advocates a type of “behavior modification” that limits the frequency with which a scrupulous person should receive the sacrament of reconciliation. Father Santa acknowledges that following these commandments will not ensure freedom from anxiety, but it will hopefully help many people to lessen the amount of anxiety in their lives. As evidenced by this document and personal conversation with Father Santa, he has a thorough understanding of cognitive-behavioral psychology and the concept of Exposure Response Prevention Therapy, which cognitive-behavioral psychologists take to be the first order treatment for many anxiety disorders, especially OCD. The 2013 version of the Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous are:

1. Without exception, you shall not confess sins you have already confessed.
2. You shall confess only sins that are clear and certain.
3. You shall not repeat your penance or any of the words of your penance after confession—for any reason.
4. You shall not worry about breaking your pre-Communion fast unless you put food and drink in your mouth and swallow as a meal.
5. You shall not worry about powerful and vivid thoughts, desires, and imaginings involving sex and religion unless you deliberately generate them for the purpose of offending God.
6. You shall not worry about powerful and intense feelings, including sexual feelings or emotional outbursts, unless you deliberately generate them to offend God.
7. You shall obey your confessor when he tells you to repeat a general confession of sins already confessed to him or another confessor.
8. When you doubt your obligation to do or not do something you will see your doubt as proof that there is no obligation.
9. When you are doubtful, you shall assume that the act of commission or omission you’re in doubt about is not sinful, and you shall proceed without dread of sin.
10. You shall put your total trust in Jesus Christ, knowing he loves you as only God can and that he will never allow you to lose your soul.<sup>192</sup>

Most obviously, these “Ten Commandments” indicate specific symptoms and behaviors with which people who suffer from the condition of scrupulosity struggle. The

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<sup>192</sup> Santa, “Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous (2013).”

scrupulous have intrusive and vivid thoughts that they interpret as sinful. They worry about breaking their communion fast, even when they do not directly put food in their mouths. They have an overall lack of trust, and they struggle with the compulsion to repeatedly confess the same sins.

As mentioned previously, certain types of rituals scrupulous persons engage in do not effectively combat anxiety as they hope it will, but rather these rituals perpetuate a cycle of relief and subsequent reoccurrence of the anxiety. Seeing as four of the ten basic instructions given to the scrupulous are about the sacrament of Confession, it is evident that this is a significant ritual for many people with scrupulosity. Given that anxiety is what drives the performance of scrupulous rituals, it is necessary to confront it. The proper way to do this is to refrain or be refrained from practicing the relevant rituals. In his explanations of the commandments, Father Santa clearly instructs people not to engage in anxiety-relieving rituals. He also instructs individuals not to worry, not to doubt, and to trust. Although Father Santa uses the fairly mundane language of “worry” and “doubt,” these are overwhelming emotions for many people with scrupulosity. When a scrupulous person worries it means that he is worrying about the culpability of his actions and whether or not his transgressions have the ability to send his soul permanently to hell. This is an all-consuming worry. The commandments are aimed at reducing anxiety by instructing scrupulous persons not to engage their anxious and worried thoughts and through breaking down the person’s misconceptions of what constitutes sinful actions or thoughts.

These Ten Commandments have proven to be therapeutically revolutionary. Countless persons have testified to the helpfulness of the commandments in SA

newsletter submissions, Q-and-A's published in Father Santa's book, respondents to Van Ornum's survey, and various other locations on internet blogs and forums. One of the men attending the weekend retreat was so adamant about the usefulness of the Ten Commandments that he asked Father Santa to print them off for everyone to have. To a person unfamiliar with scrupulosity, these instructions may seem overly specific or demanding. However, the overwhelming response to this document indicates that a large portion, if not the majority, of scrupulous individuals suffer from the emotions that the Ten Commandments seek to help them with: extreme anxiety, doubt, worry and lack of trust, especially when it comes to Confession.

A striking aspect of this document is the eighth and ninth commandments, which indicate that the presence of doubt is a sign that one is *not* committing a sin. This is a direct contradiction to the message expounded by a pre-Second Vatican Council issue of the *Messenger*, which stated that if there is doubt, the action should always be presumed sinful.<sup>193</sup> The message to the average layperson, who does not suffer from scrupulosity, might be something in between these two extremes: doubt should be immediate evidence of neither the permissibility nor the impermissibility of an act. However, the message to the scrupulous person is one of great compassion: you can trust your doubt and uncertainty and concern yourself only with acts that are unambiguously destructive or strictly forbidden..

Father Santa quotes Alphonsus Liguori, a saint, moral theologian, and Doctor of the Church, to give credibility to this point of view. The saint, whom many people speculate struggled with scrupulosity himself, notes that it is the "habitual will of the

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<sup>193</sup> O'Toole, "In the Court of Conscience," 149.

scrupulous person not to offend God,”<sup>194</sup> and this is a genuine ground for trust. In the SA March 2014 newsletter Father Santa explains this further:

People with scrupulosity who have a religious manifestation of obsessive-compulsive disorder—and not simply a “tender conscience”—are some of the most God-fearing, honest, responsible people I’ve ever met. Their lives are defined by their desire to please God and to live as faithfully as possible. Unfortunately, they don’t see themselves that way, and that’s the real scourge of scrupulosity. They see themselves as great sinners who don’t love God and who are always trying to wiggle their way out of serious situations and challenges.<sup>195</sup>

Father Santa expressed a similar sentiment to the retreat participants throughout the weekend, often telling them that he understood how hard they were all trying to please God and to show their love for God in the correct way. The people who had made the sacrifice to be there voluntarily over the weekend surely thought it was important enough to go, which is all the proof that Father Santa needed to assure them that they were struggling with scrupulosity, not trying to find a way out of religious obligations.

