

Acclaim for

A THOUSAND FRIGHTENING FANTASIES . . .

“I will personally cherish this work, because I believe I will be able to use it to help others manage the ugly ogre of scrupulosity in their lives. If and when they do, they will discover something of that peace ‘which surpasses all understanding.’ ”

—JOHN CARDINAL O’CONNOR
Archbishop of New York

“With the acuity, balance, and scholarship worthy of the late and, until now, the unequalled A. Gemelli, William Van Ornum brings to us the great moral drama of scrupulosity that has bedeviled humankind for centuries.

“Much has been said and written on scrupulosity and on obsessive compulsive disorder. No one has organized the subject so thoroughly, so gracefully, so eloquently, so tolerantly, and with such helpful scholarship as William Van Ornum. The collection of data from around the world from one thousand scrupulous people is a pioneering achievement.

“If you are scrupulous, if you know any scrupulous person, if you want to learn how to help a scrupulous person, read this volume.”

—FRANK J. KOBLER, Professor Emeritus of Psychology
Loyola University of Chicago

“To those who wonder why he wrote this book, William Van Ornum might echo Pope John XXIII when he was asked why he convened Vatican Council II: ‘To make the human sojourn on earth less sad.’ This book will surely do that for countless men and women who have suffered not only the special pains

of depression and religious scrupulosity but at times from the treatments prescribed for them. This is a very great practical handbook for this specific syndrome but, because of its tone of profound human understanding, it is something more, a book whose gentle and seasoned wisdom will make anybody who reads it feel better and more courageous about facing the challenges of life.”

–EUGENE KENNEDY
Co-author of *On Becoming a Counselor*

“Scrupulosity is misunderstood, easily dismissed, and often seen as ‘something that they (the scrupulous) can get over with just a little will power.’ William Van Ornum clears away the misunderstanding, focuses our attention, and helps us understand what scrupulosity is, and what it is not. This book needs to be read by all priests, spiritual directors, and mental health personnel before they walk the journey with the scrupulous person entrusted to their care.”

–REV. THOMAS M. SANTA, C.S.S.R.
Scrupulous Anonymous Director

“A thoughtful and clinically sensitive look at an aspect of moral and spiritual and psychological frailty.”

–ROBERT COLES, psychiatrist and author of
The Call of Service: A Witness to Idealism

“God love you, Mr. Van Ornum, for your sincere desire to help people who are troubled in this way. I will pray that your book brings light and peace to many.”

–MOTHER TERESA, M.C.
Calcutta, India

A THOUSAND
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*Understanding and Healing Scrupulosity
and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder*

William Van Ornum

Foreword by
John Cardinal O'Connor

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For
William and Thomas Van Ornum,
the best sons in the world!
May they remember always
that they are cherished
more than the lilies of the field

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FOREWORD

Psychiatrist Robert Coles of Harvard University expresses understandable perplexity that so many officials of so many churches refer their clergy for therapy instead of turning to the spiritual or sacramental resources within religion itself. I can testify to the phenomenon but am not surprised by it.

This brief reflection on Dr. William Van Ornum's *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies* is not the forum for exploring the reasons behind this phenomenon, but that many churches have suffered a loss of confidence in themselves seems undeniable. I myself meet periodically with a group of highly placed Catholic psychiatrists anxious for the insights of theology and faith, and sincerely reluctant to pretend to knowledge beyond their still limited field.

As one with a certain background in clinical psychology and psychiatry combined with more than fifty years of active priesthood, I am most grateful for what these sciences *do* offer, quite aware that neither faith nor theology is an adequate substitute when psychology or psychiatry is essential. The reverse of that truism, of course, is equally important.

In my judgment, one of the important contributions Dr. Van Ornum makes lies in his effort to promote a mutually rewarding marriage between the psychological and the religious. This particular contribution is basic to his analysis and proposed remedies for scrupulosity — that pebble in the shoe that makes walking fifty yards seem like fifty miles and, far worse, that cancer that eats away at every legitimate potential for joy in the human heart.

