

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

PUBLISHED EACH MONTH BY THE REDEMPTORISTS

January 2011
Vol. 48, No. 1



Scrupulous Anonymous
One Liguori Drive
Liguori, MO 63057-9999
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Unnecessary Baggage

By Fr. Thomas Santa

SEASONED TRAVELERS travel very light. A quick look at the people getting ready to board a plane easily tells you who travels often and who travels occasionally.

Seasoned travelers carry only what they need. Occasional travelers often carry everything, not knowing what to expect and not trusting

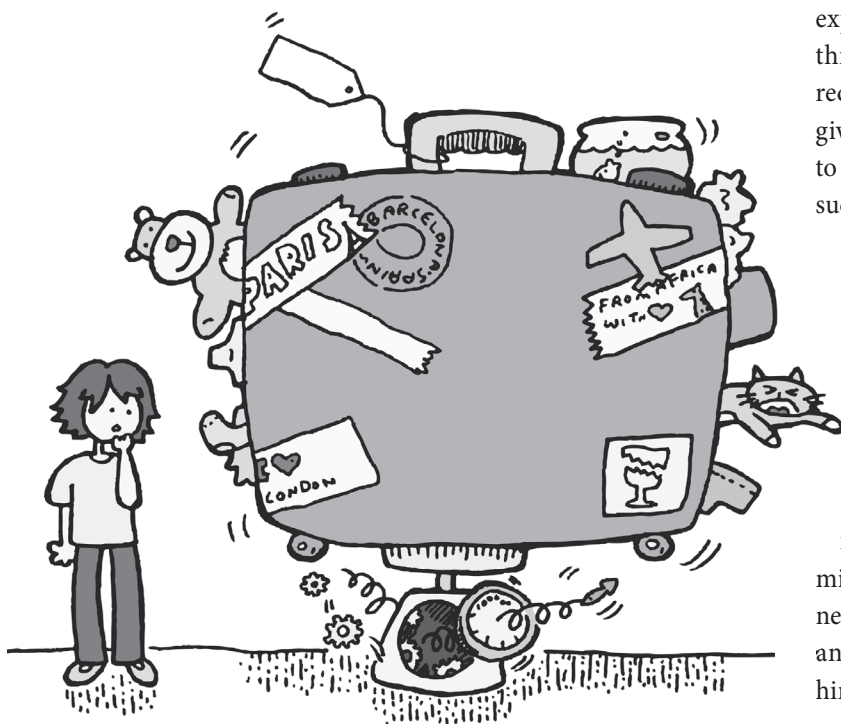
that all of the items they may need will be available.

It doesn't take too many trips for a seasoned traveler to learn that it's not fun to drag a lot of luggage through the airport or, even worse, to try to stuff it under the seat or in the overhead compartment.

The seasoned traveler also realizes that it's impossible to be perfectly prepared for every possible experience. On occasion, something out of the ordinary will be required. The seasoned traveler gives himself or herself permission to deal with and make the best of such occasions.

We're all travelers on the journey of life and, like on all journeys, we must carry a certain amount of baggage.

Whether on a trip or on vacation, if we carry too much baggage our trip is unpleasant. The key to happiness in travel and in life is to determine what baggage is absolutely necessary to carry on the journey and what baggage can be left behind.



What to carry and what to leave behind

Here's the baggage you need for your life journey: a healthy understanding of God, an appreciation of family and friends who love and support you, a respectful use of your unique talents and abilities, the ability to love and affirm another person, the ability to be thankful for all you've been given, and a sense of awe and wonder toward God and God's creation.

If you've packed this kind of baggage, your trip will be blessed and fruitful. Life will be a wonderful journey to celebrate and rejoice in, and it will not be a burden.

Here's what you don't need for your life journey: an understanding of God as an unrelenting perfectionist

with a desire to punish; memories of members of your family—living or dead—who haven't been a source of affirmation or love; a distrustful and pessimistic outlook; rigidity, anxiety, and a paralyzing sense of guilt and fear that often leads to depression; and painful memories of past sins or failures that you relive over and over again.