While these commandments and recommendations can be revolutionary for a person with scrupulosity, in order for them to be helpful, the scrupulous person must trust in the truth of these commandments and the authority of the person teaching them, which is much easier said than done.

### **Trust**

Trust, especially trust in God, is an issue for scrupulous persons. Although many of the participants at the retreat weekend were afraid to say anything bad about God, for fear that it might count as a sin, almost all of them expressed difficulty trusting God. This struggle was expressed in actions, as well as in words. One woman left the retreat for

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<sup>194</sup> Santa, “Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous (2013).”

<sup>195</sup> Thomas M. Santa, “The Joy of the Gospel: Part 2 of 2,” *Scrupulous Anonymous Newsletter*, March 2014, [http://mission.liguori.org/newsletters/pdf\\_archive/SA\\_0314.pdf](http://mission.liguori.org/newsletters/pdf_archive/SA_0314.pdf).

most of the afternoon on Saturday after expressing an inability to trust that Father Santa's guidance was consistent with the will of God. In the morning session she had tried with pointed fervor to express to the group and especially to Father Santa her extreme feelings of anxiety and her desire to engage in several compulsive processes. When Father Santa replied with understanding remarks, she resisted; she insisted that he did not understand the forcefulness of her emotions. She continued to explain herself for several minutes working herself into an increasingly emotional state, insisting repeatedly, despite Father Santa's reassurances, that he did not understand her, before finally ceasing and listening. While she was listening, her posture changed. She slumped in her chair, exhausted by her efforts, and although she was reassured by people around her and the priest in front of her the expression on her face appeared as though she did not understand the language they were speaking. It was heartbreaking to watch this woman. Although I was frustrated just observing her lack of cooperation, it indicated the severity of her anxiety. I wanted her to understand the Father Santa's empathetic message, which she was too uncomfortable to accept. She told me later that evening, after missing the afternoon sessions, that she did not feel heard, and she was so angry that she almost left the retreat completely. I was not able to ask her why she decided to stay because she exited so quickly, but I hoped for her that what she had been taught at the retreat would return to her one day and she might come to see that others did understand her feelings.

When asked about this situation later, Father Santa explained that he had experienced it plenty of times. People had called him a "liberal priest" and accused him of teaching heresy or trying to lead them into sin. He emphatically asked the group, "Why would I do that? What could I possibly gain by doing that? Nothing." Furthermore,

he expressed the fact that he would never jeopardize their immortal souls nor his own by teaching them philosophies that were incompatible with the revealed will of God. To further ensure his credibility, he stated that he had published several books through Church-affiliated publishers, and he had never once been disciplined or reprimanded for anything he had written, even though there were individuals who were appointed to read books like his and look for improper teaching. Additionally, he had spoken to theologians, Canon lawyers and several bishops and fellow priests, all of whom had approved the philosophy he was teaching.

Many of the Ten Commandments center on feelings of doubt, and they instruct a person that the proper response to such doubt is trust. By not confessing sins or performing penance repeatedly, a person expresses not only trust in himself, that he completed his actions thoroughly and correctly the first time, but also trust in the ability of his confessor to hear and understand his confession correctly. Finally, it also expresses trust in the power of God through the person of Jesus Christ to take away sins. Refraining from repeating penance is an act of trust that God does not require perfect actions from a person; God requires only the acceptance of God's freely-given, saving grace. This grace cannot be seen, but it can be trusted. One of the respondents to Van Ornum's survey explained very simply how she had decided to treat her scrupulosity. "My solution to scrupulosity has been this: "More love, and we must accept imperfection."<sup>196</sup>

The Ten Commandments also ask that persons suspend their urge to control their environment. Many scrupulous persons worry about the consequences of exposing themselves to sexual imagery or other examples of sinful behavior. They believe that as a

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<sup>196</sup> Van Ornum, *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies*, 75.

result they might be more inclined to intrusive sexual thoughts or urges or less inhibited when it comes to performing sinful behavior. The Commandments explain that scrupulous persons believe that they worry about these things because they are sinful, but in fact they worry because they lack control over every aspect of their lives. A scrupulous person feels that she must be in complete control her environment in order to avoid sin. Feeling out-of-control makes her feel sinful. The Commandments ask a scrupulous person to let go and trust that if she did not directly and deliberately engage in sinful thoughts, any pleasure he experienced was not itself sinful. The “Ten Commandments” text and the words of Father Santa encourage those with scrupulosity to laugh at jokes they think are funny, cry when they are frustrated or sad, and enjoy the beauty in the world around them without needing to be completely in control.

### **Laughter**

As mentioned previously, scrupulosity contains several elements that are inherently ironic. Scrupulosity has the ability to cause individuals serious suffering, but it may also be helpful to recognize the irony of the condition and use humor to help one heal. Father Santa encourages this recognition explicitly in recommendations at the end of the “Ten Commandments” document, but one very pointed example of this arose during the retreat.

Father Santa was explaining what scrupulosity is to people who, although they had lived with this affliction for most of their lives, did not know its exact parameters. He explained that it might be beneficial to use laughter or humor as medicine because the entire affliction is just so painfully ironic. He described it this way, “I know that the last thing you would ever want to do is sin or hurt God – or else you wouldn’t be here this

weekend. And yet you believe that almost every action you perform hurts God in some way.” His comments were met with many nods and one woman even replied, “Yes, that is exactly how I feel.” He told them to laugh about it. Scrupulous people are usually very tense and exacting, a trait that is also found in those with OCD and OCPD. So the first thing laughing does is loosen people up a bit. It makes them not take their situation so seriously. It also gives them some perspective. Laughing at the irony of the situation is helpful because it makes those who are consumed with scrupulosity look at themselves from an external perspective and see how odd it really is looking from the outside in.

