

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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The kingdom of God as proposed by Jesus creates a fondness for excess—a sense of God that is able to interrupt and confound, contradict and confront the established order of things.

When I was introduced to this idea by Arland J. Hultgren in his book *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (© 2000, Wm. B. Eerdmans), I had to pause and reflect. This concept—that Jesus seemingly preferred *excess*—might be termed “radical” by some people when they first wrestle with it, and I too was challenged. But I also found it comforting: It helped me understand that the manifestation of God’s grace is the work or activity of God. This



by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, C.Ss.R.

A PARTICULAR EXAMEN

Most of us spend a lifetime trying to grow into a personal acceptance and practice of this perspective and truth. One way to do this is to adopt a particular spiritual practice that will help us allow this lesson of God’s “plentiful redemption” to take deeper root in our heart and soul.

The spiritual practice I’ve tried to incorpo-

manifestation of grace is not dependent on my poor and incomplete efforts, but is God’s gift to his people.

All of this reflection helped me probe the foundational charism of the Redemptorist congregation of priests and brothers founded by Saint Alphonsus Liguori. Saint Alphonsus believed in “plentiful redemption for all”—the abundance of

God’s grace manifested in the people, events, and experiences of our world.

rate into my daily spiritual life is a type of *particular examen* (which by no coincidence is a spiritual practice encouraged by Saint Alphonsus). I’m not talking about a *general examen*—an examination of conscience, searching high and low for the manifestation of sin. No. A *particular examen* focuses on a single aspect.

I'm suggesting that the same kind of devoted energy that is part and parcel of the general examen also be part of my spiritual practice as I reflect daily not just on sin, but also on the power of God's grace at work in my life. In my particular examen, I pay close attention to the language I use every day to describe my perceptions about life.

SCARCITY AND ABUNDANCE

I find it important and useful to pay attention to two distinct concepts: scarcity and abundance.

Scarcity is based on conditions, shoulds, fears, anxieties, doubts, and the like. It is a language and a way of life based on the conviction that because there is never enough, everything must be protected, measured, and parceled out so we don't run out. It is a language that doesn't give an inch, will never presume innocence, does not believe in forgiveness ("If my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Matthew 18:21), and demands justice but is never satisfied, filled, or completed. With scarcity, experiences are described in words that seem to limit God's grace.

Abundance is grounded in the belief that God is filled with plenty. It is the experience of invitation, encouragement, confidence, gratitude, and generosity. At its core is the belief that love gives life, that forgiveness generates hope ("Not seven times but seventy-seven times." Matthew 18:22), and that all will be completed, accomplished, and fulfilled according to the plan of God: "not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). With abundance, ex-

periences are described in words that allow room for God's grace to be powerfully manifested.

If you reflect on and contrast these two concepts, perhaps you will be led away from asking *What am I doing?* and closer to *How can I make my belief a part of my life?*

WHAT VS. HOW

Do you see the difference between the *what* and the *how*? We can be experts on what is required in life, but unless we actually practice what we've been taught, life is pretty much lifeless.

A. J. Hultgren's challenge to see Jesus as a person *fond* of the excesses of God's life and love shows an understanding of this fundamental difference, as did Jesus. He recognized that although the Scribes and the Pharisees were experts in the law, they didn't permit the law to animate and energize their lives. As a result, their faith seemed lifeless and uninspiring.

On the other hand, Jesus also recognized the efforts of people who seemed to be far from the law but tried to live the values of the law. They often came up short, and they were often far from perfect, but they had moments when they were seemingly captured by the grace of God and became instruments and examples of the kingdom of God.

I hope you might see in these few words of reflection a possible challenge. Might not the practice of a daily particular examen be beneficial in your own spiritual life and practice?

Such a practice may help at least some of our members take the focus off the all-consuming *what* and place it on the life-giving, grace-filled *how*.



YOUR PRIMARY LOVE

The following is adapted from *Spiritual Blueprint: How We Live, Work, Love, Play, and Pray*
by James L. Papandrea (© 2010 Liguori Publications).

S*AIN*T *AUGUSTINE*, the fifth-century bishop from North Africa, wrote that unhappiness and sin come from fear. The fear is really an expression of the anxiety that comes from loving the wrong things. He said that if we love the things we own or if we love the prestige or power that comes with position or anything else the world offers, we can never be truly happy because we will always fear losing them.

If we are obsessed with acquiring what we don't yet have (the Bible calls this *coveting* something), we fear never having it.

The only way to be truly happy—to live without that fear and anxiety—is to orient our love toward the one we can never lose and who never changes: God. Even another person shouldn't be our primary love, because relationships change. If we define our identity by our relationship with another person and then we lose that person or the relationship changes, we can lose a sense of who we are.

But even if we don't lose that person, the *fear* of loss can erode our happiness, causing anxiety and jealousy and ultimately leading to sin and—ironically—broken relationships.

The only way to happiness is to make God our primary love and to define ourselves in relation to God. Then we know our identity is built on a solid foundation and that even if everything else changes, who we are will not change—because God will not change.

I once wrote a song based on Augustine's concept called "Never Mind the Piano." The second verse is addressed to God:

*When everyone else is absent,
I can still feel you here
You're the only one that I can love
without feeling that fear.
And you know my heart is restless
until it finds its rest in you.
And though my body's feeling older,
my soul, it feels brand new.*

PRAYER

Blessed Trinity, when I see love, I see you. In Christ my deepest hope for life eternal is fulfilled. In faithful obedience I receive, celebrate, and adore the gift of your Christ in the Eucharist. Give me the graces I need to live the mystery of faith—to participate lovingly, willingly in the superabundant life you have given me. Amen.

Fr. Philip Neri Powell, OP • *Treasures Holy and Mystical* • © 2010 Liguori Publications





SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

One Liguori Drive • Liguori, MO 63057-9999

Q *You've said we should be very wary of outdated material about scrupulosity. I have some old reading material I find to be very comforting and helpful. Are you telling me to throw it away? I really don't need this kind of anxiety!*

A Absolutely not! What I intended to convey was the necessity for vigilance in choosing reading material. My advice was not intended to be a blanket statement that everyone should search their bookcases and closets, frantically throwing away any book or pamphlet with a publication date before the year 2000.

I was inviting you to check the publication date of material *that you find anxiety producing or conflicting with what the SA newsletter suggests as helpful*. The publication date is one way to determine if the material is still useful to you.

Certainly if you have material that is comforting and helpful for you, my advice and caution in this respect are not required.

Q *In the February issue of this newsletter you wrote, "You are leading me from venial sin, to serious sin, to moral sin." Did you mean mortal sin instead of moral sin?*

A Yes, thank you for catching this mistake. Despite the many times we proofread an SA article, the occasional mistake makes it through to the final version. I assure you it was not intentional. I hope the readers of our newsletter mentally made the correction.

We will post a corrected version of the February issue on our website. To print the corrected issue, go to www.liguori.org. Scroll down to the bottom of the page, find the heading **Spiritual Newsletters** and click on **Scrupulous Anonymous**. Click on **View the Archives**, then scroll down to February 2010 and click on **Sin Boldly**. Then follow your normal printing procedure.

Thank you for your patience with our occasional mistakes and missteps.



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