



A Change in Perception

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The ancient story that is preserved in the Book of Genesis informs us that of all the trees in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were obsessed with one. Their interest leads me to ask, “What is it about our ability to look beyond the forest and zero in on one tree, and in the process, to no longer see the forest?” Clearly the sin of Adam and Eve is also our shared sin.

How often in life have you found yourself thinking about one experience, one person, one particular job or task, and then judge everything else about yourself based on this single perception? For example, just because something didn’t work out the way that you hoped, you now see everything about life as a failure. Or perhaps someone you love doesn’t love you the way you want to be loved,

so you judge all your relationships as no good and yourself a failure.

Perhaps none of you have had such experiences, but maybe a couple of you know what I’m talking about. Our ability to make mountains out of mole hills, to make rash decisions, to become depressed and withdrawn, to make judgments and sweeping generalizations as a result of one event and thus zeroing in on one tree and ignoring the entire forest can, unfortunately, operate in our lives.

Theology, which is one way we talk about God and explore the mystery of God, is most certainly not exempt from the human experience. In fact, we would recognize a theology that is devoid of human experience as empty, lacking in inspiration and spiritual nourishment.



Sacred Scripture is filled with stories and examples of how people experience this notion of focusing on one tree. I've already referred to one in Genesis (3:1-8). Adam and Eve's obsession with the tree led them to choose to eat its fruit, which brought sin into the world.

Of course, we have no any idea what comprised the real event that led to the couple's eviction from the Garden. It's probably safe to assume that the scriptural metaphor actually was made up of more than one event or choice. However, there is something in the human experience and relationship with God that has led human beings to a long-held conviction that our relationship with God is somewhat less than what it is intended to be.

In the consistent theology of St. Paul with which we're familiar, the apostle often makes it clear that "through one person sin entered the world....But the gift [of Christ]...brought acquittal" (Romans 5:12, 16). It has long been correctly observed that this theology is good news. But we must also admit that, as a result of this theology, there has been an operating perception within the Church and each of us that religious practice is primarily focused on sin.

We often understand religion as the practice of learning how to avoid sin, becoming free from sin, and being forgiven of sin on those occasions when we have succumbed to temptation. According to this limited point of view, eventually we arrive at death, making sure it is at that point in our life when we have been signed, sealed, and delivered as free from sin and in need only of a little purgatory and not the big hell of eternity. Is this yet another example of the human person concentrating and obsessing on one part of the experience of the relationship between God and humanity, and in the process perhaps losing sight of the forest?

In today's Church, some voices weakly proclaim that perhaps we're missing the "big picture." These new voices suggest that by concentrating on sin we

have lost sight of an even bigger event in the relationship between God and his people. This bigger event is the Incarnation of God into our world. In other words, despite our human obsession, or maybe even because of our insistence that we are separated from God, God determined, once and for all to end this perceived separation by becoming one of us. In a real sense, how can God, who is now incarnate in the human person through Jesus, be separated from himself?

If you let this reality sink in for a few moments, the truth of what it proclaims becomes obvious, powerful, and life-giving for each of us. While humans have been running around determining how we have become separated from God and what we need to do to reunite with God, our Lord, in the person of Jesus, cut through all of our methods, all of our ideas, all of our perceptions, all of our obsessions, and freely became incarnate in our world. If we would somehow come to the point in our lives where we could open our eyes and see, we would notice the incarnate reality of what it means to say that God, in the person of Jesus, became a human being. That has to mean something, doesn't it?

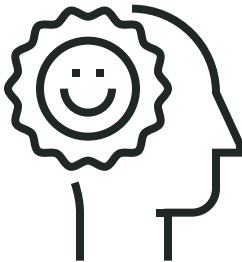
During this time of Lent, instead of spending all of our time thinking about how we are separated from God and reviewing again and again the stories of how that perceived separation took place, perhaps we could better use our energy to let the reality of the Incarnation sink in. What does it mean for humanity that God has become a human person, that God has freely entered a world that we see as somehow less than perfect and godlike and that somehow needs to be fixed?