At the beginning of the weekend after sharing the reasons everyone was attending the retreat, one participant shared how her OCD had affected her children, who also have OCD, and how she sometimes blames herself for their struggles. She became emotional and another participant leaned over to comfort her and said, “You’re too hard on yourself.” Father Santa looked across the room and said to the pair of women, “You’re both too hard on yourselves.” The woman who was doing the comforting and who had shared just a minute earlier gave him a shocked look. She replied with a chuckle, “Maybe you’re right, but I never feel that way.” Father Santa responded simply, “Isn’t that ironic?” After pausing for a beat he asked the woman doing the comforting to extend the same comforting to herself and asked her why she did not treat herself in the same compassionate way that she was treating the woman next to her. This small exchange forced the woman to see her own scrupulosity from an external perspective, see how ironic it was that she would comfort another but not herself, and it made her laugh.



### **A New Understanding of the Sacraments**

Some of Father Santa's teachings, such as the cultivation of trust or laughter, seem very basic and congruent with a scrupulous person's conception of religion, but Father Santa also recommended specific practices at the retreat that were almost too radical for the participants to tolerate. These practices involved rethinking fundamental aspect of the Catholic religion.

As mentioned in a previous section of this paper, one of Patrick McCormick's criticisms of the older, traditional Catholic conception of sin is that it is too often legalistic. McCormick and O'Toole have noted how the rules forced upon Catholics from the Church hierarchy are still often legalistic and juridical, especially when it comes to Confession and punishment for sins. The punishment for some sins is almost formulaic and the penance that is given to those who attend Confession is even predictable to a certain extent. Even young Catholic school children know that the more prayers you have to say after your confession, the more guilty you are. Again, this was characteristic of the pre-Second Vatican Council Catholic Church and the Church as a whole has adopted a more generous and compassionate understanding of individuals since the Second Vatican Council, but parish priests and parts of the Catholic hierarchy that insist on preaching and harsh rules about sin punishable by the fires of hell still exist. Several retreat attendees and respondents to Van Ornum's survey recounted their anxiety about when their teachers marched them into Confession in Catholic school, even after the Second Vatican Council.<sup>197</sup> Additionally, many members of Catholic communities view sin in terms of a definitive rights and wrongs and some may occupy lay leadership roles in the Church,

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 92, 94.

such as the parish director of religious education. The internalization of black and white thinking regarding sin is especially problematic for people with scrupulosity. O'Toole points out that question-and-answer columns in Catholic magazines are a “telling phenomenon” in themselves because they reinforce the idea that there is a definite right and wrong answer for every situation.<sup>198</sup> These question-and-answer sections exist in almost every issue of the *Scrupulous Anonymous* newsletter. In fact, Father Santa's book is mostly a collection of question-and-answer exchanges with scrupulous persons who have subscribed to the SA newsletter over the years. The answers his book are usually have a more nuanced in answering questions, but it demonstrates the black and white nature in which scrupulous persons think about sin. The questions from a scrupulous person are often quite detailed and painful to read because they clearly indicate the confusion that the person is experiencing. For example one person wrote, “My confessor tells me that God loves me, no matter what I have done in my past life. But this priest does not really know how bad I used to be. I wonder if God really loves me.”<sup>199</sup> Another asked if it was sinful to yell at her dog while disciplining it. These types of questions seem typical of an adolescent, but they are often the types of questions that come from middle-aged adults. Scrupulous persons even write in asking for advice about instruction that they received directly from previous SA newsletters or documents that has already been confirmed as acceptable advice by their confessors.<sup>200</sup> It is typical of a person with scrupulosity to seek constant assurance that her actions are correct. So many scrupulous

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<sup>198</sup> O'Toole, “In the Court of Conscience,” 149.

<sup>199</sup> Santa, *Understanding Scrupulosity: Helpful Answers for Those Who Experience Nagging Questions and Doubts*, 14.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

individuals seek answers from Father Santa that he has made it a policy not to accept phone calls from scrupulous persons because the phone conversations never end.

No answer about the acceptability of her thoughts or actions is fully satisfying to a person with scrupulosity. She will continue to ask for clarification and provide her advice-giver with more and more details about the situation in order to make sure the other properly understands the scenario. Often the answer is that the scrupulous person is not at fault for what she did or the action they are asking about is not sinful. Yet this is an answer that scrupulous persons find it excruciatingly difficult to accept. The guilty feelings they carry inside themselves are incongruent with the statement that their actions are blameless, so they seek to clarify further what they have done, secretly hoping that they will provide a bit of information that will finally settle the fact that they are at fault. Then, they can be instructed or advised to go to Confession, which makes them feel comfortable, at first, because it puts them in a place where their salvation is assured. Yet we have seen that it is actually this sacrament that locks them into their repetitious actions.

What scrupulous persons are most uncomfortable with is doubt and uncertainty, specifically doubt about moral culpability and salvation. Confession promises to help them escape this doubt. Father Santa explained that the way in which scrupulous persons use Confession is very similar to pattern of how alcoholics use alcohol. Alcoholics begin using alcohol as a means for quieting their anxieties, and their usage continues to increase as the amount of alcohol that used to relieve them of their anxieties becomes less and less effective until they are frequently consuming excessive amounts of alcohol.

