

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

PUBLISHED EACH MONTH BY THE REDEMPТОRISTS

January 2013
Vol. 50, No. 1



Scrupulous Anonymous
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Integrative Spirituality

PART 1 OF 2

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

The experience of being a spiritual person isn't tied to a single religious expression or practice. As Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience."

Spirituality is a "transreligious" experience. Just as we can speak about Christian spirituality, we can also speak about Muslim spirituality, Jewish spirituality, and Hindu spirituality.

Christians emphasize specific components of our spiritual tradition as being essential. We describe our understanding of what it means to be a spiritual person

with two root words: the Hebrew *ruach* and the Greek the word *pneuma*, both of which mean breath, wind, or spirit and both of which are

equally applied to the human and the divine. With this grounding, Christians assert that acknowledging our spirituality and becoming aware that we are indeed spiritual beings involves the integration of body, mind, and spirit. We might go so far as to remind ourselves of St. Luke's assertion in Acts of the Apostles: "In him we live and move and have our being" (17:28).

To connect with the spiritual aspect of being human, we must look at our experience, relationships, and practices:

Experience Spiritual experiences can be dramatic or quite ordinary. Either way, they bring humans to some deeper understanding of the sense of the sacred in ordinary life: holding a baby and being aware of this fragile life as a gift from God, or standing on the back porch in the middle of the night, looking up into the night sky, and becoming aware of the immensity of the universe. A serious illness or unexpected personal challenge brings a person face to face with his or her own experience of humanity—to some parallel experience of the sacred and the mysterious.



Relationships Each person experiences life as relational, beginning with the experience of birth and ending in the experience of death. Along the way, we encounter all manner of people on their own journeys. Some of our relationships will be very positive and life-giving—for example, relationships with people who freely profess their love and caring for us. Still others can be challenging, even painful. It's hard to know we're not loved and appreciated by every person we encounter.

Practices Spiritual practices are intentional and specific actions designed to connect with an individual person's understanding of the divine, the sacred, and/or the mysterious. Such practices are usually deeply rooted in a particular culture or tradition or are easily identified with a religious expression (like our Catholic understanding and celebration of the Eucharist). Some practices are essential, like required ritual cleansing or purification. Some require community, while others are deeply personal and private. Many spiritual practices are best understood as heartfelt and deeply rooted within the person who practices them.



Balancing the Three Components

When we understand that spirituality is integrative, we strive to balance our experiences, our relationships, and our practices so that each complements and supports our united personhood. Take, for example, a spiritual practice that denies a person access to life-giving relationships. Isolating and insulating someone from other people might be an acceptable path for a monk, but it's suspect for other lifestyles. A spiritual practice that cuts off a person from family and friends and causes great consternation within the family structure needs to be more closely examined. It may be OK under some circumstances or for a determined period of time, but it's probably inappropriate for an extended period.

During our recent SA retreats, participants discussed these components. We came to a better understanding of how compulsive and obsessive behaviors can be manifested through our experiences, in our relationships, and in our individual spiritual practices. We clearly identified moments in which we experienced the presence of the sacred in ordinary and extraordinary moments. We recognized how compulsive and obsessive behaviors dramatically influence our relationships, whether a significant other actually understands what we're going through or merely suspects.

Finally, we acknowledged that we routinely struggle with specific spiritual practices like the sacrament of reconciliation. Other practices, like holy Communion, we may struggle with but understand the necessity of participating in—even when we feel fear—as a regular, necessary expression of our own spiritual lives.

Next month: Integrative Spirituality, Part 2

The Misunderstood Season

Adapted from *Bring Lent to Life: Activities and Reflections for Your Family*
by Kathleen M. Basi (Liguori Publications, © 2011).

I have a confession to make. Are you ready? OK, here goes: *I love Lent.*

Whew! Now that I've revealed myself to be a true Catholic geek and you've thrown the book across the room, I'll move on to why.

Lent is a season of contrasts. During Lent we prepare to celebrate the memorial of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection—the centerpiece of our Christian faith. We focus on fasting, almsgiving, and prayer.

But, mostly, we focus on giving things up and how unpleasant that can be.

Am I right?

This is also the time when earth hurtles through its miraculous odyssey of rebirth. At the start of the season, stark winter holds sway, but by its end, all the earth glories in an explosion of color.

Lent is a journey from death to life, both spiritually and physically. On Ash Wednesday, we strip the liturgy of its alleluias. We strip the sanctuary to its most basic elements. The Church asks us to come away to the “desert,” away from distractions and, in the simplicity of the season, to be renewed.

We are sinners, and we always will be, but penitence isn't a destination. *Repent* is a call to

action, an attitude that points toward reconciliation, toward holiness, toward renewal—in short, toward Easter. Even the dramatic, emotionally draining liturgies on Holy Thursday and Good Friday crackle with anticipation of the resurrection. In the midst of the Great Fast is plenty of room for joy. We don't have to spend the entire forty days focusing on misery.

Speaking of *forty*, let's talk about that

number. At some point during every

Lent, most people say, “Forty?”

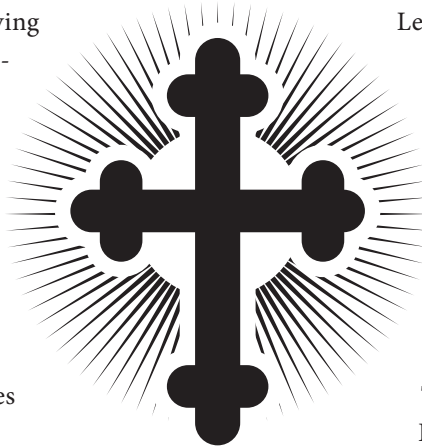
Is that all it is? It sure feels longer than forty days!”

Guess what? It's Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday is 46 days. Technically, Sundays don't fall within the fast. And technically, Lent ends on Wednesday of Holy Week.

Triduum is its own fast.

But to the vast majority of us who aren't liturgy geeks, Lent includes the whole works. So rather than getting stuck on the number forty, let's resolve to do as a wise man once advised me: to think of *forty* in the biblical (that is, symbolic) sense and journey together through some of the most important elements of our Christian faith.

Kate Basi's "Just Live It" column appears in each issue of Liguorian magazine.





SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS

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Q *Each year I struggle to make New Year's resolutions. Each year I finally determine a resolution, and then I break it after a few short weeks. Is it a sin to resolve to complete the action and then fail to do so?*

A New Year's resolutions are routinely broken by all sorts of people. It's part of the ritual. A resolution is more an expression of hope than a promise for action. It's fortunate that we're not morally bound to the successful completion of resolutions no matter how serious, needed, or comprehensive they may be.

There's no sin in breaking a resolution. There may be virtue in keeping it, but there's no potential for sin in any manner, shape, or form.

If you the process makes you anxious, why not make your resolution one you *can* fulfill: "I will not make any New Year's resolutions."

Q *Are we morally obligated to make sure we don't give our business to pharmacies that sell artificial birth control and family-planning devices? I'm confused about moral culpability and how it pertains to this decision.*

A No. You have no obligation to seek out a pharmacy that doesn't sell such devices, which is a good thing because I'm pretty sure you wouldn't be able to find one.

We live in a secular society, and not every person believes in the moral principles we do. You have no moral culpability if you shop at these stores, so please do so in peace and with a clear conscience.

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