

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

November 1, 2015

Spiritual Ponderings

Scrupulosity

This month, I would like to tackle a topic that has bothered me for some time and that is scrupulosity. I have nothing against people who suffer from scrupulosity but I often find myself very frustrated with myself after dealing with a person with scrupulosity because I always felt like I had not help the person in a way that they needed to be help. In my search to become a better priest/confessor, and to be able help people with scrupulosity better I came across a book by Fr. Santa C.Ss.r. (Yes his name really is Fr. Santa as in Santa Claus). Fr. Santa had been the editor of monthly newsletter for people who suffer from scrupulosity called *Scrupulous Anonymous*. Taking what he learned from that experience and from being a Redemptorist retreat director who wrote the book: *Understanding Scrupulosity: Questions, Helps, and Encouragement*. I would like to share with you today some powerful insights from his book today. Quotes from his book will be in bold. My personally commentary will be in regular font.

Perhaps the best way to understand scrupulosity is to recognize the manifestations of the affliction. For most suffers the experience of scrupulosity is described as “thoughts that cannot be shaken.” It has been variously described as being possessed by a “thousand frightening fantasies” or as “constructing a spider web in the mind.” Others describe the affliction as being constantly and unrelentingly “pricked by a pin.”

Joseph Ciarrocchi, PhD, in an article entitled “Ministry to Scrupulous Persons” that appeared in the Jesuit journal Human Development, identifies the core experience of scrupulosity as “an intrusive idea, often associated with a sinful impulse, which the person abhors but cannot shake.”

I like to think of scrupulosity in the following way. The virtue or the healthy way of living is always in the middle of two vices. Humility is between pride and self-hate for example. The healthy way of dealing with sin let us call it contrition is in the middle of not caring about sin (and we all know many people who are like that) and caring too much about sin to the point of neglecting/doubting God’s mercy (scrupulosity).

I think the most important thing to realize is that people with scrupulosity have not done anything to deserve this mental/spiritual illness. Growing up with and battling depression, I was always felt somehow responsible for my depression. I eventually came to realize that my depression was not something I caused but was more like a natural disaster. I just happened to be the poor landmass that the typhoon hit or the place where the earth plates shifted (earthquake). The important thing I believe is to stop asking “why?” and to start asking “what now?” and “how can I overcome this challenge?”

I repeat, it is not a sin, to be scrupulous and it not a sin not to be able to “get over” it. All the same, we should try our best to rid ourselves of it. That is all the Lord asks of us.

It is important to realize that temptations are a part of life. Even Jesus himself was tempted but did not sin. Temptations are in a sense neutral. What matters is what we do with them. Do we follow through with them and hurt others or do we entertain them in order derive pleasure from them? If so then we have sinned. If we dismiss them and choose God’s ways then there is no sin. A man tempted to sleep with his girl friend has not sin. The temptation can lead to sin if he begins to fantasize about it or actually does it or it can be a moment of virtue if he turns to God in prayer.

You decide that you—and not your fears—were in charge of your religious life.

Can you overcome scrupulosity? In one sense yes, you can because you can learn to control it. In the same way that an alcoholic can come to control his drinking problem so can a person learn to control their scrupulosity. This does not mean that an ex-alcoholic does not want a drink but rather he chooses not to have a drink because he knows he does not like the person he becomes. A person suffering from scrupulosity can with help and grace recognize scrupulous thought and temptations and choose to not give into them.

The scrupulous person desires, above all else, a healthy relationship with God. However, in the grips of the manifestation of scrupulosity this seems unattainable, and so they seek instead the peace and tranquility that comes from another person's reassurance and certitude.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

November 8, 2015

Spiritual Ponderings

Scrupulosity

In last week's Spiritual Ponderings we began to look at the problem of scrupulosity. This week and next I would like to share with you from Fr. Santa's C.Ss.R book: *Understanding Scrupulosity: Questions, Helps, and Encouragement* something he calls **The Ten Commandments For the Scrupulous**. They were written by one of his mentors Fr. Don Miller C.Ss.R. I will list each commandment and then add my thoughts and reflections.