Father Santa acknowledges the typical pastoral methods that have been used to treat scrupulosity. These methods have included walking the person with scrupulosity through a general confession in which the nature of a mortal sin versus a venial sin is explained. Under this type of instruction scrupulous persons are often asked to reduce the frequency with which they go to Confession. However, on the retreat weekend Father Santa acknowledged that asking a scrupulous person to go to confession only every six weeks instead of every week does not accomplish the task of healing the person. The scrupulous person is still using the sacrament as a prop for their compulsions, just less frequently. Father Santa again compared a person struggling with alcoholism to a person with scrupulosity saying that a doctor would not tell an alcoholic to stay away from alcohol except for their monthly drink.

Father Santa referenced the fact that he was frequently asked by those struggling with scrupulosity if they should lie down and accept their fate because God had chosen to give them this affliction and it was “their cross to bear.” Many had employed this kind of language in the beginning of the retreat weekend while telling their personal stories. At several points during the weekend, Father Santa answered this question with an emphatic “no.” I believe that some of his empathy stemmed from his own brief struggles with scrupulosity, but mostly he was fighting on behalf of scrupulous persons. He communicated many stories of what he had experienced with scrupulous persons over the twenty years he had been involved with SA. He told a story of how one time he opened a large package that had been sent to his office, and it was a document that was several hundred pages long. He began to read it, thinking it was a manuscript draft or a book he was supposed to review. After about twenty pages he realized that it was a letter written

to him from an SA subscriber thoroughly describing every tiny detail of his scrupulous struggles that he had had for over twenty years. Although this particular letter contained an excruciating amount of detail, Father Santa receives letters like this, albeit most of them shorter, all the time. He hears confessions like this frequently. He has to turn down scrupulous persons' visits and phone calls because they have the potential to consume his whole day. Father Santa gave the impression of a man who had heard too many stories from scrupulous persons not to be affected by it in his own spirit. Despite his weariness, he continually communicated a forceful message that just because you are affected by scrupulosity does not mean that you should accept your suffering. It is in no way, shape, or form God's intention for you to suffer in this way.

Even as a person who does not struggle with scrupulosity, I found this message inspiring, yet it is also difficult to accept. There are hundreds of saints that the Catholic Church has beatified for enduring the suffering of martyrdom, physical torture, or severe ascetic practices to the point of starving themselves to death. Dominican friar and ascetic Henry Suso wrote, "Brother, it is necessary for thee to be punished in this life or in purgatory: but incomparably severe will be the penalty of purgatory than any in this life."<sup>201</sup> Ariel Glucklich explains in his book, *Sacred Pain*, that the pains of monastic disciplines are not only accepted but also enjoyed because they alleviate the fear of punishment in the afterlife.<sup>202</sup> It is widely taught in Catholic schools and Catholic Churches that persons are to model their lives after the saints. When going through the process of Confirmation, teens are asked to select a saint as their personal Confirmation

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<sup>201</sup> Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17, note 14.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

saint and look to him or her as a model of how to live a faithful life. One of the retreat attendees told me that he aspired more than anything in the world to be a saint and that he would do anything to attain salvation. However, emulating the saints by striving for absolute perfection becomes an obsession and an addiction for those with scrupulosity. One of Van Ornum's points of advice is to be human, not saintly, and make religion one part of a balanced life.<sup>203</sup> While this may be good and practical advice, it seems incongruent with the teachings of the Catholic Church. The problem of God allowing suffering, or the problem of theodicy, has been debated within the Catholic Church for hundreds of years.

### **Father Santa's Teachings for the Scrupulous**

At the retreat, Father Santa explained that when he first began working with Scrupulous Anonymous he used to cite other people's advice. Over the course of twenty years, he developed his own teachings and instruction for the scrupulous. He believes that those with severe scrupulosity, what Ciarrocchi refers to as clinical scrupulosity, should not under any circumstance go to the sacrament of Reconciliation. They must sever ties with the trigger of their debilitating emotional response. However, he went on to explain that this does not mean that they cannot receive reconciliation, for there are other forms of reconciliation within the Catholic Church; they just should not go to Confession. Father Santa explained that he has had numerous discussions with moral theologians and church officials, and he is absolutely convinced that teaching persons with severe scrupulosity not to go to Confession is correct. He explained that the reason he is not teaching it to the masses from the pulpit on Sunday mornings is because it is not

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<sup>203</sup> Van Ornum, *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies*, 160.

applicable to everyone. He and the theologians he discussed this with believe a teaching like this is best if it is only imparted to small groups of people to whom it definitely applies.

Father Santa gave a brief explanation of the seven sacraments that the Catholic Church endorses and how four of them can impart reconciliation: Baptism, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, and the Eucharist. Reconciliation is typically thought of as the only sacrament that can confer forgiveness of sins. However, the three other sacraments are also able to do this. Baptism can be received only once for the removal of original sin and cannot be repeated, so being re-baptized is not an option for the scrupulous. However, Father Santa explains that the Anointing of the Sick can and should be received frequently by those with scrupulosity.

Before the Second Vatican Council the Anointing of the Sick was given only to people who were near death as part of Last Rites, which include the three sacraments of Reconciliation, Eucharist, and Anointing of the Sick. However, post-Second Vatican Council this sacrament has been approved for use on persons who suffer from serious illness, whether they are near death or not.<sup>204</sup> Only priests are permitted to perform the Anointing of the Sick precisely because this ritual does communicate the forgiveness of sins.<sup>205</sup> Father Santa mentions in an SA newsletter the use of this sacrament for healing individuals with scrupulosity; however, he does not authorize in print its use as a substitution for the sacrament of Reconciliation.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> CCC, 1514.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 1516, 1532. Father Santa noted that deacons are not allowed to administer the anointing of the sick because they have not been ordained.

<sup>206</sup> Thomas M. Santa, "Patient Suffering?," *Scrupulous Anonymous Newsletter*, February 2012, [http://mission.liguori.org/newsletters/pdf\\_archive/SA\\_0212.pdf](http://mission.liguori.org/newsletters/pdf_archive/SA_0212.pdf).

