

The Struggle with Scrupulosity

What is scrupulosity, and what should we do if it strikes us?

There seem to be a lot of misconceptions about scrupulosity in the modern secular world. What exactly is it? Are there any distinctions between how the term is used in Catholic circles and secular circles?

The word *scrupulosity* derives from the Latin word *scrupulis*, which means “a small, sharp stone or pebble.” People with scrupulosity walk around as if they have annoying little pebbles grating and irritating their minds and souls, and they just can’t seem to shake them out.

Scrupulosity produces feelings of doubt, guilt, and anxiety. It typically involves seeing mortal sin where there is only venial sin or obsessively focusing on possible or imaginary sins that may not be sinful at all.

The psycho-spiritual “pebbles” that make up scrupulosity come in a great number of varieties, though they can be classed into a few common categories: scruples of potential sins involving sexual, violent, or blasphemous thoughts; prayer practices; and reception of the sacraments, especially confession and the Eucharist.

Scrupulosity is certainly not unique to Catholics, and the content of scruples tends to accord with various religions’ more fundamental beliefs. For example, one study showed more scrupulous responses among Turkish Muslims than Canadian Christians on a “fear of God” scale of a psychological test used to measure scrupulous tendencies.

Still, religion in general is not necessarily the “cause” of scrupulosity. We must recall that most religious people do *not* experience any severe or prolonged problems with scrupulosity. Second, we should note that some people who do not go to church and describe themselves as non-religious *do* experience religious scruples—fearing that they have offended God! Third, there is a related form of scrupulosity, found at times in both the religious and the non-religious, that has been called a *secular* or *moral* scrupulosity, centered on issues of right and wrong or potential harm to others without specific religious content.

That this kind of scrupulosity should exist should be no surprise to Catholics. Let’s recall these words of Saint Paul:

When the gentiles who have not the Law do by nature what the Law requires, they are a law unto themselves, even though they do not have the Law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to the gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Jesus Christ (Rom. 2: 15-16).

There is a “natural law” written in the hearts of every one of us, whether or not we recognize that it derives from God’s “divine law.” The human capacity of conscience, this innate capacity to discern right from wrong, is there in every one of us, and in certain circumstances, it can be misdirected into unneeded doubts and worries, into scrupulous thoughts and behaviors.

Even great saints battled scrupulosity and won (e.g., St. Ignatius Loyola), or endured it throughout lives and did great things for God and the Church despite it (e.g., St. Alphonsus Liguori). Some priests and spiritual directors have expertise in dealing with people with scrupulous thoughts and behaviors working on their own, or in conjunction with therapists. St. Alphonsus advised that anyone troubled by scrupulosity should find one holy and competent spiritual director and follow that person's advice.

There are people crippled by scrupulosity, and then there are people who dismiss any concern about sin as scrupulosity. How can we take a middle road between these two extremes when we examine our conscience?

Vices involve missing the *golden mean*, the middle road between opposing vices of excess and deficiency, too much and too little.

Those crippled with scrupulosity worry too much about sin. They see sin where there may be no sin at all or worry excessively that they might have committed some sin. On the other hand, the unscrupulous miss the mark of true virtue by dismissing sin altogether.

For Catholics with scrupulosity, a deeper understanding of what the Church actually teaches can also be of immense benefit. For example, people with scrupulosity often treat temptations, or spontaneous unwanted thoughts, images, or memories, as if they were sins. They would do well to deepen their understanding of the Church's teachings on the difference between temptation and sin, and how sin requires a deliberate act of will regarding any temptation.

Ironically, too, the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist are often the subject matter of people's scrupulous thoughts and behaviors, and yet, when properly understood and embraced, they can supply us the grace and spiritual balm to overcome, or at least endure, scrupulosity. Also of great importance is a deeper meditation upon the love and limitless mercy of Jesus Christ, who gives himself to us in the Eucharist. He told us he wants us to live in peace, with hearts untroubled and unafraid (John 14:27).

There is always hope for the scrupulous, even for those who worry that they may never overcome it. As St. James advised us: "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-5).