1. You shall not repeat a sin in confession when it has been confessed in a previous confession, even when there is doubt that it was confessed or a doubt that it was confessed in a sufficiently adequate and complete way.

It is very important here that we do not confuse liturgy and Sacraments with witchcraft. Witchcraft is ultimately the idea that I can make God or the divine do something if I recite the right words or perform the right actions. Liturgy and Sacraments are more about relationship. By coming to God and asking for forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation we are not forcing God to do something that He does not want to do. Rather we are allowing God to do something that He deeply desires and that is love us. Sometimes I think in the confessional that we treat God as if He is more like the older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son and not like the loving Father Jesus reveals Him to be. Relax and let God love you.

2. You shall not confess doubtful sins in confession, but only sins that are clear and certain.

Remember sins are not something that just happens. We must choose to sin. Sometimes we do this directly in the case of sins of commission and other times we choose to sin by omission by choosing not to do the good but we can never sin without choosing to do so.

3. You shall not repeat your penance after confession or any of the words of your penance because you feel or think that you had distractions or may not have said the words properly.

I am surprised at how many people do not realize the true purpose of the penance is in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We say that the penance is medicinal and not punitive meaning that the purpose of the penance is to help us avoid the same sins in the future they are not in any way obligatory. God's love and forgiveness is unconditional and we cannot earn it. Instead our penances are supposed to help us get back on the correct path. This is why a penance can seem so insignificant compared to the amount of damage we have caused. This is also why some of the best penances are prayers.

4. You shall not worry about breaking your fast before receiving Communion, unless you actually put food and drink in your mouth and swallow it in the same way a person does when eating a meal.

I was camping with a group of friends and just as we were about to begin Mass a fly flew into one of my friend's mouths and he swallowed. After a few moments of laughter, I realize that my friend was now worried about receiving Eucharist because he had broken the fast in his mind. I assured him since he did not intentionally do it that he was fine. There is a major difference between swallowing a fly on accident and downing a beer before going to Mass.

5. You shall not hesitate to look at any crucifix or at any statue in church or at home or anywhere else because you may let bad thoughts in your mind and imagination. If such thoughts occur, they carry no sin whatever.

From time to time, we have to remind ourselves that we have a real opponent in the devil and that the devil desires our downfall and for some reason God allows the devil to produce images in certain people's heads when they look at religious items. I think three things need to be remembered. The first is that God does not allow us to be tempted more than we can handle and so while these thoughts and images can be very disturbing they are above all an opportunity to turn toward God and rely on Him. The second is thing to remember is that these dreadful images are being produced by

the devil and he is doing so in order to ruin your relationship with God. Therefore if the devil wants you to go left you should go right. If the devil wants to cut down your prayer time, pray longer. If the devil does not want you to look upon a certain image look upon it more. Finally remember to call upon God and ask Jesus to defend you.

The following is a prayer written by someone who suffers from Scrupulosity:

With a strong faith in God, much can be done, from fighting a war, to seeing it won. To bearing a hurt that can never be cured to finding a way where vision was blurred. Yes, battles are won, and loneliness fought and sickness is cured, where God is first sought. And remembering this saying Whate'er you shall do, "Take one step toward God and he'll take two toward you."

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

November 15, 2015

Spiritual Ponderings

Scrupulosity

In last week's Spiritual Ponderings we began to look at **The Ten Commandments For the Scrupulous** by Fr. Don Miller C.Ss.R. . This week I would like to look at the rest of those commandment as found in Fr. Santa's C.Ss.R book: *Understanding Scrupulosity: Questions, Helps, and Encouragement.*

6. You shall not consider yourself guilty of bad thoughts, desires, or feelings, unless you can honestly swear before the all-truthful God that you remember clearly and certainly consenting to them.

Spirituality above all is an exercise in honesty. We must admit to ourselves that we are not angels and we are not demons. We are somewhere in the middle. God knows this better than anyone and has shown that He is not willing to give up on us. He is the Good Shepherd in search of his lost sheep and the Good Samaritan heals and binds our wounds.

