

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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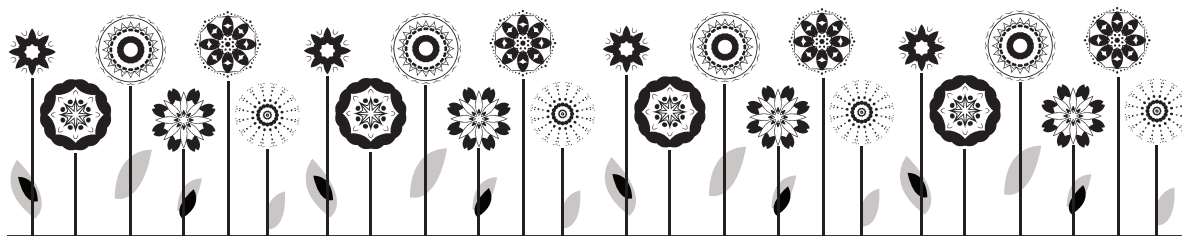
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Scrupulous Anonymous
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In Praise of Diversity

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What would you think if you went to a flower shop and they had only one species of flower? What would you think if you went to the meat counter at your favorite grocery store and they featured only one cut? What if you wheeled your cart away from the counter and pushed it through the aisles of the store, only to discover one brand of mustard, one kind of pasta, and one type of cereal? You would probably be disappointed and surprised. In each instance, you expect a variety, a choice—and you expect nothing less.

We routinely expect diversity. We're not easily satisfied with sameness and predictability when it comes to our foods, our flowers, our plants, and our grains. Variety is appreciated and diversity is expected, but not necessarily in all places, times, and circumstances. When it comes to people, for example, we become a little pickier, a little less open to variety and diversity.

Most people offer an opinion when they see a teenager with blue hair, twelve facial piercings, and a seemingly random selection of tattoos. Some heads can be turned at the sight of a person of another ethnicity or gender in an unexpected place.

And in theology and religion, diversity and variety are routinely looked upon with suspicion. Deviation from the norm is seldom tolerated; in fact, some people see lack of diversity and variety of understanding and opinion in theology as God's will.

One God, Three Faiths

Let's contrast this phenomenon with the evidence offered by our experience of life. Ask yourself these questions:

- From God's point of view, is there only one way to understand him, one way to experience him, one way to worship him?

- Are all other ways wrong or somehow lacking, incomplete, and unsatisfying?
- Is the God who created the diversity and variety of plants, animals, grains, people, personalities, sunsets, climates, seasons, genes, and DNA molecules intolerant of the diverse ways his creation understands him?

To me, that doesn't seem like the divine opinion or judgment of the Creator God. Although I treasure and hold very dear my Catholic faith, I've learned to respect other faiths and beliefs. To do otherwise would seem to dishonor and disrespect the creativity and energy of my experience of God.

When I don't respect the manifestation of God's grace in many and varied forms, I can't freely enter into the experience of wonder, mystery, and awe that is essential for faith.

The Bible often presents a picture of diversity—many different cultures and opinions—within the context of the sacred encounter between God and his people. In an ancient world of diversity and variety, in a world of many gods and many understandings of what those gods expected from their creations, Abraham first recognized an essential and revealed truth: There is only one God.

Thankfully, however, his profound foundational experience of God gave birth not to the unity or sameness you might expect from such an awakening and encounter with the sacred, but rather to even more diversity: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the three great monotheistic religions of our day who all claim Abraham as an ancestor in faith.

Unfortunately, also born was a world of violence and intolerance. Again and again the heirs of the experience of Abraham fall into the trap of insisting on the primacy and correctness of their singular experience and are intolerant of any other expression of faith and belief. Every day we pay a price for such intolerance.

God's Will Be Done

We're given many challenges. We're blessed with many experiences. We have moments of great joy and great sadness. We have moments of great success and monumental failings.

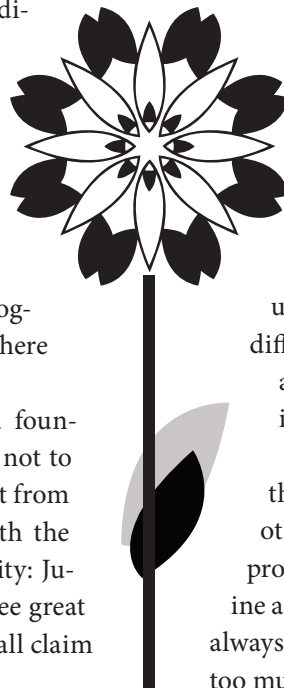
Most of us are blessed with people who love us. We gather with friends and neighbors to enjoy the fruits of our labors.

