



SA Mailbox

BY FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSSR

It has been a while since I devoted an entire newsletter to questions submitted to the SA mailbox. As summer ends and the seasons change, this seems like an opportune time to do so. Your letters have always been a popular feature of the newsletter, so I apologize for being remiss in engaging in this kind of dialogue with you. I hope to do better in the future. In the meantime, please keep submitting your questions, and I will do my best to respond in a timely manner.

Q. *I believe I committed the sin of detraction four years ago by telling my parents about a woman we know who drove someone to an abortion clinic. At the time, I didn't realize I was sinning. Am I still obliged to repair this? How would I do so? I am agonizing over going to hell if I am supposed to repair this situation and I do not.*

First of all, you did not commit the very serious sin of detraction. Its intention is to inflict serious and permanent harm to the reputation of a person. Detraction is a multilayered sin that engages advance planning and sustained and deliberate focus in order to accomplish the end result. What you did was report to your parents something that you observed. Yes, transporting someone to a clinic for an abortion was and is a serious matter, but your simple reporting of this action in a conversation is not a sin. It is best understood as a conversation about a serious matter. That is all.

I also would counsel you to think about your



fear of going to hell, particularly your fear of going to hell for an action that you were not even aware of. This is a disturbing idea of God that seems out of line with the Abba Father that Jesus speaks about. In fact, this idea of God is even more severe than some of the representations of Yahweh featured in the Old Testament. It simply is not supported by our faith tradition and understanding of God. I think it is better understood as a powerful example of your fear and anxiety about sin.

Q. *How does a person with scrupulosity discern impressions from the Holy Spirit? I have read from sources like Fr. Jacques Philippe and Francis de Sales that we need to follow impressions from the Holy Spirit. This often leads me down a road that is a lot more subjective and hard to navigate with the issues I have. How does a person deal with decision making if there really is a perfect will of God?*

“You have summarized one of the processes that is engaged in by a person with scrupulosity: the back and forth, the questions and the doubts.”

In my experience and pastoral ministering, I have come to the understanding that the problem for scrupulous men and women is not necessarily discovered in trying to discern the will of God. The real issue is trying to discern the perfect will of God. Discovering the perfect will of God is an impossible task. God does not require perfection but rather sincere effort and faith that is anchored and secured in hope in his love and in the power of his sanctifying grace. Even people who suffer with scrupulosity are capable of being sincere in their efforts and desires to follow the will of God. Thankfully, that is all that is required of us.



have counseled me to not share my experience of this sin, including with the person I believe I hurt by my actions. Since the death of my sister a few weeks ago, the shame and guilt keep getting worse. How can I get past all of this and stop being extremely hard on myself and, dare I say, hating myself?

It sounds to me as if you are carrying a very big load. I believe that you may benefit significantly from the experience of professional counseling to help you with your struggle. You have many layers to unravel here and put into a more healthy perspective. I think you might have part of the picture, but you may be “missing the forest because of the trees,” to borrow from an old expression. There is no need to live like this and carry all of this guilt and shame. I suggest that you begin, if you have not already done so, the therapeutic journey of recovery that you would most certainly benefit from. All of us here at SA will keep you in our thoughts and in our prayers.

Q. *I had been wondering whether a particular sin I committed is mortal or not. In thinking it through, I realized that the sin I am worried about is obviously a symptom of my scrupulosity, and if it isn't, I know that God will still forgive me. I want to please God, and if I knew for certain what God wanted me to do, I would do it in a heartbeat. Since I do not, I have to pick the path that leads to freedom from this terrible affliction. Certainly that will be his will. I say often, “Jesus, I trust in you.” It is time to start meaning it, I think.*

I love the way that God's grace is demonstrated and the way that grace works in the people of God! You struggled with your question and with the anxiety that it provoked, but you nonetheless arrived at the correct answer and the path that will lead to freedom and peace. What a blessing you have experienced. It is a good lesson for each of us.

Q. *I have suffered from scrupulosity and perfectionism for most of my life, but it has deepened recently as a result of a serious sin I committed twice in six months. The sin has been confessed several times, but I am still obsessed about it. Several priests*

Q. *Are there any resources for helping scrupulous people keep their jobs? I am having a really hard time with scruples affecting my employment status. I have not been able to keep a job for more than six months. I also feel I can never approach the sacraments because I have to sin in order to keep my employment.*

To the best of my knowledge, there are very few jobs that people could have that would consistently place them in a position where they would be sinning constantly. It is not that I cannot imagine such a place of employment, but it is rather that I sincerely doubt if you would ever apply for such a position in the first place. I think you are experiencing acute fear and anxiety about sin that is placing you in a position where you are suffering in the

manner you described. Jesus and the Church do not require this kind of suffering in order for you to achieve the fullness of life. The position you are in is an extreme example of the scrupulous condition and its consequences. I pray that you seek the professional counseling and guidance that will provide you with immediate and essential relief and clarity in your life. You need this kind of help desperately, and I hope that you have courage to seek it out.