7. You shall not disobey your confessor when he tells you never to make another general confession of past sins already confessed.

I identify a general confession as someone coming in and not confessing any new or recently committed sins but rather the person has come to the Sacrament in order to ask forgiveness for sins that have already been forgiven in a previous Sacrament of Reconciliation. Trust that the it is the same power of God working through the priest in the Sacrament that worked through Jesus. Jesus did not try to heal people and only sometimes succeed. He always succeeded. It is also important to realize that God promised us the forgiveness of sins and not "good feelings."

8. You shall believe and act accordingly, so that whenever you are in doubt as to whether or not you are obliged to do or not to do something, you can take it for certain that you are not obligated.

God does not expect us to follow commandments and rules that we do not know of. If tomorrow the bishops declare that all Catholics should abstain from meat on all Fridays and not just the Fridays in Lent and a person does not learn about the new rule and thus eats meat on Friday he or she did not commit a sin. If however he or she knew about the rule and broke he or she did commit a sin.

9. If, before you perform or omit an act, you are doubtful whether or not it is sinful for you, you shall assume as certain that it is not sinful and shall proceed to act without any dread of sin whatsoever.

This commandment is specifically designed for people who are suffering from scrupulosity. When I was in therapy from depression I learned that I carried around in the back of my head a lot of ANTS (Automatic Negative Thoughts)and that affected the way I was living my life. In order to deal with these ANTS in a healthy manner, I learned that each morning I needed to thank God for three things that made me special. If I was a prideful person this would be an exercise in vanity but since I learn toward depression it is a healthy exercise. For scrupulous people who are worried about sinning every moment of their lives this rule helps balance them out. Remember the virtue is always in the middle of two vices.

10. You shall put your total trust in Jesus Christ, knowing that he loves you as only God can love, and that he will never allow you to lose your soul.

I think St. Paul has the best commentary in his letters to the Romans.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access [by faith] to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us. For Christ, while we were still helpless, yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly. Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. How much more then, since we are now justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath. Indeed, if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, once reconciled, will we be saved by his life. Not only that, but we also boast of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:1-11)

A Helpful Prayer For the Scrupulous

I behold the Christ in you. I place you lovingly in the care of the Father. I release you from all anxiety and concern. I see you as God sees you a spiritual person, created in the image of God, endowed with qualities and abilities that make you needed, and important—not only to me but also to God and His plan. I believe that you have the understanding you need to choose life. I bless you, I have faith in you. I behold Jesus in you. (Recite to yourself as you look in a mirror).

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

November 22, 2015

Spiritual Ponderings

Scrupulosity

For the past three weeks we have been looking at the spiritual illness called scrupulosity. This week and next I would like to share with you from Fr. Santa's C.Ss.R book: *Understanding Scrupulosity: Questions, Helps, and Encouragement* something he calls **The Ten Commandments for Peace of Mind**. They were written by Fr. Santa C.Ss.R. as a follow up to the Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous by Fr. Don Miller C.Ss.R. It was Fr. Santa's hope that these commandments would help individuals living with scrupulosity in their everyday life.

1. Understand that scrupulosity can be a temporary condition or a persistent and seemingly unyielding condition, which is most often a manifestation of obsessive-compulsive-disorder (OCD); in either case, it is not a punishment from God.

Philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, theologians and historians talk about the idea of a Just World Theory. The idea of the Just World Theory is simple: if you do good things then good things will happen to you and if you do bad things then bad things will happen to you. This idea is also called by many karma. This is not a Catholic idea. We believe that God created this world good but sin threw the world into chaos and so there are times in which bad things happen to good people. As Catholics we believe that God will bring good out of evil like an artist uses black to help make his paintings stand out. This means God does not give a person scrupulosity but if the person works with God, they could bring good out of the situation.

2. Acknowledge your need for help and guidance and accept that you cannot effectively pursue a path of healing and wholeness by yourself.

Everyone from time to time needs help and it is important to admit that to ourselves. As the saying goes "the first step in healing is to first admit that we need help."

3. Accept and understand that the presence of fear and anxiety is the condition of scrupulosity and not the indication or warning of the presence of sin.

