

# Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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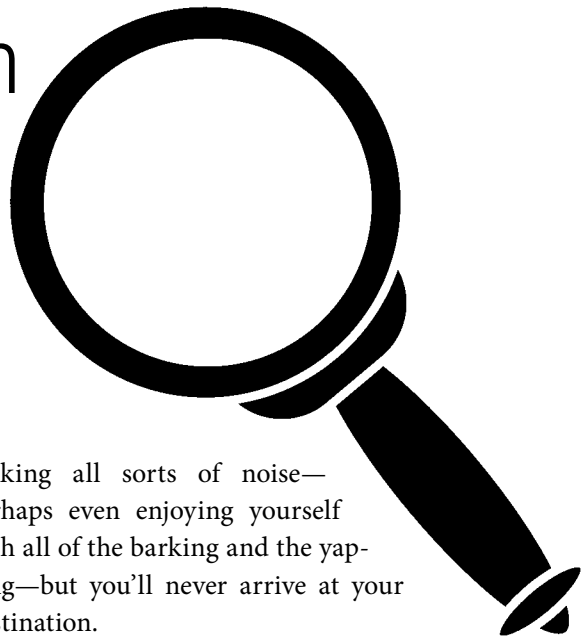
## Clarity of Perception

*Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR*

The spiritual masters tell a story that might be useful for our consideration. It's a story about the necessity to develop clarity of perception—the ability to clearly see. It's a story about bringing a specific point into focus and remaining fixed on the point, not in an obsessive or compulsive manner, but rather as a way to clearly mark the progression of our spiritual journey.

Standing outside the monastery one day, a younger monk asks an older monk, “Why do so many people begin the spiritual journey but do not persevere?” At that moment, a rabbit runs past the master and the questioning monk. A pack of dogs follows, yapping and barking. After a slight pause, another pack runs by. The older monk smiles and says to the younger monk, “Observe what happens next.” Sure enough, one of the packs returns to the village, yapping and barking. The master tells the young monk, “That pack of yapping, barking dogs is the same pack that ran by a minute ago. They never saw the rabbit—they just heard the barking.”

This story has many layers of meaning, but perhaps one of its lessons is this: Before you set out on a journey, it is very helpful to have an endpoint firmly in focus. If you don't, you'll find yourself



making all sorts of noise—perhaps even enjoying yourself with all of the barking and the yapping—but you'll never arrive at your destination.

### **Find your focus**



Even if you're not sure of your destination, you need a point to focus on. Sailors chart their course by fixing their instruments on the North Star so they have a reference point—something to fall back on—as their exploration begins. Focused perception, the ability to clearly see, is essential.

Perception plays a very important role in the Christian journey of growing in the spiritual life. Jesus consistently invited his apostles to develop a clear vision. The ability to focus on a single point

quickly became a required skill for men and women who followed the Lord.

One challenge that faced that early Church, according to Acts of the Apostles 15, was whether it was necessary to become Jewish before one could become Christian. The Jerusalem church under the leadership of the apostle James said yes, while the churches under the apostle Paul said no.

In the emotional deliberations that followed, a point of clarity emerged. Even as a fragile and newly formed community, these early Christians used the skills Jesus taught them to firmly focus on trying to see as Jesus would have seen.

Their eventual response to the dilemma? Ask only the minimum from the people who wanted to follow Jesus but who perceived circumcision to be a stumbling block, and do not require that which is impossible. This compromise opened the door to the growth of the Church throughout the world.

The Book of Revelation, which also emerged from the experience of the Christian community in the first century, gives us an entirely new way of seeing, a vision that requires great skills to stay focused.

## Focus on the kingdom



What emerges from this vision is something very important to the early Church and perhaps something we take for granted since it isn't an integral part of our experience: The new heavenly Jerusalem—where God dwells, where the fullness of the kingdom of God will be celebrated—will not have a temple, a single geographic location where God can be found. Instead, God will be present throughout the city.

In a very real sense, this assertion is another movement away from the early Jewishness of our Christian faith to a more universal perception of

the activity of God—or, if you want to understand it more concretely, it's why Christians visit the ancient temple wall in Jerusalem as a tourist attraction and not as the ultimate place of pilgrimage.