This book is well named, particularly if “a thousand” is translated as an infinite number, for, as the text observes, for every blip that goes off the radar screen of one's conscience, another instantly appears. The sufferer of scrupulosity is never, ever at peace for any length of time. Indeed, if peace steals into the heart unobserved, the scrupulous feel guilty over feeling peaceful, when they “know they don't deserve peace.” I must confess to wondering, at

times, whether the merry-go-round was invented by a sufferer of scrupulosity, compelled to do the same thing over and over and over, convinced of never getting it right.

If Dr. Van Ornum's book offers one hope — a hope I would underscore emphatically — it is that the scrupulous can be helped. Within the text the author is generous enough to quote a few informal suggestions I offered him while he was preparing the manuscript. I hope they bring hope to some sufferer somewhere.

I will personally cherish this work, not because it references me in passing, but because I believe I will be able to use it to help others manage the ugly ogre of scrupulosity in their lives. If and when they do, they will discover something of that peace "which surpasses all understanding."

JOHN CARDINAL O'CONNOR

PREFACE

This book is written for people with scrupulosity. They know they have it. They may not be aware of helpful therapies and medication. They may find it hard to sort out claims made by mental health professionals. For them I write this book and hope it represents one stop on their journey of healing. In writing this book, I have tried to serve as their advocate. Throughout the book I've tried to offer an honest evaluation of therapies for people with scrupulosity. Material of a more technical nature, of interest to therapists or academicians, is cited in the end notes.

Others will benefit from learning more about scrupulosity/obsessive compulsive disorder (Scrup/OCD). Family members need to know why someone they love acts so strangely at times. Perhaps therapists will be helped by learning more about scrupulosity as a distinct form of OCD. They may be surprised to learn of its existence during the past five hundred years. Medication and behavior therapies help many. There is a need for openness to other approaches as well, especially from a spiritual perspective, and I discuss this during the latter half of the book.

New developments in brain imaging tools are making it possible to locate changes in brain functioning due to medication or behavior therapy. I hope this book encourages researchers to consider expert talk therapy and spiritual approaches as variables in future research.

I am grateful to Scrupulous Anonymous. Over a thousand members responded to a four-page survey. Father Patrick Kaler provided help and encouragement. Father Thomas Santa continued Father Kaler's assistance.

My students and colleagues at Marist College deserve thanks and gratitude. Heidi Askin and Yves Paultre, newly minted school psychologists, devoted over a thousand hours each to statistical tasks and to American Psychological Association presentations in Boston, Washington, and Toronto. I appreciate their intelli-

gence, hard work, and comradeship. Dr. Royce White provided extensive assistance on the statistical procedures and ongoing friendship and support. Dr. John Scileppi gave freely of his time to review the book in progress. My administrators at Marist College — Doctors William Eidle, Marc vanderHeyden, Mark Sullivan, and Dennis Murray — encourage my teaching and writing. They create an atmosphere of freedom of research inquiry unmatched anywhere.

My parents, Wesley and Shirley Van Ornum, have provided a strong foundation for my professional work. My father's honesty and sense of integrity are matchless, and my mother's sensitivity to others is a quality I can only hope to emulate. I am grateful that these qualities have been passed along to me and I hope their presence remains in future generations.

I am grateful to these people for interviews or other help on this project: Edna Foa, Steven Levenkron, Deborah Widmar, Grace Austen, Father Joseph Campo, Father Russell Abata, Paul Pressman, Robin Torres, John Mordock, Edward O'Keefe, Kathleen Zraly, Susan Muto, Christopher Brown, Maya Machocek, and Dr. Jack Sherman.