By embarking on this journey, we're not rejecting what we've been taught and what we hold to be true and essential. Instead, we're attempting to become free of our desire to zero in on one thing, one person, and one experience and simply try to see our world the way God sees us. ✨

The True Self

In a healthy individual, the sense of self is rooted in reality. In other words, the identity we understand ourselves to bear matches up, more or less, to the collective view of who and what we are with respect to feedback from the world. We have a more or less accurate perception of our attributes, strengths, and weaknesses. There is little self-delusion.

Good self-esteem means that one respects and values oneself—as we all need to do—to be healthy. The feeling of regarding oneself as worthless is one of the most destructive and desolating of all human experiences. But to be healthy, our evaluation of ourselves must be balanced and based on accurate self-perception.



If we tell ourselves we are wonderful, clever, and successful, but we have no achievements to back this up and others see us as dull, foolish, and ordinary, we are setting ourselves up for a thousand attacks on our self-esteem each day. We must fight off threatening feedback from reality in order to maintain our inflated view of ourselves.

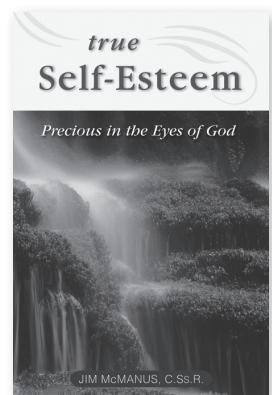
Conversely, if we focus entirely on our failings, overlooking our strengths, we are equally out of touch with reality. If we do this, we bring ourselves low, where a more balanced view would paint a different picture. We also need to remember that:

- Self-esteem, our very self-image, is not a constant thing.
- Self-esteem can fluctuate with events, over minutes or years.
- Self-esteem can change as our skills, insight, and values change—or as they fail to change and develop to meet fresh circumstances or our new roles in life.

It is important to remember that as spiritual creatures, precious in God's eyes, we are eternal and constant. God knows us. Our basic essence is unique, precious, beloved, and anticipated by God from the beginning of time and will remain forever.

At this level, our understanding of ourselves starts, not from catching a glimpse of ourselves in other people's eyes, but from seeing our true selves through the eyes of God. We are precious just as we are. In the eyes of God, there is no cruel rejection, no possibility of failure, death, or decay. There is only the danger of failing to find or failing to acknowledge that true self, failing to become the person we are meant to be. ✨

Excerpted from *True Self-Esteem: Precious in the Eyes of God* by Jim McManus, CSsR, (Liguori Publications 2005)



True Self-Esteem:
Precious in the Eyes of God
by Jim McManus, CSsR,
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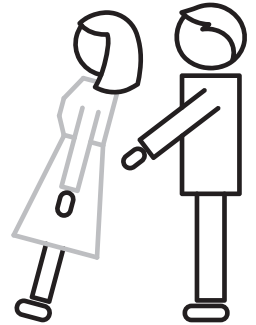
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Q. *This may sound silly, but it bothers me. I recently saw a poster advertising a movie about St. Francis of Assisi. It showed the saint standing naked in front of his father, renouncing his inheritance. I wasn't looking for a nude picture. I just stumbled on it. What kind of sin did I commit?*

A. You didn't commit a sin. Nudity isn't a sin, and looking at the picture you described is not a sin. The poster illustrates an important moment in the life of St. Francis and informs you about the movie that celebrates his life. Pornography is a totally different matter. This poster certainly is not pornographic.

Q. *My daughter, who lives with me, is in her twenties and likely smokes and drinks outside the home. Since she lives with me, I feel I have a responsibility to monitor her behavior.*

A. Your daughter, as an adult, is responsible for her own choices. Your parental responsibility was to form her to the best of your ability when she was growing up and maturing. Of course you have the right to monitor behavior within your home, but when she is not in your home she needs to make her own decisions. If you wish to share your concerns with her—which adults often do—she might appreciate that.



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