This kind of baggage, dutifully packed and carried with you no matter where you go, guarantees that life will not be celebrated and will be at best endured. A burdened life cannot be lived. It's simply life that goes on and on, one day at a time, until it finally comes to an end.

Ready, set—unpack!

Follow this three-step process to begin ridding yourself of your extra baggage.

- 1. Congratulate yourself.** Some people never figure out that they're carrying unnecessary baggage, so they can't do anything about it. Be grateful that you recognize the situation.
- 2. Acknowledge that you need help.** It's almost impossible to unload baggage without help—if you knew what you really needed, you wouldn't have packed the unnecessary stuff in the first place. When you reach out and ask for help, it's not a sign of weakness. Accepting help is a sign of your desire to cooperate with God's gift of grace.
- 3. Get that help.** Many people are reluctant to go outside themselves because they find it embarrassing. They also feel frustration: "Where should I go and whom should I ask?" This may be the biggest stumbling block.

A good place to start is with your confessor and/or spiritual director. If this person doesn't have the expertise to help you, he or she will gladly refer you to someone who can.

If you don't have a spiritual director or confessor, ask a caring and competent friend for help or make an appointment with your parish priest or a member of the pastoral staff.

It really doesn't matter how you begin as long as you do begin.

The new year is a great time to make changes and commitments. What better gift can you give yourself than the gift of unburdening your life journey?

Make 2011 a year of grace and new beginnings. With God's help, 2011 can be a great year—a less burdened year—for each member of our SA family.

May God bless you and keep you in his love.

The Gift of Silence

The following is adapted from *Finding Your Hidden Treasure: The Way of Silent Prayer* by Benignus O'Rourke (© 2010 Liguori Publications).

Some time ago an elderly lady complained to me that she could no longer pray. She said, "I come here to church after my shopping and sit here all peaceful and quiet. But I can't pray like I used to."

I tried to suggest that perhaps sitting there all peaceful and quiet *was* prayer. Maybe it was a gift God was offering her at this stage of her life. But she wasn't convinced. Prayer for her meant keeping her mind on the words, battling with distractions, concentrating. "Sitting there all peaceful and quiet" seemed like laziness and failure.

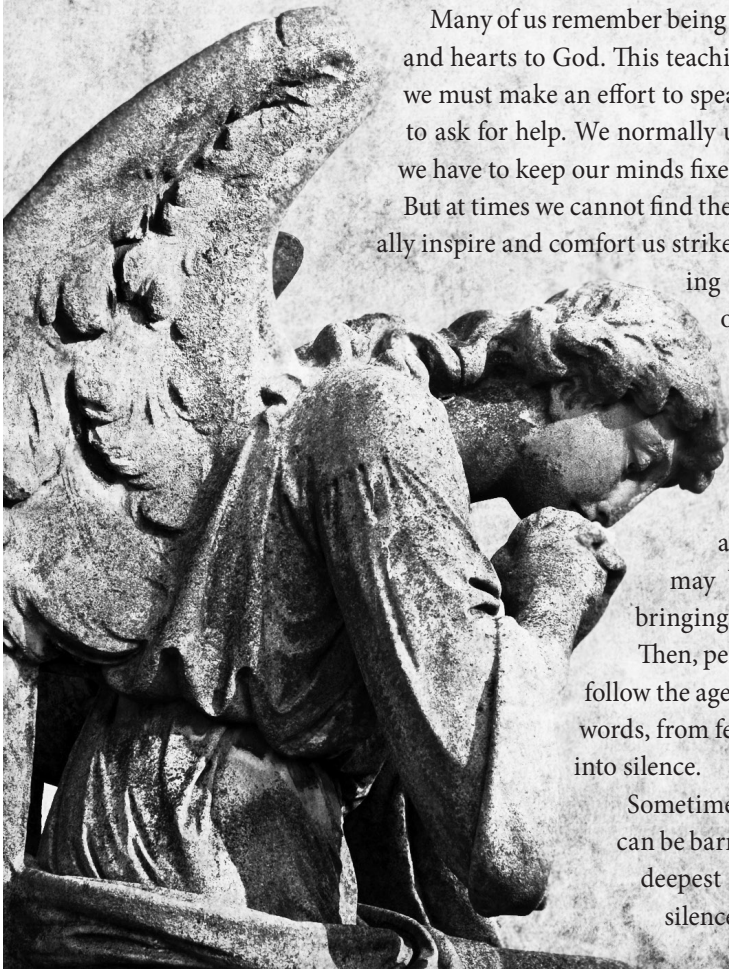
What my parishioner was discovering, in fact, was one of God's loveliest gifts, the purest form of prayer. She rejected it because it wasn't what she'd been taught. And she's not alone. Many people who come to the retreat house share her anxiety about praying.