Various professional experiences helped me write this book. Dr. Frank Kobler of Loyola University of Chicago encouraged me in 1975 to continue in William James's tradition. He has helped me throughout this book through long-distance correspondence which has enriched the book immeasurably. Courses in theology taken at DePaul University piqued my interest in religious issues. While I was at Loyola in clinical psychology, Dr. Eugene Kennedy and Dr. Gerard Egan taught me about the intersection of psychology and pastoral counseling.

The openness of Thomas Merton to ideas from many branches of knowledge has always inspired me, and I hope the diversity reflected in the references list contributes helpful ideas to understanding scrupulosity and obsessive compulsive disorder.

I am grateful to John Cardinal O'Connor, Bishop Howard J. Hubbard, Mother Teresa, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, and Christopher Brown — all of whom guided and encouraged spiritual aspects of this book, an area where I am just a beginner.

The work of the OCD Foundation has been a beacon to many, and their efforts are recognized and commended.

Working thirteen years as a clinical psychologist has broad-

ened my understanding of OCD and other problems. Over a decade of work at Astor Home for Children as a psychologist, administrator, and board member taught me the need to combine medical, behavioral, and talk therapies in general practice. Service as a New York State disability examiner and director of psychology at Craig House Hospital impressed on me the complexity of relationships of any psychiatric condition. As general editor of *The Crossroad Counseling Series* I learned to review critically the work of professionals and to strive to locate simple and helpful approaches. Teaching at Marist for twelve years encouraged me to interpret seemingly disparate information.

Special thanks to Michael Leach. Maxwell Perkins could not have been a better editor or mentor. I'm just one of hundreds of authors who say this. John Eagleson did a great job to make this book more organized and readable, and I thank him myself and on behalf of the reader.

Extra special thanks are due to Lori Rivenburgh, M.A. When carpal tunnel syndrome struck, Lori provided great help in typing and consolidating the manuscript. Thank you, Lori!

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Part One

HOW IT WAS

The five chapters of Part One deal with scrupulosity as a form of obsessive compulsive disorder that has been described during the past five hundred years. Current psychological and spiritual writers stress the importance of viewing human experience from both the male and female perspective. During past history and in current times, scrupulosity has been expressed differently by the two sexes.

A theme in the lives of many great historical figures has been the presence of an understanding and directive counselor or spiritual guide. This lesson from history is reaffirmed in the stories of contemporary sufferers of scrupulosity in chapters 6 through 9. While current psychiatric practice has brought tremendous relief to many sufferers of scrupulosity and obsessive compulsive disorder, current researchers may overlook the importance of a long-term trusting and caring relationship in the lives of people with scrupulosity and obsessive compulsive disorder. History teaches us a wider perspective.

Chapter 3 presents previously unavailable scientific research on scrupulosity that was completed just before World War I. This data, combined with the results of the studies leading to this book, suggests that scrupulosity and obsessive compulsive disorder are genetic disorders with multifactorial inheritance (described below on p. 137) — one that can be influenced both by genes and environment. This provides great hope for effective medical and psychological treatments.

Chapter 1

A STORY OF SCRUPULOSITY

The task of understanding scrupulosity provides drama and a good story. What is scrupulosity? Those who suffer from it know it instantly. Others such as family members, friends, work colleagues, and most mental health professionals have never heard of it. Some define scrupulosity as excessive worry and concern over religious matters.

John Cardinal O'Connor suggests a wider definition: "You can call scrupulosity an obsessive compulsive behavior, but clearly people become scrupulous over a broad spectrum of issues which are not explicitly religious. Because of the moral sensitivity of their conscience, people scruple over the moral dimensions of daily behavior" (Interview with John Cardinal O'Connor, January 23, 1996).

