

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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Scrupulous Anonymous
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The parable of the Prodigal Son (see Luke 15:11–32) may be the best-known, most-beloved story Jesus told. We also recognize this powerful drama as the story of the Forgiving Father. Probably no story of Jesus is more commented on or preached about, not only in Christian circles, but often in other religious traditions.

Some homilies emphasize the role of the son, some the role of the father, and some the reaction of the eldest son. Rembrandt has painted a famous picture. Every possible angle has been studied, and every possible meaning has been extracted. About the only

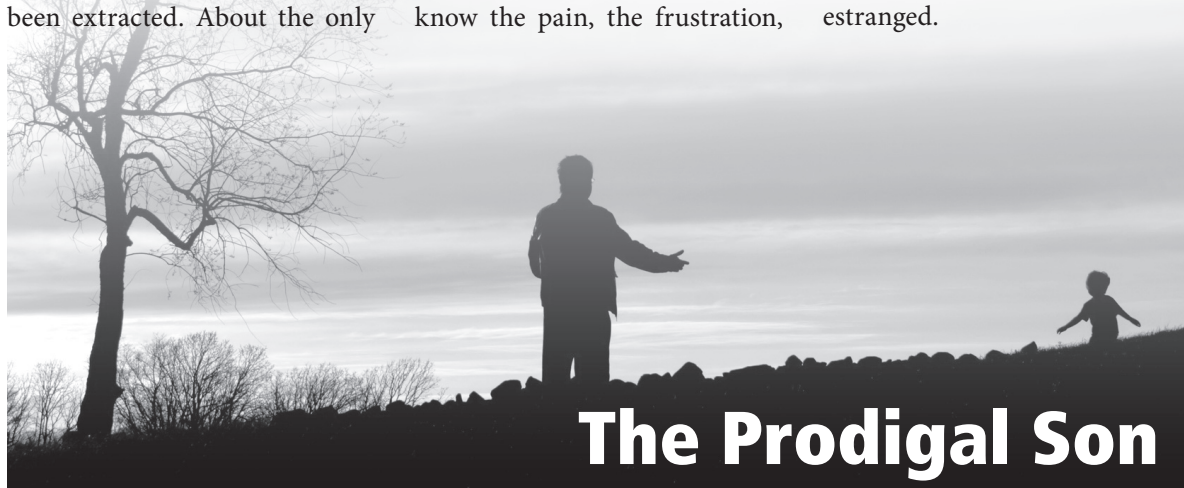
thing missing is that Andrew Lloyd Webber has not written a Broadway musical about this wonderful story (but who knows, he might be working on one). It might go like this:

*And yet,
With all of this,
We still go back to the story,
Expecting more,
and seldom being
disappointed.*

We all know what it's like to be estranged from someone we love. We may even know what it's like to be estranged from a son or daughter or mother or father. We know the pain, the frustration,

the restlessness, the anxiety, the false starts at reconciliation, and the repeating cycle of wounds, hurts, actions, events, and words that begin the situation and contribute to the festering. And we are also able to rejoice at the moment of reconciliation in the parable, when the father embraces the son.

However, this moment, for all of its power and emotion—a moment that gives us hope that our own alienations and estrangements may one day be healed—is not a moment of true reconciliation, because the father and son were never alienated or estranged.



The Prodigal Son

OUR WAY

In fact, what we have in this story is the younger son's inaccurate *perception* that he must reconcile with his father. But his father is not alienated—he is constant and persevering in his love. All he wants is to have his son home, in his arms, loved unconditionally.

The only mutual estrangement in this story is between the brothers. As the story ends, we are unsure but hopeful that the estrangement will be healed.

But for our purposes, the relationship between the father and the son is paramount, especially the notion of *perceived* estrangement—the assumption that a situation exists because of the way I feel or because of judgments I make. These feelings and judgments feed into my belief system, and I act accordingly. It's so easy for our assumptions and judgments to skewer the truth and the reality.

