

# Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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## Undeserved Mercy

*by Fr. Thomas M. Santa*

**T**he Emperor Napoleon had a rule that any soldier who were absent without leave would be shot if captured. This rule was enforced without exception until a soldier who happened to be the seventeen-year-old son of Napoleon's cook ran away. When he was captured, his mother asked Napoleon for mercy. He said, "Woman, your son doesn't deserve mercy." She replied, "Yes, of course, you're right. He doesn't deserve mercy. If he deserved it, it would no longer be mercy." Napoleon responded, "Well, then, I will have mercy." And he spared the woman's son.

Mercy isn't mercy if it's deserved. A gift isn't a gift if it's deserved. In our human relationships we tend to choose gifts based on merit, and we sometimes mistakenly apply the same principle to our relationship with God.

We recognize the gift of life, the gift of grace, and the gift of forgiveness with little or no effort and easily identify these as God-given. Other gifts from God are a little more difficult to discern because they're well disguised—sometimes so well disguised that it takes us a lifetime to recognize them as gifts.

What comes to us from God is totally undeserved, but it still calls for a response.

**W**hen we respond to God's gift of awareness and insight—through grace, also an unearned and unmerited gift from God—we begin to see life from a different perspective. We begin to see the many paradoxes in God's ways of working with us and inviting us to enter more and more into relationship with him.

This is why we gather in church, in community with others who have also responded to the invitation. We might think of our response as primarily obligation, but it's not. Only through the power of God's grace can we gather at each moment, at this time, in each place. We permit, in faith, God's grace and love to be made manifest in the manner and with the timing God intends, not the timing we intend. That's a hard lesson to learn, but it's well worth the effort.

Human beings often find it difficult to fully accept and understand that we're not in charge. We have just enough intelligence, just enough talent, and just enough power to think we're in charge,

but we're not. We are not the creator; we are the creatures.

Of course, we have moments when we recognize this essential truth—in times of tragedy, when we're challenged beyond our skills and abilities, when we're at a loss. We struggle to make sense of the situation. If we fit it into a nice little category to help us understand and comprehend it, we feel like we again have control over what is happening.

This attempt to interpret and control is a distraction, but it's not a sin.

Scrupulosity is a harmful distraction that focuses our attention on something that's an illusion, an effective distraction from important, necessary, and even messy aspects of daily life.

Scrupulosity magnifies the allure of illusion. Maintaining the illusion is not a sin. It's a symptom of an affliction that deprives us of our capacity to act and choose fully and freely.

**I**f the Emperor Napoleon could be convinced of the need for mercy in a situation in which there was no relationship, no care and concern for the other person, imagine the mercy we can expect from God. God's unending care and concern for each person is motivated only by love.

Unwavering love and mercy are pure gift. They cannot be earned. They can only be gracefully received and celebrated. They are freely given, and each of us can experience them every day.

### **Scrupulosity Research Project**

A marriage and family therapy student at Mount Mercy University in Cedar Rapids, Iowa is studying similarities in behaviors and attitudes in people with scrupulosity and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and she'd appreciate it if you would participate by completing a 10- to 15-minute confidential survey. Participants will be entered into a drawing for a \$20 amazon.com gift card. If you are 18 or older and would like more information, please visit [tinyurl.com/qa99Iga](https://tinyurl.com/qa99Iga).

# Reflection

The following is adapted from *In the Midst of Noise: An Ignatian Retreat in Everyday Life* by Michael Campbell-Johnston (Liguori Publications, © 2010).

God forgives immediately and completely without harboring any grudges or imposing any punishments. God's attitude is summed up beautifully in the behavior of the father in the parable of the prodigal son. Even though the father would have been perfectly justified in imposing some sort of penalty on the son, and even though the son seems to have repented mainly because he was hungry and unhappy in the country where he had gone, the father pays no attention to any of this. He not only gives his son an immediate and complete pardon but welcomes him with great joy and happiness.

For, as Jesus himself said, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance" (Luke 15:7). And the whole of his life is full of notable examples of how readily and completely he forgave sins—the good thief, Mary Magdalene, Zacchaeus, and so many others.

How then should you and I react to this loving kindness of God?

The first thing is to accept it in wonder and humility. One commentator on the Ignatian Exercises has said that our attitude must be "to stand without defenses before the gratuity of God's love." "Without defenses" means not putting up any barriers or hiding behind ex-

cuses, but being ready to follow whatever path God indicates.

This will call for a conversion. Not a conversion in the sense of finding a new faith, but in acknowledging that there is something which needs changing in your life. This applies to all of us because no one can claim, if honest, that nothing must be changed in his or her life.

A retreat is precisely to help us find out what it is that needs to be changed and to give us the strength and courage to take the practical steps to change it. This can certainly cost us, but it is an accurate measure of our love for God in return for God's love of us. As another commentator on the Ignatian Exercises has put it, our desire for conversion "arises out of the literally heartbreaking experience of being loved and forgiven."

And we can only fully experience this, not in our minds or understanding, but in our hearts and our feelings. Hence, it is important to seek this grace from God.

This is how God will help us move toward the conversion we are looking for. Pray today for this personal conversion of the heart, for this heart of flesh that God offers. In your prayer today, reflect on the way God forgives you, and therefore, how you too should respond.



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# MAILBOX

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NEWSLETTER@LIGUORI.ORG

**Q** *Is it appropriate for a person with scrupulosity to regularly receive the sacrament of anointing? Our pastor says only the sick and infirm are eligible. Does scrupulosity meet that requirement?*

**A** Yes, the scrupulous condition meets the requirements for the reception of the sacrament of anointing. I personally counsel, from a pastoral perspective, that a person with this affliction should receive this sacrament of healing and reconciliation as often as possible. You can receive the sacrament with a clear conscience.

**Q** *Is a "tender conscience" the same thing as scrupulosity?*

**A** Yes and no. In the moral manuals up until the last fifteen years or so, the terms were used interchangeably. Now, however, we recognize two types of scrupulosity. One is "tender conscience," a curable form of scrupulosity caused by poor or incomplete catechesis. The other form of scrupulosity is associated with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), a disease that requires medical treatment as well as pastoral counseling. Traditional remedies work for tender conscience, but not for OCD-related scrupulosity. Our SA newsletter is useful for people with a tender conscience, but it's intended for people with OCD-related scrupulosity.

[ScrupulousAnonymous.org](http://ScrupulousAnonymous.org)



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