We have so much to be grateful for. An abundance of God's blessings surround us. And if we pay attention, we see and understand that our lives are filled with diversity and variety.

Might it not be God's will and hope that, no matter how we understand him or experience him, we resist the urge to demand from others something that seems to conflict with what God has created?

Might a better stance be to celebrate and respect even what we don't understand or prefer and to recognize the differences as a simple expression of variety and diversity? Perhaps that's what God intended.

For some members of our group, these words may well be challenging. For other members, these words are also fear-producing and anxiety-generating. To imagine a God who celebrates diversity and doesn't always demand conformity might be just a little too much to believe in.



But that's the point. The fear and the anxiety we experience as we reflect on these words might be a portal to God's abundant grace for us.

If we can begin to believe, accept, and celebrate that God can be experienced in many different ways, and if we can do so in the confidence of our

own experience of God as a profound manifestation of grace, we might also learn a way to live, a way to give glory and honor to God, and a way to become a little less fearful and anxious and a little more confident and appreciative of God's revelation to all people.

God So Loved the World

The following is adapted from *Mothers, Lovers, Priests, Prophets, and Kings: What the Old Testament Tells Us About God and Ourselves* by Mary Katharine Deeley (© 2010, Liguori Publications).

In truth, we cannot know God very well when we encounter him in the New Testament person of Jesus if we haven't spent considerable time with God in the Old Testament.

At the same time, the stories of Scripture, whether Old or New Testament, are stories about us as well. Every human strength and flaw has a place in these stories. Heroes, villains, people striving to lead faithful lives, and those simply caught up in the moment are on display as living word.

As they meet God and one another, so do we. Each of them adds a little more to the understanding of who we are and *whose we are* as



we make our way in this world.

The relationship between God and the world is told bit by bit in these stories. Where else can we find mothers, lovers, judges, priests, and countless other characters who demonstrate so vividly the human struggle with faith and life?

In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, they reveal, surprise, and engage us, moving us deeper and deeper into reflection on our life in God. Such stories are the expressions of our lives and of God's life with us, designed to convey in mere words what we have spent lifetimes trying to understand: that God so loved the world.

So what is plentiful redemption? It's that state of being alive due to God's initiative to share our humanity, to call us to share in his life and mission, to love us to our death and beyond, to place the promise of life where humans confront hopelessness.

May there always be people who remind us of God's constant presence and who walk through the days and nights with us, not taking away risk or responsibility, but testifying to the wonder and beauty that can accompany the setbacks and sins that are inevitable in any life lived with passion.

From *With Hearts Full of Joy: Following Christ the Redeemer*
Mathew J. Kessler, CSSR, and José Antonio Medina, STD (Liguori Publications, © 2010)



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MAILBOX

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Q *Lent is coming soon, and anxiety is building within me. Each year I get confused about what is required from me and, in my confusion, I am unable to celebrate the season. I hate to admit it, but I see Lent as a burden, not as a joy. Any words of wisdom would be appreciated.*

A Lent is not intended to burden you or rob you of peace and calm. It's not good that you find yourself filled with fear and anxiety.

I'm guessing that the fasting requirements for Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are the primary source of your anxiety.

I suggest you embrace only the minimum penitential practices: abstain from meat on Lenten Fridays and celebrate (with the help of your regular confessor) the sacrament of reconciliation. You may do this in good conscience.

In these circumstances, you're free from the requirements. I offer you and the other members of the SA family this dispensation. God bless you, and please be at peace.

Q *Can you recommend a confessor located near my home? Any help you can offer is most certainly appreciated.*

A I get this question quite often and am always at a loss how to answer. If there were a test or certification or seal of approval for confessors, I wouldn't hesitate to give you the name of a priest with those credentials. Unfortunately, there is no way to guarantee a confessor's capability.

It's also impossible for me to know the pastoral situation in the different areas of the country, so I'm afraid I wouldn't be very helpful.

The best place to start is to have a conversation with your own priest about your needs. If he can't fulfill your needs or give you direction, he'll be able to make a reasonable recommendation of another priest as close to your home as possible who might be helpful. God bless you, and please be at peace.

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