In the parable, the younger son perceives that his actions—taking his father's money, living with reckless abandon, coming to a point of total and irreversible loss—means he is “no longer worthy to be called your son.” In his judgment, all of his actions have to do with being or not being his father's son.

Because he feels so bad and so guilty, he assumes his father feels the same way, but his fa-

ther doesn't consider any of these matters to have anything to do with their relationship. The father refuses to affirm the son's assumptions about himself and their relationship.

The father's reaction demonstrates very appealing qualities—unconditional love, perseverance and faith in relationship, openness to change and circumstance, and ability to see the big picture and not just zero in on particular actions and events.

How often do we *perceive* that we are somehow estranged from God? How often do we *perceive* that God no longer loves us? How often do we *perceive* that our sins are so bad and our guilt so incomprehensible that God can no longer love us?

GOD'S WAY

Despite the depth of our feeling and condition, God does not affirm our perception. It's good that God refuses to affirm the judgments and the assumptions we make about ourselves and our relationship with him. To put it in a more familiar way, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD” (Isaiah 55:8).

God our Father doesn't see or judge in the same way we see or judge. This is the Gospel, the Good News of the kingdom of God. Our inability to see the possibilities and to recognize that we are loved and accepted doesn't change the reality that we *are* loved, accepted, and forgiven.

Reflect often on the distorting power of inaccurate or unsubstantiated perceptions, especially if they aren't supported by evidence. Reflect often on the overwhelming evidence that *is* presented in the Scripture: that God calls each of us to himself, that we're loved

and precious in God's eyes, and that God wants to be with us for eternity.

Contrast this reality with your feelings and emotions, which may distort this truth and try to take away what God wants for you.

Really, are you the exception, the only person who is not and cannot be loved by God? Are you the only person God ignores and wants to punish for eternity?

I think not. I *know* not. That is not who God is. That is not the Father whom Jesus presents in the powerful and essential story of faith, the story of the prodigal son and the forgiving father.

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Personalizing the *Rosary*

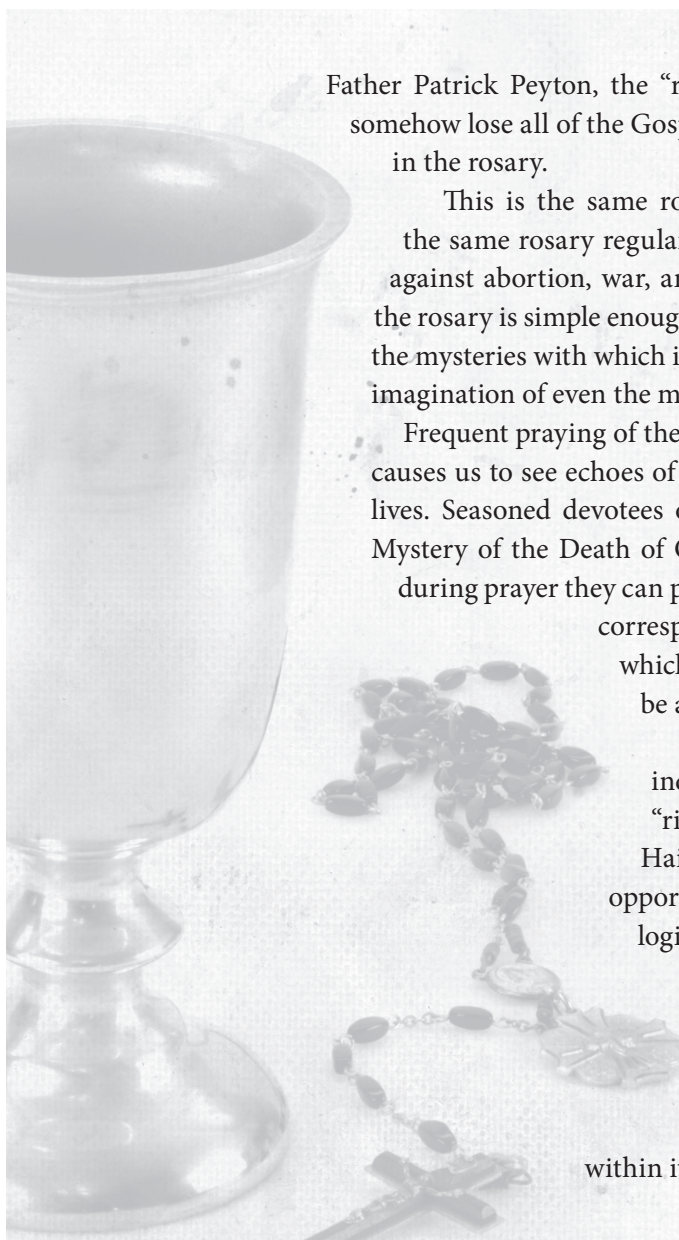
The following is adapted from *The Eucharist and the Rosary: Mystery, Meditation, Power, Prayer* by Matt Swaim (Liguori Publications, © 2010).