In addition to the Anointing of the Sick Father Santa emphasizes the Eucharist as a means for attaining healing and reconciliation. The Catechism teaches, “The body of Christ we receive in Holy Communion is ‘given up for us,’ and the blood we drink ‘shed for the many for the forgiveness of sins.’ For this reason the Eucharist cannot unite us to Christ without at the same time cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from future sins.”<sup>207</sup> The forgiveness that can be found in Communion is emphasized much less in Catholic teaching than the forgiveness that can be found in the sacrament of Confession. Given the education that takes place in Catholic Schools and Catechism courses, which emphasizes the manuals for examining one’s conscious and the details of attending the sacrament of Reconciliation it, is no surprise that the laypersons of the Church forget that forgiveness can be attained also in the Eucharist.

Father Santa addresses the judicial and legalistic attitudes with which some parishioners regard the sacrament of Reconciliation in one of the appendixes in his 2007 edition of *Understanding Scrupulosity*. He frames his comments in a way that does not implicate any teachers, but only the interpretations of the scrupulous.

Many members of SA continue to emphasize specific elements of the sacramental practice, such as exact number of sins, performing the correct penance, being in the correct state of mind, and so on, over the primary purpose of the sacrament, which is the opportunity for the celebration of conversion, confession and forgiveness. Discipline continues to receive the attention, and the emphasis and celebration seems so far away and perhaps even unattainable.”<sup>208</sup>

In response to Father Santa, I would question how much responsibility can fairly be placed on the scrupulous for perceiving their situation as they do, and raise the need to

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<sup>207</sup> CCC, 1393.

<sup>208</sup> Santa, *Understanding Scrupulosity: Helpful Answers for Those Who Experience Nagging Questions and Doubts*, 280.



assess the role that Catholic clergy and other educators play in teaching these types of attitudes.

Father Santa quotes a passage about this subject from Pope Francis' exhortation "The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)" in the most recent SA newsletter. He also read it aloud on the retreat weekend: "The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak."<sup>209</sup> Many scrupulous individuals refrain from receiving Communion because they deem themselves unworthy; however, Father Santa explains that this is the single worst thing that a person with scrupulosity can do. It cuts the scrupulous off from the community and from Jesus, who is essentially in the Eucharist.

Over the weekend Father Santa took time to describe the story of Jesus within the framework of the Roman occupation of Galilee and Jerusalem. As Father Santa described, Jesus came to reconnect his people with God: not the God of the Temple in Jerusalem who judges and divides, but the Father who is characterized above all by love and mercifulness. Father Santa emphasized that reconnection with God is at the core of Catholicism. From this it can be determined that anything that disconnects someone from God and the experience of the love of God is bad for them. Thus, it is a bad, almost the antithesis of what God intended for Catholic rituals, when people's scrupulosity causes them to disconnect from the sacrament of Communion.<sup>210</sup> I could almost see the wheels

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<sup>209</sup> Pope Francis, "Evangelii Gaudium [The Joy of the Gospel]" (Vatican Press, November 24, 2013), 47, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium\\_en.pdf](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.pdf).

<sup>210</sup> Although Father Santa spoke only to a room full of laypeople, he used the pronoun "we" and I perceived that he also wanted to preach this message to other Catholic officials. While Father Santa never implicated anyone in preaching a judicial or legalistic sense of sin from within the Catholic Church, I sensed that he would not disagree with the fact that this was the prominent attitude toward sin at times in the Church's recent history.

turning in the heads of the people sitting around me when Father Santa made these comments. After he finished, just as I predicted, someone asked the question of whether it was *sinful* to refrain from receiving communion because of one's scrupulous anxiety. Father Santa answered no, it was not sinful; but it is a good thing to think of the Eucharist as medicine that people need in order to heal the severed connection between themselves and God. It is not sinful not to take the medicine, but it is also not helpful.

Father Santa's emphatic recommendation is that without exception scrupulous persons should receive Communion every time they attend Mass. One of Van Ornum's survey respondents recounted how this advice had helped her and even healed her: "A confessor told me not to come back [to Confession] for three months. He told me to go to Communion every time I went to Mass, no matter what I did. This led me to become a daily communicant and cured me at least 90%."<sup>211</sup>

Father Santa explains that theologically, the sacrament of Reconciliation is required only of people who have committed a mortal sin and wish to receive Communion. It is contrary to the disposition of a scrupulous person to commit a mortal sin. Father Santa read another quotation from *Evangelii Gaudium* in which Pope Francis quotes the Catechism. "Imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors."<sup>212</sup> As Father Santa explained on the retreat and in the March newsletter quoting Pope Francis, duress and fear are the "essential definition"

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<sup>211</sup> Van Ornum, *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies*, 76.

<sup>212</sup> Pope Francis, "Evangelii Gaudium," 44; CCC, 1735; Santa, "The Joy of the Gospel: Part 2 of 2."

of the scrupulous person's conscience.<sup>213</sup> This duress and fear can be so intense that they make it almost impossible for a scrupulous individual to commit a mortal sin.

The purpose of Confession is to be able to cleanse people of their mortal sins and redirect them toward the love of God. The Church teaches that attending Confession is a fine practice for people who have not committed a mortal sin, but nonetheless feel alienated from God. However, the practice is bad for scrupulous people who have not committed a mortal sin and it feeds their addiction. Therefore, unless they have knowingly, definitely, committed a mortal sin beyond a doubt, they should not go to the sacrament of Reconciliation.