Q. *This morning (Friday), I took a sin to my confessor that I had committed on Wednesday. Thursday morning, when I attended daily Mass, I received holy Communion [because] I had determined that the sin was not mortal but was rather a venial sin. This morning, I changed my mind about the seriousness of the sin and decided to include it in my confession. Did I gravely sin when I received Communion on Thursday morning? It seems to me that I did not, but I am not sure.*

You have summarized one of the processes that is engaged in by a person with scrupulosity: the back and forth, the questions and the doubts. I can say with certainty that it is descriptive of a scrupulous condition because a person who did not suffer with scrupulosity would have discarded the thought once his or her initial discernment was completed. On the other hand, you kept revisiting

the issue again and again. All that being said, you are correct. You did not gravely sin, because the requirements for mortal sin were not present, nor were they engaged. You recognized this from the start and, thankfully, with God's grace, made the right decision. Keep up the good work!

Q. *I discovered a prayer from the Armenian Orthodox tradition that I believe will be helpful to pray for people who suffer with scrupulosity. The prayer was composed by St. Gregory of Narek, a monk and an Armenian mystic who was named a doctor of the Roman Catholic Church in 2015. My translation and slight revision follows:*

Lord, take me out of my prison and free me from my bonds. Remove my chains and rescue me from drowning. Free me from anxiety and release me from the irons that bind me. Deliver me from my preoccupations and banish my doubts. Console my sadness and calm my vexation. Dispel my afflictions and quiet my agitation. Cure me of my tears and stop my sighing. Drive away my lamentations and heal my sobbing. Amen.

What a beautiful and emotional prayer. The imagery is very strong and descriptive of this kind of mental anguish and suffering. Thank you for taking the time to share this prayer with all of us. ✨

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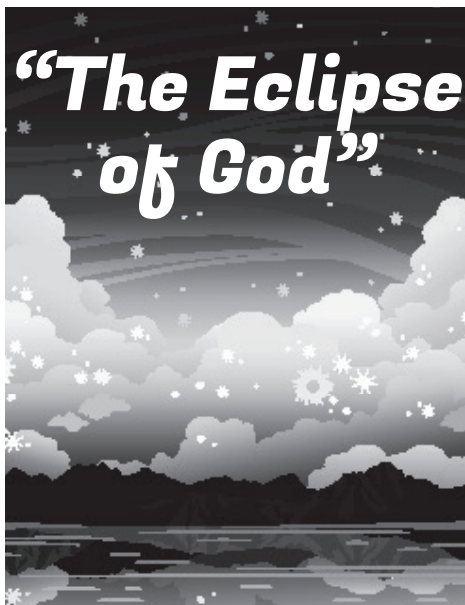
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Mental health professionals try to distinguish between fear and anxiety. Fear is a realistic response to a real threat, like feeling scared when we are diagnosed with a serious illness. Anxiety, on the other hand, is a feeling of apprehension about an unidentified threat: like panic disorders that involve severe attacks of torment, which seem to come out of nowhere and lead to physical symptoms such as sweating, a sense of choking, and palpitations.

In normal everyday language, however, people do not distinguish between fear and anxiety when they try to name their feelings of unease or disquiet. But what are these feelings connected to? What is the source of this unease and dread?...

The principal source of anxiety and distress is separation from loved figures, or the threat of separation. Certainly, anxiety seems to be related to expectations of loss of love and approval—living in dread of being abandoned by our loved ones, apprehension about being utterly rejected by the people we respect, feelings of inferiority, fearing the disintegration of our personal relationships, feelings of isolation and loneliness, feeling scared about losing our essential values in life.

We can all add to this litany because all of us have shared something of these feelings of dread at some time in our lives...We all feel anxious at some time in our lives, and when there is no specified object, the anxiety



can deepen, so we can end up in a circle of desperation feeling anxious about being anxious....

The human challenge is learning to live with anxiety, accepting it as our subjective and often appropriate response to the ways we interact with people and our world, and to be free under its pressures. How do we do this as Christians?...

In Gethsemane we watch an anxious Jesus, greatly distressed and troubled: “He was in such agony and he prayed so fervently that his sweat became like drops of blood

falling on the ground” (Luke 22:44). He begs his friends to stay awake with him and begs God to release him. As the story develops, Jesus appears to be abandoned by both, suffering the profound anxiety of separation. In the darkness we hear the terrifying silence, what Martin Buber called “the eclipse of God.” On Golgotha the anxiety of separation becomes the anxiety of abandonment in the death cry of Jesus as he experiences abandonment by God: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

The Gospel story becomes a compelling source of teaching and liberation when we can connect our own fitful lives to its narrative insights. Crossing over into the Jesus story and returning to our own can be not only insightful but also freeing. ✨

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