

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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REVERENCE WORKS

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Recently I was asked what I'd say to someone with scrupulosity who wants to practice the Holy Spirit's gift of "fear of the Lord."

Proverbs 1:7 says "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge." Psalm 19:9 says "The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever." These passages present people who live with scrupulosity with a perplexing dilemma: "How can fear of the Lord be a spiritual gift when it's so paralyzing and often the source of great anxiety?"

We might appreciate the concept more if we understand what the passages are trying to teach us. Understanding will not automatically make the practice of the gift easier, but it's a good step in the right direction.

Fear factor

One of the root words used in Scripture and often translated as "fear of the Lord" is *pachad*, which always indicates a terrified dread. At first glance, this is not at all reassuring. It might even describe your own feelings when you think about your relationship with God.

However, in Scripture, only one type of person

should be terrified of God: the person who has so hardened his or her heart, so turned against God, that he or she refuses to listen to God or to the holy prophets who speak God's Word. Categorically, in my informed opinion, this does *not* describe a person with scrupulosity.

People with scrupulosity are so concerned about their relationship with God that they want to choose nothing, act in no manner, think no thought, or choose no path that displeases God in any way. This is the total opposite of the scriptural portrait of a person who should experience *pachad*, yet even though scrupulous people are not deserving of God's wrath or punishment, they often imagine they are.

“No fear in love”

Pay close attention to Saint Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, in which he teaches us that those who are in Christ are not destined for wrath (see 5:9). We should also remind ourselves of the teaching found in Paul’s letter to the Romans: “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1).

Finally, we should listen to Saint John when he tells us to “have confidence on the day of judgment because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment, and so one who fears is not yet perfect in love” (1 John 4:17–18).

So for we who are in Christ, fear of the Lord doesn’t involve abject terror or dread of divine justice. People with scrupulosity must remind themselves that they are loved by God exactly as they are at this present moment in time. Constant practice of this may not completely remove the anxiety, but it should provide some solace.

Reverence for life

A second root word used in sacred Scripture with respect to fear of the Lord is the word *yirah*, which means “piety and reverence” rather than “abject terror.” Indeed, modern lists of the gifts of the Holy Spirit sometimes call this gift “wonder and awe in the presence of God.”

This is why some modern translations don’t use the word *fear*. Psalm 33:8 might be, “Let all the earth *reverence* the Lord, and let all the inhabitants of the world be in awe of him.” Psalm 19:9 might be, “the *reverence* of the Lord is pure, enduring forever.”

If we emphasize the word *reverence* instead of the word *fear*, we might be closer to the intended meaning and experience. We might feel less anxiety when we think about our relationship with God. Certainly reverence is a spiritual gift worth practicing.

Our holy patron, Saint Alphonsus Liguori, offers us some insight on this gift. In his popular *Counsels for Comfort and Confidence*, Alphonsus writes, “God is better pleased that the souls which love him should treat him with loving confidence than with timid servility. So, do not treat God as a tyrant any more. Recall to your mind the graces which he has bestowed upon you, even after the offenses and acts of ingratitude which you have committed against him. Recollect the loving treatment with which he has dealt with you, in order to extricate you from the disorders of your past life, and the extraordinary lights which he has given you, my means of which he has so often called you to his holy love. And so treat him from this day forth with great confidence and affection, as your dearest friend” (19).

The spiritual gift of fear of the Lord can be incorporated into the prayers and devotions of a person with scrupulosity if it can be understood as *reverence* for God. If practicing this spiritual gift causes anxiety, dread, or any other response that seemingly portrays God in a negative manner, it won’t be helpful.

Prayer

Help me, Lord, to *reverence* your name. Let the *reverence* I want to give you in all my thoughts, words, and actions be the cause of adoration and praise of your name and consolation and peace in my life this day. Amen.

LOVE FOR GOD, SELF, OTHERS

The following is adapted from *The Essential Catholic Handbook: A Summary of Beliefs, Practices, and Prayers*, © Liguori Publications, revised and updated 2004.

In this life, your love for God is bound with your love of others—and these loves are bound with your love of self. “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20) [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2840]. By God’s own commandment, you are to love your neighbor *as yourself* (see Matthew 19:19; 22:39) [2052].

When it comes to practical, real-life terms, fulfillment of God’s commandment to love begins with a proper self-love. To love God as he wills, you must respect, esteem, and reverence *yourself* [2055].

You increase your love of self by allowing yourself to realize, gradually and more deeply as the years go on, that *God really loves you* with a love that has no end. You are loved, and

you are lovable. When you try to acquire or deepen this attitude about yourself, you cooperate with the grace of God [2196].

You also increase your love for self by better understanding those around you. You listen to others, trust them, and love them. You let yourself *be* loved, by being truly forgiving and (what is most difficult) seeking true personal forgiveness, by widening your circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty [2842–2845].

Saint John writes about the importance of love: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:7-8). You learn what love is by loving. By loving, you come to know God [1, 214, 221, 773, 1828].



*We Are Rivers
Running to
Thy Sea*

Lord, we are rivers running to Thy sea,
Our waves and ripples all derived from Thee:
A nothing we should have, a nothing be,
Except for Thee.

Sweet are the waters of Thy shoreless sea,
Make sweet our waters that make haste to
Thee;
Pour in Thy sweetness, that ourselves may be
Sweetness to Thee.

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI



SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

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Q *I feel guilty about my last confession because I have a very difficult time with promises, and in the Act of Contrition we “promise to avoid the near occasion of sin.” I don’t think I can fulfill this promise. Does this invalidate my confession? I realize I’m probably overreacting to all of this. What should I do?*

A Your confession is most certainly valid. It doesn’t depend on either the perfect or imperfect fulfillment of the promises you recite in the Act of Contrition. What is required for the sacrament is your desire to accept the forgiveness of God and try, despite your limitations and weakness, to serve the Lord to the best of your ability. Your concern is proof that this is your intention.

I also want to commend you for recognizing your own inner wisdom. Even if you don’t always trust it, you understand that you’re

capable of making a good decision and you recognize both your strength *and* your weakness. That’s a very good decision, one I’m pleased you made. Keep up the good work, and be at peace about this matter. May God bless you.

Q *If I don’t attend weekly Mass because I’m sick, am I committing a sin?*

A You’re not committing a sin of any kind. When you’re sick, you may dispense yourself from weekly Mass with a clear conscience.

Be sure to believe this advice. To affirm your ability to make a good decision, don’t mention this occurrence in confession—there is no need to. This is a good opportunity for you to freely choose to trust in God and in the ability God has given you to make a mature and adult Catholic decision. May God bless you.



Attention Readers!

Fr. Westly and Fr. Santa are no longer able to respond to individual letters, and the sa@liguori.org e-mail address *has been closed*. We will, however, continue to answer commonly asked questions in *Scrupulous Anonymously*. Send your questions to **SA Mailbox, One Liguori Drive, Liguori, MO 63057**.

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