A person with diabetes has a problem regulating their blood sugar and thus they know that there are certain symptoms that they must watch out for so that they can inject themselves with insulin so a person with scrupulosity needs to monitor themselves so that they can inject themselves with the appropriate psychological medicine.

4. Always remember and never forget that discipline is essential if you wish to become healed. Choose one helper and resist the urge to seek many different helpers and a variety of different opinions.

As human beings we must search out the truth and not the answers we want to hear. Find a good spiritual director, mentor, counselor, or support group to assist you in your healing process. We also must avoid becoming addictive to the attention we may receive for our illnesses. It may be hard for us to start relating to others in a new way and that can be scary.

5. Learn to be very patient with yourself, your confessor and spiritual director, your therapist, and with family and friends.

When talking to engage couples about how to argue and problem solve in marriage, I remind them that it is important for husband and wife to remind themselves that they are on the same side. When we find ourselves arguing with ourselves it is important for us to remind ourselves that we are on the same side with ourselves. We also need to be patient with those who want to help us because it is not always easy to help a person change.

Prayer for the Scrupulous written by a Scrupulous Person

I was the lost lamb in your flock of sheep. And you've found me and carried me home. You guide me in everything that I do, and I know that I'm never alone. After all the pain that I've given you, You've given to me only love. And now I know that wherever I go You'll look after me from above. A wise man once said that those who seek the Lord has already found him. I believe it's true, for in seeking god, I have build my world around him!

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

November 29, 2015

Spiritual Ponderings

Scrupulosity

We are now at our last Sunday of the month and our last look at the spiritual illness called scrupulosity. We will focus on the last five commandments of Fr. Santa's Ten **Commandments for Peace of Mind** from his book *Understanding Scrupulosity: Questions, Helps, and Encouragement*

6. Discover and recognize your success and learn to celebrate your effort.

Mother Teresa each night before she went to bed had the practice of thanking God for five things and asking pardon for five things. She said her activity focused on gratitude helped her become of God's presence and her asking for pardon reminded her that she still needed God's grace despite all the praise she received from others.

7. When you fail, or feel that you have taken two steps backwards, pick yourself up and try again. Do not give in to feelings of failure.

Ernest Kurtz & Katherine Ketcham has this to say about life in their book: *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*: "Baseball teaches us, or has taught most of us, how to deal with failure. We learn at a very young age that failure is the norm in baseball and, precisely because we have failed, we hold in high regard those who fail less often—those who hit safely in one out of three chances and become star players. I also find it fascinating that baseball, alone in sport, considers errors to be part of the game, part of its rigorous truth. Francis T. Vincent, Jr. Commissioner of Baseball"

Thomas Merton put it this way... "MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

8. Never underestimate the power of grace.

A priest that I met while studying for a certificate in Spiritual Direction is fond of saying that the devil only has two lies. The first lie is that "you are not good enough," and the second lie is that "you are alone." All temptations boil down to these two lies. God though has promised that we can do all things with Him and that He is Emmanuel "God with us." Thus making the devil the "father of lies."

Mother Teresa put it this way: "I know God won't give me anything I can't handle. I just wish he didn't trust me so much."

9. Pray, pray, pray. Try to live a life of thankful praise.

The following is from Ernest Kurtz & Katherine Ketcham's book: *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*:

"All spiritual teachers have asked in one form or another, "What do you have that you have not received?" That question can lead in two directions. Gratitude responds, "Thank you." Greed demands "more."

"No one is as capable of gratitude as one who has emerged from the kingdom of night.

We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; not to share them would mean to betray them. Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately.

...And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation.

We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. – Elie Weisel"

10. Imagine yourself living free from scrupulosity.

"For me to be saint means to be myself." - Fr. Thomas Merton.

Prayer for the Scrupulous written by a Scrupulous Person

I cannot dwell forever on things of the past, I cannot hang on tightly for they will not last. I must progress, not only remember, from the first little flicker to the last dying ember. The good of the past is all that remains: May the good of the present blot out its pains. May the Lord give me strength to see it all through as he does when we ask him, through old times and news.