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PART 2 OF 5

Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous (2013)

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In the July issue, we examined the first two commandments for the scrupulous (2013): “Without exception, you shall not confess sins you have already confessed” and “You shall confess only sins that are clear and certain.” These commandments effectively isolate the issue of doubt in scrupulosity. Commandments 3 and 4 build on this.



You shall not repeat your penance or any of the words of your penance after confession—for any reason.

Fr. Don Miller, who first published a version of this commandment in 1968, often saw people with scrupulosity doubting the efficacy of their confession unless they’d prayed or fulfilled their penance perfectly. Fr. Miller tried to reassure his readers that perfection was not required—that their effort, complete or incomplete, was all that was required.

By stating clearly *for any reason*, I’ve strengthened the original commandment by eliminating the excuses people might use to repeat penance(s).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* clearly teaches that “Absolution takes away sin” (1459). Within the sacrament of reconciliation, it’s the confession of sins and the absolution of the priest—not

the perfect or imperfect act of the person who confesses—that take away the sin.

Penance is an act “performed by the penitent in order to repair the harm caused by sin and to re-establish habits befitting a disciple of Christ” (1494). It is distinct from the absolution of sin and the reception of the sacrament of reconciliation. Absolution is *not* dependent on the completion of penance, whether performed deliberately or accidentally, perfectly or imperfectly.

Let there be no confusion in this matter. The Church teaches that the only perfect remedy for sin—the only perfect satisfaction for sin—is found in Jesus Christ, “who alone expiated our sins once and for all” (1460). According to the Council of Trent (1551), as quoted in the *Catechism*,

The satisfaction that we make for our sins, however, is not so much ours as though it were not done through Jesus Christ. We who can do nothing ourselves, as if just by ourselves, can do all things with the cooperation of “him who strengthens” us (DS 1691, Philippians 4:13).

Even the most perfect act of penance performed with due diligence, without distraction, and with

no stumbling upon words or concepts, would be in some sense imperfect. Only Jesus Christ, through his passion, death, and resurrection, is capable of the perfect act of satisfaction. We can participate in his saving action, but it's *his* saving action, not ours. It's not dependent on our thoughts or feelings; it's pure gift—sanctifying grace, manifested and received.



You shall not worry about breaking your pre-Communion fast unless you put food and drink in your mouth and swallow it in the same way as when you eat a meal.

Much of the anxiety about breaking the fast before Communion centers on extraneous matters. For example, lipstick and lip balm aren't food. Prescription medicines aren't food even if they're flavored. Snowflakes aren't food.

You cannot break your fast unless you deliberately choose to eat in the same way you'd choose to eat a meal or a snack. No second thoughts are allowed regarding accidental swallowing of things that aren't considered food.

In any event, no penalty of sin is attached to the breaking of the fast. The fast is *not* a moral obligation as such; it's a devotional practice intended to show additional respect for the sacrament of the Eucharist in the form of holy Communion. Here's what *The Code of Canon Law* says:

919. §1. A person who is to receive the Most Holy Eucharist is to abstain for at least one hour before holy communion from any food and drink, except for only water and medicine. §2. A priest who celebrates the Most Holy Eucharist two or three times on the same day can take something before the second or third celebration even if there is less than one hour between them. §3. The elderly, the infirm, and those who care for them can receive the Most Holy Eucharist even if they have eaten something within the preceding hour.

That the *Code* itself notes exceptions to the application of the devotional practice clearly underlines the practice as a discipline of the Church. It's most certainly *not* a moral obligation that can't be dispensed with and that must be upheld with due diligence.

Even in the most enthusiastically conservative interpretations of this law in all the journals I consulted, I was unable to discover any reference to sin or any canonical penalty. All authors agree that the pre-Communion fast is primarily a devotional practice.

People with scrupulosity are not usually prone to carelessness in these matters and should free themselves with God's grace from the anxiety associated with this devotional practice.

Next month: Commandments 5 and 6



God Knows Who You Are

The following is adapted from *Remembering God: Resting in the Midst of Life* by Mary Katharine Deeley (Liguori Publications, © 2011).

I once had a spiritual director who suggested I pray Psalm 139 every day for a month and continually invite God to reveal what God knew about me. Every day I reflected that God knew my thoughts, my *going out and my coming in*, and most of all, that God had known me from the very beginning of my being.

“What do you know about me?” I asked, pleaded, prayed. Occasionally good times and good acts would come to mind—places and situations in which I had done my best, and both God and I knew it. At other moments (and there were far more of these), the places, times, and relationships where I had missed the mark were a bit more evident.

I wasn’t sure whether it was good or bad that God knew me so well. Certainly, I thought, there were issues better left undiscussed. I shared many of these findings with my director, who said, “God knows all that and created you anyway and continues to be with you even today. What do you make of that?”

I was caught. I realized that the mystery of who I was and who I was becoming was not a mystery to God. I could only stand in profound

awe that God could know me that well and not turn away.

As long as we carry ourselves with us, there is no place we can go that God does not know us. We can change jobs, move far away, or start new lives as couples or on our own. We can try to erase the past or refuse to talk about it, good or bad, and God still knows the whole of it.

That may be uncomfortable at times. But the thought of such faithfulness means we are in it—God and us—for the long haul. And in a way, it makes the journey easier.

More important, God knows the *possibility* of us. God already sees the gift we can be when we are fully open to grace, and God invites us to live into that possibility, rejoicing over every step that takes us closer, no matter how small it may seem to us.

The whole of Psalm 139 is an acknowledgment and a praise of God’s universal presence and the impossibility of finding a place where God is not. I think this is why the psalm is a favorite of so many, and one of mine as well.





SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS

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Q *Is it a sin to unfriend a personal contact in social media? I like this man, but I don't support his politics, and I don't want a constant reminder.*

A This question was never asked of early directors of this newsletter! It's a good example of how things change.

It's not a sin to unfriend a person on social media. It says nothing about your respect for that person as a child of God. Friending or unfriending is simply a choice of the kind of information you want to receive. Nothing more and nothing less is intended or understood.

Q *My dog recently died. He was a faithful pet and friend for seventeen years, and I miss him. Is it a sin to pray he's in heaven?*

A There is no sin in this matter. Grief and mourning center on the reality of loss. We experience grief whenever we experience loss of companionship, and to grieve is totally normal. It's also normal to hope for a renewal, a healing of all of our relationships as part of the experience of eternal life. The Church has no specific teaching one way or the other about whether pets join us in heaven. Why not enjoy a hope that they will?



OCD RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY

Nova Southeastern University is studying scrupulous OCD. For more information, visit our website: mission.liguori.org/newsletters/scrupanon.htm.

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