Returning to the Gospel again and again, we're asked to prepare ourselves to see and experience something Jesus tells us is essential for the formation of the kingdom of God. We're told in the Gospels that we are to prepare for the coming of the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit of God, in whom we will live and move and have our being. A Christian person who receives the gift of the Holy Spirit will be clearly focused on the kingdom of God—a person who, with the help of the Spirit, will be able to see as Jesus did, to act as Jesus acted, to love as Jesus loved. The experience of the Holy Spirit of God is intended to change everything, and that clearly brings into focus the clarity of life in the kingdom.

## Never lose sight



Like the apostles, we too are challenged and invited to perceive clearly. And if we spend time with each truth we're offered on our Christian spiritual journey, we will experience what it means to focus on the activity of God in our lives.

The examples in Scriptures, while vitally important in the formation of the early community, may not directly speak to our specific concerns and questions. Nevertheless, they help us recognize the importance of clearly focusing our attention on what is important and essential and of never losing sight of the final goal.

As the spiritual masters teach us, there is a huge difference between actually seeing the rabbit and just following the barking. One experience leads to life, the other only to senseless activity and ultimately to disappointment and frustration.

# Coping With Stress and Conflict

The following is adapted from *Manage the Mess of Family Stress: Gospel Solutions for Everyday Life* by Richard C. Brown, PhD (Liguori Publications, © 2011).

ASKED A GROUP OF FAMILIES AT MY PARISH, “Who makes this beautiful universe we see at night and the fruit trees we see during the day?” A nine-year-old immediately responded, “Jesus does!” That extraordinary wisdom went to the heart of all God’s love does for us. God created the universe, God makes our daily bread, God is one of us...all is God’s love for us.

Does God want stress and conflict in our daily lives? Who wants stress and conflict for a loved one? No one, of course. So why do we have stress and conflict in our own lives? The answer: We do it to each other and to ourselves. Even God in Jesus suffered stress and conflict as a human. Fortunately, Jesus left us with logical, practical examples of how to cope.

When I was a high school sophomore, I decided to break a long-distance hiking record with two buddies. That June, we would trek from the Phoenix Desert into the north country full of Arizona’s forests and streams. When my parents found out, they said, “You want to cross the desert in the summer? What about the rattlesnakes? No way, Richard!”

I persisted, and they reluctantly gave me permission. And we did break the record, even though one of my friends ended up in the hospital with bloodied feet. But my parents were right about the rattlesnakes—we survived five separate encounters.

I wanted to be in charge of my own life. I wanted to rely on my own decisions. My parents’ judgment was more sound than mine but, fortunately, they took the risk of letting me have this experience where I had to trust myself and my own decisions.

Both my parents and I wanted to be in charge of the situation. This, of course, created stress and conflict. But the thrill of the adventure remains with me to this day. My desert experience taught me to trust my own God-given intelligence. The stress of dealing with different personalities—whether in the family or at work—begins when we leave the womb.

No one is identical to another. God gives each of us a unique combination of skills. The shadow side of that gift is that those differences also tend to create the most conflict and stress in our relationships.

Understanding this dynamic allows us to pour the concrete foundation on which we can build the confidence, hope, peace, and joy God wants for us.

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**The stress of dealing with different personalities—whether in the family or at work—begins when we leave the womb.**

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# SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

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**Q** *I think one critical issue in being healed from scrupulosity is a belief in God's love. I pray every day, "Help me to believe God loves me." But why does God love me?*

**A** God loves you because God loves himself, and you are part of God. If God didn't love you, that would mean God didn't love himself, which cannot be true because God is perfect, whole, and entire. God also loves you, as the Scripture teaches us, because God delights in all his creation. We are pleasing to God, our creator, the source of all our love and life.

Your prayer is on target, but to bring it more into focus, you could say, "Father, please give me the grace to accept the gift of your love in my life, because I often struggle with the belief that you love me." That's just a thought.

God bless you. Please be at peace.

**Q** *I continually struggle with past sins. The older I get, the more aware I am of how sinful I was and how negligent I've been in properly confessing my sins throughout my life. How will I ever get to the point where I will know all my sins have been forgiven?*

**A** An anxious conscience often becomes more brittle and fragile as we age. Fear builds on fear, and little fears that were once quite manageable become more difficult to manage.

The solution to this spiraling dilemma is to take the focus off yourself, your fear, your anxiety, and perhaps even your sinfulness, and simply learn to accept Jesus at his word, spoken through the minister of the Church.

Through the ministry of the Church, may God grant you pardon and peace. I absolve you from your sins.

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