Scrupulosity afflicts mostly Roman Catholics but also affects others such as Orthodox Jews, Protestants, and Muslims.¹ This book looks especially at Catholic scrupulosity, but the underlying themes and dynamics apply to all religions.² Scrupulosity has probably existed since the beginning of time, and religious writers have clearly defined it during the past five hundred years. The research leading to this book discovered that scrupulosity in Catholics is a unique manifestation of obsessive compulsive disorder. Over ten thousand people participated in this research, and more than one thousand completed intensive survey information.³ Examples of scrupulosity include:

- Martha, age forty-six, is a computer programmer. Martha stays at work after everyone has gone home. She feels she does not give her employer 100 percent effort during the day and staying late is an act of restitution. This annoys her husband.

- Robert, age twenty-three, goes to confession every week. He has “bad thoughts,” mostly in church, involving what he thinks is blasphemous. These trouble him greatly.
- Alicia, age seventy, stated, “I have been scrupulous for fifty years. It robbed my life of fun and joy.” Alicia worries about germs, particularly *after* she uses the toilet, because she fears she may contaminate others — a sin.
- Jake, age fifty-six, says his rosary exactly three times each morning. Doing this, he believes, keeps him from acting crazy at work.

There is an unrecognized presence of scrupulosity among the general population, as researchers Heidi Askin, Yves Paultre, and Royce White have discovered. Cardinal O’Connor agrees: “Priests who were trained prior to the Second Vatican Council at least had some sense of scrupulosity. They were taught about it in moral theology. They recognized it pretty quickly in the confessional” (Interview with John Cardinal O’Connor, January 23, 1996).

Some suggest that scrupulosity is less prevalent since Vatican II. Cardinal O’Connor offers a differing insight: “I think tremendous numbers of things are blamed on the Second Vatican Council. But this in my judgment is a complete misconstruction of the Council. A huge number of people talk about the spirit of the Second Vatican Council but you could walk down any street in New York, the most crowded street in New York, all day long and find only the tiniest handful of people who have read the documents from the Second Vatican Council.

In many cases, the sacrament of Penance, Reconciliation, and confession weren’t even treated. The whole idea of sin, as Dr. Menninger said, just kind of disappeared from our vocabulary and our conceptualization. Whatever happened to sin?

And I think that a number of seminaries were caught up in this and a certain number of seminarians, and therefore priests, were raised in this mentality. That was not the intention of the Second Vatican Council in my judgment at all.

Since Vatican II, the discussion on scrupulosity has waned, but scrupulosity still exists. I think readers might want to reflect briefly on what I suspect might be a reason.

A certain number of priests, a certain number of post-Vatican II priests, spent far less time in the confessional. I'm not saying this as an indictment. This is simply the way things were. They spent far less time in the confessional and a good bit of time in taking courses and sometimes pseudo-courses in counseling. Then some, certainly not all of these priests, in turn became, and this may sound harsh, pseudo-counselors instead of spiritual directors or confessors. Some of them, I regret to say, simply didn't know what they were doing. Some were merely mouthing a good bit of Carl Rogers material. They had no true philosophic or psychological understanding of the dynamics of the human personality. A lot of jargon and pop psychology about feeling right and how not to feel guilty and so on filled the air of the day.

You don't help a truly scrupulous individual by saying "Well, you shouldn't feel bad." That doesn't do it, and you can compound the scrupulosity with such an approach.

(Interview with John Cardinal O'Connor,
January 23, 1996)

This book suggests consideration of these approaches when treating scrupulosity: (1) behavior therapy; (2) medication; (3) directive and expert talk therapy; (4) knowledge of healthy and realistic religious practices; (5) encouragement of positive and healthy spirituality.

This book, written by a clinical psychologist, uses different methods to study scrupulosity. People suffering from scrupulosity participated in two studies. The first study examined scrupulosity and obsessive compulsive disorder and a host of other personality qualities. A second study, in 1995, focused on new medications available since 1989. These surveys, using scientific principles, offer a detailed exploration into this puzzling and bedeviling condition.

The information yielded from these surveys comprises only part of this story. The survey provided rich data concerning scrupulosity, but material from extremely diverse sources — old