Many of us remember being taught that prayer is a lifting of our minds and hearts to God. This teaching can lay a heavy burden on us. We feel we must make an effort to speak to God—to praise him, to give thanks, to ask for help. We normally use words, thoughts, and images and feel we have to keep our minds fixed on what we're saying.

But at times we cannot find the words. The well-known prayers that usually inspire and comfort us strike no chord in our hearts. We may be singing God's praises while our hearts are heavy or empty. And our hearts become heavier because our feelings do not match the words. We are perhaps tired of words, anyway. Tired of asking God in words that have no life. Tired of thinking about God. Tired of being talked to about God. Tired of saying prayers that may be beautiful in themselves but are not bringing God closer to us.

Then, perhaps it is best to simplify our prayers and follow the age-old advice to go from many words to few words, from few words to one word, and from one word into silence.

Sometimes when we pray, our words—any words—can be barriers. They come between us and God. The deepest communion with God comes through silence.





SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

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Q *I have great difficulty being near someone who belongs to my club. When she sits at my table, I want to move. I have no reason to feel this way. There's just something about her that makes me uncomfortable. I don't wish her harm, but I feel very guilty for feeling like this, and I know I must be sinning. What should I do?*

A If you're respectful of her as a person and as a child of God, you're not sinning. The presence of a strong feeling of being uncomfortable doesn't mean you've sinned; it simply means you're uncomfortable.

Sometimes people react to others as you describe. As long as your feelings aren't the result of prejudice, discrimination, or something on your part that needs to be examined, you're free to follow them.

But if you do change tables, be respectful and careful of the feelings of the other person and be aware of the reactions of others around you. There are respectful ways to excuse yourself from a group, and there are disrespectful ways to do so. I'm sure you understand the difference.

May God bless you.

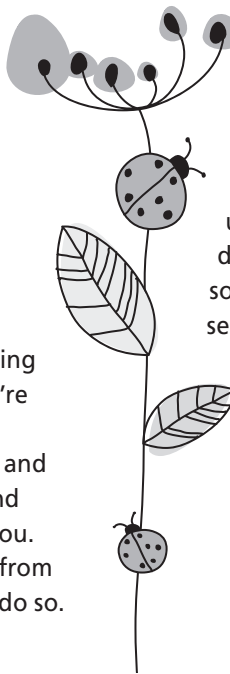
Q *I get mail from religious groups asking for contributions. They're all doing good work, and I know the need is great, but I simply cannot afford to respond to every mailing. What should I do?*

A Receiving this kind of mail is difficult for many members of our SA family. I, too, receive a variety of unsolicited mail. Some of it's welcome, but some isn't.

If you experience anxiety with uninvited and unwelcome solicitation, don't even open it. Just throw it away as soon as you receive it. The organizations sending the requests know that most people are unable to help, so they are expecting only a small percentage to respond.

So feel very free and totally at peace to ignore any solicitation you receive. In no way are you displeasing the Lord or not fulfilling your Christian obligation.

May God bless you.



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