Father Patrick Peyton, the “rosary priest,” once said that if we were to somehow lose all of the Gospels, their narrative core would be preserved in the rosary.

This is the same rosary Padre Pio referred to as a “weapon,” the same rosary regularly used by countless Catholics in the battle against abortion, war, and other grave social evils. The structure of the rosary is simple enough to be learned by an elementary student, yet the mysteries with which it connects us can outstretch the limits of the imagination of even the most theologically astute.

Frequent praying of the rosary immerses us in the Gospel story and causes us to see echoes of the Gospel in many different aspects of our lives. Seasoned devotees of the rosary can remember the Sorrowful Mystery of the Death of Our Lord every time they see a crucifix, or during prayer they can perhaps call to mind specific pieces of art that correspond to each mystery. In this way, the rosary, which is shared by the universal Church, can also be a personalized prayer.

One might even say with credibility that individual Catholics have their own ways of “riffing” on the rosary. Some use the three Hail Marys that precede the mysteries as an opportunity to pray for an increase in the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Others offer the rosary for the intentions of the Holy Father or pause to invoke the help of Saint Michael the Archangel at the close of the prayer. The possibilities for personalizing the rosary while remaining within its universality are seemingly endless. ✱





SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

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Q *I am haunted by serious sexual sins that I committed when I was very young. No matter how many times I confess these sins, I don't believe I've been forgiven, and I fear death and the punishment that will follow.*

A The guilt and anxiety you feel is very real. The memory of the thoughts, words, and actions of a long time ago deny you the peace and serenity Jesus desires for you.

It's not the memory of sin that robs you of peace, but rather the idea that these sins have something to do with the awesome beauty, wonder, mystery, and power of human sexuality. You are experiencing a perfect storm of guilt, regret, and powerful feelings.

But despite your feelings, your sins *have* been forgiven by a loving God even though the strong emotion of regret remains.

Fortunately, we're not sent to our eternal reward or punishment because of how we feel or because of how we *perceive* God to feel. God's feelings about us are the determining factor. God loves us and wants to be with us. Be at peace in the loving forgiveness of God.

Q *I understand we are an anonymous group, and that is very important, but in these days of social networking is there a way to provide a forum for those of us who might wish to be part of such a group?*

A I imagine you're referencing the use of a site like Facebook. Yes, I have thought about social networking sites for our SA family.

One potential benefit would be the opportunity to share specific actions that were helpful to a person in their struggle. Yet another benefit might be the ability to recommend other self-help groups and resources that have been appropriate and useful.

I hesitate only because we would need an efficient way to monitor the site to ensure the information shared is accurate, up to date, and useful as a healthy alternative.

I will keep readers of this newsletter posted on my progress. Thanks for asking, and may God bless you.

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