This conclusion is what Father Santa had been building up to all weekend. He had hinted at this idea in the answers to questions he received earlier during the retreat, but he had not given specific instructions. Now he put it directly: "If you are emotionally scrupulous, do not under any circumstances go to the sacrament of Reconciliation. You are free from that requirement because God does not require of you that torment in your life." The words resonated in my head and I penned them in my notes: You are free. For those who obey every rule in the Catholic Church and literally obsess about how closely they are following these rules, this can sound radical. It goes against everything they have been taught, everything they have read, and the understanding of the Church around which they have oriented their entire lives. I can only imagine the mixed emotions that those attending the weekend retreat might have felt. However, for those who were willing to trust, Father Santa had just freed them or at least helped them begin the arduous process of freeing themselves.

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<sup>213</sup> Santa, "The Joy of the Gospel: Part 2 of 2."

Soon after this discussion there was a break for dinner; Father Santa left the room and many of people's questions came out as we began to discuss as a group what we had just heard. While there was some confusion about exact rules, for example one person had not gotten a straight answer to whether missing Mass was a mortal sin, others were obviously affected in a positive way by what they had been taught. One woman, who for a person with scrupulosity acted rather calmly all weekend, talked about trust. She related to the group that she had prayed on her drive to the retreat that God would send her the messages that she needed to hear in order to heal herself. She continued, "So I think I need to trust that he [Father Santa] is telling me what I need to hear." Some in the room nodded their heads and seconded her opinion. Others gave looks of intense contemplation, clearly unsure what to think.

After dinner Saturday night we came back together as a group to discuss what had been taught before dinner. Father Santa explained that he tailors his teachings to each type of group he meets on his retreats. Based on where he judged people to be on their journeys, he felt that it was appropriate to go beyond traditional Church teachings. He felt that the specific individuals that were in attendance this weekend were ready to hear a teaching like his. He fielded a few questions from people but when the questions became overly detailed and even argumentative from a few participants, he stopped them. He quoted a passage from a letter he had received from an SA member about being on an endless search for answers that never led him to definite conclusions. Father Santa's answer to this letter-writer, which he read to the retreat participants, is that no one can ever be certain. Certainty is not possible for people with or without scrupulosity; it is only that people without scrupulosity are more comfortable accepting this innate uncertainty

about life, especially regarding spiritual matters. He said, “If you want to grow in spirituality and in your relationship with God, you have to let go of certitude.” You have to trust.

### **Anointing of the Sick**

On the Scrupulous Anonymous retreat, Father Santa offered a unique experience for those with scrupulosity to be healed through the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. Van Ornum discusses this sacrament and deems that in cases of severe scrupulosity, Anointing of the Sick should be considered a promising treatment. Van Ornum specifies that it should not be thought of as a cure-all or a replacement for psychological help, but rather as an acknowledgment by the Church of “the debilitating effects of a severe psychological illness.” It should also be understood as an invitation to participate regularly in the other sacraments.<sup>214</sup> On the retreat, Father Santa explained a little about what took place in this rite and why those with scrupulosity should think about receiving it. After this discussion Father Santa invited everyone to take a few moments to relax and try to enter a calm state of mind and meet in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament when they were ready.

Having been in adoration chapels before, I figured that this would be a typical small space with room for a few rows of pews and a small altar with a monstrance, a gold stand devised to hold the Eucharist. The chapel I walked into was anything but typical. The first thing I noticed was a large dark boulder about six feet wide sitting in the middle of the room. The chapel was about the size I expected it to be but instead of pews the room was set up in a circular formation and very informally. There were several,

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<sup>214</sup> Van Ornum, *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies*, 174.

comfortable chairs placed around the room facing the boulder. There were indoor plants and trees behind these chairs and large windows, all of which created a feeling of being outdoors. The comfortable chair and staggered walls created what felt like little nooks to sit in. Although I was aware that I was in the room with fifteen other people, I could not see many of them because they were obscured either by the boulder or walls and there was a sense of privacy. The boulder had several stained glass pillars or columns stuck in it that housed little votive candles. I could not see the Eucharistic host anywhere although I assumed that it was embedded somewhere in the boulder. I also noticed that the floorboards had been mitered in such a way that they created a radial pattern around the boulder in which the boards met to create arrows directed at the boulder. There was extensive psychological and theological thought that went into this room, and it was not lost on me.

Father Santa came in the room, dressed in his priestly robes for the first time all weekend. He told people a little about what would be happening during the anointing, and he began the rite. He explained later that the rite can be tailored and varying sets of prayers can be used for different situations. I did not have my notebook and cannot remember all that was said in the ritual, but I do remember the words spoken during the anointing. Father Santa asked everyone who wanted to be anointed to stand. As he came around to each person he rubbed a dab of oil on his or her forehead and in the palm of both of his or her hands while reciting the words, "May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up." He repeated these words each time he anointed a person, and the repetition of these words stuck in my head. The Lord frees you. You are free.

Many forums and articles on the internet address the question of whether a person can properly receive the benefits of the Anointing of the Sick if he or she is unconscious. The answer from many sources is yes. A person who is unconscious can be anointed, although he cannot receive the other Last Rites of Reconciliation and Communion, and the anointing alone does take away a person's sins.<sup>215</sup> Thus making the Anointing of the Sick the only sacrament in which you can be completely passive and still receive forgiveness. It may seem like the rite of Baptism as an infant fits this description, but while the baby might be passive the godparents and parents must profess the beliefs of the Church on behalf of the baby. Adult Baptism within the Catholic Church requires that the person being baptized profess his or her belief in God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.<sup>216</sup> The Anointing of the Sick is the only sacrament in which the person receiving it or undergoing it does nothing but receive and trust. It is the ritual equivalent of accepting God's freely given grace without doing anything to deserve it. This sacramental performance summed up all the important things about the weekend. Persons with scrupulosity must let themselves be healed, not through their own actions, but through God's grace, which is freely given even to the undeserving or those who simply think that they are undeserving.

