

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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The Most Loving Response

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa

I prefer our December newsletter to be joyful as we anticipate the feast of the Incarnation, Christmas. At first glance, it may seem that this year's December column breaks that tradition, but this story is actually a Christmas gift that can bring you a lifetime of joy if you take its message to heart.

I recently had an e-mail conversation with a Scrupulous Anonymous member in which my participation was limited to reading a bombardment of e-mails demanding clarification and guidance. He was struggling with the diagnosis that his behaviors were caused by obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). He insisted his struggles were not behavioral and emotional, but spiritual: the pursuit of vain glory, taking too much pride in characteristics or achievements.

Experience has taught me how these conversations will end, but I nevertheless hoped this one would be different, that my participation would be helpful. I was lulled into a false sense that I was simply answering a question, even though I knew in my heart that my efforts were useless. Questions asked by people with scrupulosity powered by OCD

are followed by more questions instead of acceptance; more expended energy instead of less; more anxiety instead of peace; and, finally, an explosion of frustration at the uselessness of the process.

The kindest and most pastoral response I could have provided was none at all. It's very difficult to ignore questions, especially when you can feel the questioner's pain and anxiety, but no response is *the most loving response*. The emotional energy OCD generates can be overwhelming, with a seemingly harmless question quickly escalating into the full-blown, raging manifestation of fear, anxiety, and dread of sin and eternal damnation.

And that's what happened here. I answered the first question and received an explosive reply complete with the results of frantic research, links to articles, and more questions that led to even more questions, research, and anxiety.

On one level, the depth of the research was impressive, but on another level it was disheartening. I could only imagine the anxiety and pain that had fueled the relentless search for the false promise each link symbolized. What I

was witnessing was not a research project; it was a full-blown manifestation of OCD behavior that was destructive in both obsession and compulsion. It was clear that I would have to be the one to pull the plug and refuse to participate in the destructive behavior.

As expected, the SA member's anger and disappointment were swift. I had interrupted the process that he believed would have led to an answer if only I had cooperated.

The chain had been broken, but the pain and suffering hadn't ended. In fact, abandoned in his struggle, the SA member now felt even more isolated.

The realization that little good comes from participating in OCD-manifested behavior and emotion is quite discouraging to

confessors, caregivers, friends, families, and spouses of people with OCD. Knowing it must be played out and endured until the energy is dissipated—after which it will soon start up again—is the primary frustration experienced by everyone involved because it makes them feel helpless.

Let me repeat what I've already said so often: OCD/scrupulosity cannot be healed or tempered by will power alone, prayer alone, or research alone. It can be tempered only with an integrated approach using variety of healing tools. All of the tools must be used, and they must be used together.

That is the most honest and loving response I can offer. It might not be the Christmas gift you're looking for, but in both the short run and the long run, it's a gift you'll long treasure if you take this advice.

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Reflection

The following is adapted from [Winter Meditations](#) by John Bartunek, LC, SThD
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Historians don't know whether December 25 was Jesus' actual birthday, but the commemoration of the midnight birth of the Savior in the darkest days of Palestine's winter has always been associated with the power of hope. Just as winter darkness must gradually recede to allow summer brightness to return, so too must the moral darkness of sin and suffering recede with the advent of God's saving grace wherever it makes an entrance.

One symbol of hope that appears frequently in early Christian art is the anchor. Early Christians knew that faith didn't remove all trouble—struggles, persecution, sickness, and death are companions of both believers and unbelievers. The message of Jesus and his crucifixion and resurrection gave knowledge of a life beyond this fallen world, a life in which suffering would cease and joy would be unending. God's grace and mercy are available to lead every believer through the present darkness into the light of eternal life.

An anchor gives stability to a seafaring vessel. It grounds it amid turbulent waters. It's an eloquent symbol of the steadfastness, endurance, and dependability that God's love brings to any human heart that accepts it. No matter how dark things may get, no matter how long the darkness lasts, the light will never be vanquished.

What is your anchor? What are you hoping for, and how do you hope to get it? What hopes do you nourish by calling them to mind and mulling them over? The powers of darkness are real, and they never tire of trying to jade us and lull us into cynicism, useless criticism, and the deadening spiritual anemia of quiet despair.

We must believe that all the darkness, all the failures, all the complications, all the messes, and all the tangles of life in this fallen world are not the conclusion of the story. There is—and there always will be—an end to the darkness.

This, too, is a lesson to be learned from the wisdom of winter.



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MAILBOX

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Q *Perhaps it's because of the holidays, but I've been bombarded with so-called premium gifts that accompany appeals for donations. All the causes are worthy. What am I supposed to do with these premiums?*

A You have no obligation to return any unsolicited gift or to make a donation. Organizations realize that not everyone will respond. Even if you don't make a donation, you're free to use the premium or throw it away. The choice is yours, pure and simple.

Q *I'm very attached to my dog. She's been my faithful companion for more than fourteen years. When she dies, will she go to heaven, or is there another place for faithful companions like her?*

A No one knows, but if I were to speculate, I'd say yes, your faithful companion will go to heaven. I prefer to err on the side of generosity and magnanimity when speaking of spiritual things because that's the way God is revealed to us through Jesus.

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