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<sup>215</sup> "Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick," *Church of Saint Matthew*, accessed March 14, 2014, <http://stmatthewct.org/anointing.html>; Brother Rich, SFO, "Re: Unconscious While Receiving Last Rites," *Catholic Answers*, April 9, 2006, <http://forums.catholic.com/showthread.php?t=107332>; Catholic Answers Staff, "If a Person Is Unconscious and Receives the Last Rites but Is Unable to Confess, Is He Cleansed of His Sins?," *Catholic Answers Blog*, accessed March 14, 2014, <http://www.catholic.com/quickquestions/if-a-person-is-unconscious-and-receives-the-last-rites-but-is-unable-to-confess-is-he>; "Last Rites Explained," *Newspaper of the Catholic Archdiocese of Hartford Connecticut*, June 6, 2006, <http://www.catholictranscript.org/columns/150-last-rites-explained.html>.

<sup>216</sup> Phillip T. Weller, STD, "The Sacrament of Baptism: Rite for Baptism of Adults," in *Rituale Romanum (Roman Ritual)* (The Bruce Publishing Company, 1962), <http://www.sanctamissa.org/en/resources/books-1962/rituale-romanum/12-baptism-of-adults-rite.html>.

Van Ornum provides a short discussion of a few historical religious figures who have struggled with scrupulosity, one of whom was Martin Luther. Van Ornum argues that Luther's scrupulosity must have been influenced by Catholic teaching. Van Ornum speculates that this influence was one of the reasons why Luther dissented against the Catholic Church. Luther's theology emphasized that it is impossible to earn salvation, that it can be attained only through God's freely-given grace. Van Ornum holds that it was Luther's ultimate conclusion that, "obsessive compulsive rituals don't win salvation."<sup>217</sup> One respondent to Van Ornum's surveys talked about how he left the Catholic Church after his divorce and joined a small Bible church in which he learned about the scriptures. He recounts a realization he has while attending a Bible study: "the pastor reminded us that Jesus had taken the burden and guilt of our sin upon himself. I thought—you know, 'I've been trying to shoulder it for years! So that's what I've missed as a Catholic!'"<sup>218</sup>

My point in highlighting this material is not that scrupulous people do best to leave the Catholic Church, as Martin Luther or one of the survey respondents did. The presence of God's grace is noted within all the sacraments of the Catholic Church. However, grace and the forgiving power of God could perhaps be emphasized more, especially for people who are burdened by excessive anxiety over their worthiness to be saved.

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<sup>217</sup> Van Ornum, *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies*, 48.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.



## CONCLUSION

### **A Note about Addiction**

Although Father Santa stated that Scrupulous Anonymous was not inspired by Alcoholics Anonymous, there are striking similarities between the two organizations philosophies. The most obvious of these is that a scrupulous person can only overcome his or her addiction to a ritual through accepting their own powerlessness and learning to trust in a higher power. This is the first, and some say the most important, step in the twelve-step Alcoholics Anonymous process. Throughout the paper I have referenced a few analogies Father Santa made between alcoholism and scrupulosity, which are surprisingly integral to the philosophy Father Santa teaches. The case for encouraging scrupulous persons to refrain from going to Confession and seek reconciliation in other places is strengthened by comparing the rituals of a scrupulous person to rituals to the rituals of an alcoholic: you cannot ask them to lessen the frequency of their behavior; they must stop completely. Many of Van Ornum's survey respondents and even some attending the retreat made references to how their scrupulosity was similar to alcoholism. A forty-nine-year-old nurse wrote, "Today my scrupulosity is just a tendency. However, it's like being an alcoholic—one day at a time."<sup>219</sup>

Both addicts and scrupulous persons have addictive behavioral patterns that feed off of the addictive belief systems, which often begins with a feeling of worthlessness. Lack of self-esteem or self-worth drives a behavior that seems to take away these feelings. Because it is this behavior alone that has the ability to relieve these feelings, this behavior becomes an addictive behavior. It can be a substance or ingestive addiction or a process addition, where one becomes hooked on a specific series of actions. Almost all

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 70.

processes can take an addictive form.<sup>220</sup> Regardless of the object of one's addiction, it operates in the same way becoming the most important thing in a person's life even at the cost of their employment or personal relationships. However, the feelings of relief only last for a short period of time and when they return the person feels the need to return to the behavior or substance that relieved them. The addictive substance or process then returns them to feelings of worthlessness and the entire process loops back on itself creating a never-ending cycle. Not only does this description of the process of addiction perfectly fit the behavior of many scrupulous persons regarding confession, the resulting consequential behaviors of deception, refusal to change one's behavior or admit one is wrong, self-centeredness, and the need for control parallel as well.

Scrupulosity also has interesting ties to abusive parenting that at times co-occurs with alcoholic or addict parents. As mentioned previously, I believe this statistic was underreported in Van Ornum's survey due to lack of objective criteria. However, it is evident that parenting style and children's attachment style can effect the development of scrupulosity. Not all alcoholic parents display authoritarian or abusive parenting styles, but statistically speaking children of alcoholics are more likely to form negative attachments to alcoholic parents and thereby are more likely to develop scrupulosity. The genetic component of addiction may also play a role in the development of scrupulosity. About 50-60% of the risk for developing alcoholism is genetically determined. It is possible that scrupulous children of addicts gravitated toward the process of addiction of scrupulosity rather than substance addiction.

The former addict and alcoholic attending the retreat, Nick, seemed to me to have replaced his addictive cravings for alcohol and drugs with an addiction to religious ritual

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<sup>220</sup> McCormick, *Sin As Addiction*, 157.

and a drive for holiness. Although he believed he had overcome his addictions, he had only switched the object of his addiction. All the time he used to spend getting drunk he now spent praying and participating in church activities. During a break period of the retreat one woman admitted to self-medicating with alcohol for a period of about eight years in order to quiet her scrupulosity and a few others around the room nodded in understanding. I later asked Father Santa if he had encountered many persons seeking help for scrupulosity that were also current or former alcoholics or addicts but he could not say for sure.

Several sources have written on the similarities between religion and addiction although with little to no mention of scrupulosity.<sup>221</sup> It is my understanding that most of this material occurs in the context of Protestant Christianity and is not geared toward a Catholic audience. However, some authors like Leo Booth advocate a cure for spiritual addiction through integrating the Alcoholics Anonymous model.

### **In Closing**

This paper has thoroughly examined the issue of scrupulosity with the aid of psychological studies as well as Catholic theological and social teachings. In Chapter I of this paper I outlined the psychopathological view of scrupulosity in regards to its clinical features, development and treatment. While both the psychopathological and Catholic perspective of Scrupulous Anonymous understand scrupulosity as intimately related to OCD, some within the psychopathological understanding of scrupulosity maintain that several specific characteristics of scrupulosity suggest that scrupulosity may need to

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<sup>221</sup> See Jeff VanVonderen, Dale Ryan and Juanita Ryan, *Soul Repair: Rebuilding Your Spiritual Life* (Westmont, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008); Bob Minor, *When Religion is an Addiction* (St. Louis: HumanityWorks!, 2007); Leo Booth, *When God Becomes a Drug: Understanding Religious Addiction and Religious Abuse* (Signal Hill, California: South Coast Publishing Limited, 1998); Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton, *Toxic Fatih* (Colorado Springs, WaterBrook Press, 1991).

differentiated from OCD and suggest specific diagnostic criteria. Regardless of diagnostic issues, the psychologists and psychiatrists understand that the cognitive-behavioral Exposure Response Prevention Therapy, the gold standard therapeutic method used to treat OCD by cognitive-behavioral therapists, is highly effective for persons presenting with scrupulosity. As I have noted, even the theological manual *Moral Theology* by Jone and Aldeman promotes the use of behavioral techniques used in ERP Therapy although they do so through pastoral language. I also summarized how psychiatrist Joseph Ciarrocchi integrates his religious training as a priest with his knowledge of psychiatry to delineate three types of scrupulosity: developmental, milieu-influenced, and clinical.

In Chapter II of the paper I outlined the events in recent Catholic history necessary for situating scrupulosity within a Catholic population and understanding the particular philosophy of the Scrupulous Anonymous organization. I examined several areas of Catholic teaching that can be interpreted in harmful ways by those with scrupulous anxiety, including the Confiteor, the general attitude toward human beings as sinful, and the Sacrament of Confession, which is used by the Catholic Church to remedy the sinful nature of human beings. I provided many examples of individuals with scrupulosity who present with specific anxieties regarding Confession from William Van Ornum's book *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies*. I also discussed other issues that scrupulous persons struggle with, for example the conception of God as a vengeful and angry authority figure, which were presented in Van Ornum's book.

In the later part of Chapter II I chose to focus on the discourse of fear, which Kelly and Kelly argue was prevalent in American Catholics in the early twentieth century

but began to die out as the Catholic Church moved toward the Second Vatican Council. I also discussed the decisive event of the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, which elicited severe reactions from clergy and laypersons in the United States. The confusion caused by the publication of this document combined with the language *Guadium et Spes* which encouraged each person to rely on his or her own conscience, caused many American Catholics to turn away from the practice of Confession and instead seek reconciliation through the Sacrament of Holy Communion. It is this turn that I argue is vital to the Scrupulous Anonymous organization and Father Santa's understanding of how to heal those struggling with scrupulosity.

In Chapter III I summarized the ideology of the Scrupulous Anonymous, an organization that began with a newsletter to Catholics struggling with scrupulosity. Scrupulous Anonymous' understanding of scrupulosity has progressed from viewing persons as having consciences that are "overly sensitive" to understanding that scrupulosity is a "pathology" intimately related to OCD. I provided the most up to date version of the "Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous" written by Father Santa that contain many of the ideologies of the organization within them. I also detailed many of the events that took place over the Scrupulous Anonymous retreat weekend that I attended, including various group therapy-like sessions and the administration of several Catholic sacraments. The main teaching imparted by Father Santa throughout the weekend was that persons who struggle with severe and serious scrupulosity should not attend Confession and rather should seek reconciliation of their venial, or small, sins through other sacraments like Holy Communion and the Anointing of the Sick. Although Father Santa's teaching at the retreat weekend were geared toward the specific population

attending that weekend, I do not believe he would hesitate to apply these teachings to other Catholics seriously struggling with scrupulosity. While Father Santa would not promote these teachings for those not struggling with scrupulosity and would encourage those without scrupulosity to attend confession, his instructions fortify the behaviors that many Catholics demonstrated after the Second Vatican Council.

In conclusion, I hold that the new understanding of sin as determined less by legalistic standards and more through one's individual conscience in addition to the trends of decreased attendance in Confession and increased value of receiving Communion exhibited in the post-Second Vatican Council era have been adopted by the Scrupulous Anonymous organization and are present in the "Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous." In addition to these new understandings of sin and the sacraments present after the Council, Father Santa has further developed his teachings to allow those struggling with severe scrupulosity to disregard the Sacrament of Confession and seek reconciliation through the Sacraments of Holy Communion and Anointing of the Sick.

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