

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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The Unreflective Life

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THE SCENE: market day in the city of Athens. Everyone was busy trying to find that elusive commodity called a bargain, and they weren't averse to using their tongues and elbows to aid them in the task.

One corner of the market, however, was strangely quiet. A famous man most people admired walked among the crowd. He had condescended to patronize the market place. People moved aside to let him have his walkabout. He wasn't a film or television star—the time was still before the birth of Christ. Neither was he a member of the royal family. He was an orator renowned for his eloquence and patronage of lost causes.

His appearance was very odd. In spite of being rich, he dressed in rags with the diligence and care other people use when dressing in formal clothes.

He was pleased at the theatrical impression he was making until a voice in the crowd hailed him: "Antisthenes, Antisthenes! I can see your pride through the hole in your cloak!" For once, the great orator had nothing to say. He was trying to pass himself off as someone he wasn't, guilty of trying to deceive others into thinking well of him. When the great

orator realized that his shallow attempt to divert attention from his true self had been discovered, he was reduced to silence.

Discover all that you are

I used this story in a homily I preached over ten years ago. It reminds me how consistent Jesus' teachings are. In the Gospel, Jesus takes people to task time and time again when they notice faults in others but are blind to their own shortcomings. People who do this are passing themselves off as something they're clearly not. Their sin is not in recognizing others' faults—it's in their failure to recognize and accept their own faults and weaknesses, thereby trying to pretend they are something they're not.

This behavior is a clear warning: The person engaging in it is living what I call an "unreflective" life. As the apostle James puts it, "If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his own face in a mirror. He sees himself, then goes off and promptly forgets what he looked like" (1:23–24).

The unreflective life is unaware of what truth is. It is a life convinced that others can be just as easily fooled as you can. It is a life in which you repeat others' thoughts and opinions because you're completely unaware of your own thoughts and feelings.

The unreflective life never stops to discover the truth about itself. When you live an unreflective life, you never honestly enter a relationship with another person. You don't know who you are, so you can't share anything. In an unreflective life, you're doomed to pretending to be someone you're not.

People who are unreflective—who don't know the truth about themselves—are threatened by others' faults and failings. People who don't know the truth about who they are, who are incapable of knowing themselves as completely as possible, live as if life were a dream. Unaware of who they are, they move through life feeling threatened by anyone who might expose them for what they are.

You can be talented, funny, loyal, or have any other quality that can be imitated, but if you don't know who you are and why God loves you, at best you're an actor. There is a big difference between acting out a life and actually living a life we're called to live through our baptism. One is real; the other is at best a flattering imitation.

The spiritual life demands honesty, integrity, willingness to recognize yourself as both saint and sinner, and willingness to celebrate who you are. The spiritual life invites others to wholeness and healthiness but doesn't need to demand, insist, or threaten. Finally, the spiritual life accepts others exactly as they are. You see in another the person you are: someone who is redeemed and called into the fullness of life.

Accept all that you are

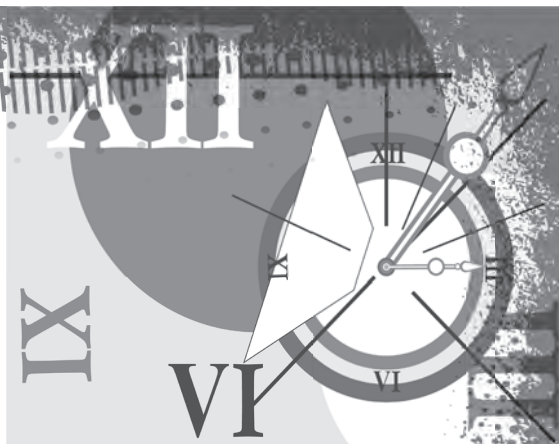
Scrupulosity can make us see only a part of who we are. When we focus our energy and anxiety on certain sins or behaviors, we're incomplete. When we resist God's call to step back and look beyond our biggest fear and anxiety and try to see something more, we risk living an unreflective life. When we can quickly list our behaviors and shortcomings that we name as sinful but aren't able to list our gifts and talents, something significant is missing from our lives. We're just like Antisthenes walking through the marketplace, completely unaware that our true self is on display for all to see.

People with scrupulosity often tend to quickly see others' faults. Perhaps our valiant struggle with the fear and anxiety of our own shortcomings makes us more prone to see the same struggle in others.

That being the case, a life of grace is also present in us, in ourselves, and in the person who may be the object of our particular care and concern. If we want to be authentic, aware, and open to all the gifts and graces that come from God, we must try also to see and accept all that we are—not just some of what we are.

FORTY and CHANGE

The following is adapted from
*Mining the Meaning of the Bible: Beyond
the Literal Word* by Sallie Latkovich
(© 2011, Liguori Publications).



We think of time differently now than people did in the ancient world. We have years, months, days, hours, and minutes. We wear watches and have clocks. We're so specific about time that we even measure things down to fractions of a second.

In the Bible, time often had symbolic importance. Here are some examples.

In the Book of Genesis, God calls Noah to build an ark for himself, his family, and two of every animal. It rains for forty days and nights, after which the earth is renewed and recreated; evil has been conquered and goodness remains. Thus, there was a great change; we sometimes call this "transformation."

The Book of Exodus says it took forty years for the Jews to wander the desert until they reached the Promised Land. We hear that and think they spent exactly forty years in the desert. But really it just meant that several generations

had passed. "Forty years" meant that the Jews lived in the desert so long that they had children and even grandchildren before they found their way out.

Most important, the number forty became a symbol of change. When we find the number forty in a Bible story, we know that the people in that story have been changed, just like the Israelites who reached the Promised Land and started a new life. They were changed or transformed from slaves in Egypt to free people in the Promised Land.

Think about Jesus, who spent forty days in the desert praying. He was changed, too. He hadn't been recognized in public healing and teaching before he went to the desert. But after his forty days there, Jesus began his ministry with people. Forty days brought a new beginning for him.

We cherish this ancient meaning of forty.



SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS

MAILBOX

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Q *I've tried to confess some sins of the past, but I didn't confess additional scandal attached to these sins that my confessor would have been unaware of. Do I need to bring this scandal to confession now?*

A Most certainly not. It's conjecture on your part: You *assume* your confessor didn't understand the maximum potential impact of the sins you confessed. You *assume* the people around you experienced the results of your actions exactly the way you imagine. You're ready to *assume* responsibility for other people's potential thoughts, feelings, and judgments, but you have no way of realistically appraising their true reaction—you're only guessing.

The sin of scandal is, by definition, based on certitude, not conjecture. You have this certitude only because of the disease of scrupulosity—not for any other reason. Be at peace.

Q *Please explain "willful failure to make restitution." A few years ago I ate at the fast-food restaurant where I worked without paying. I also took office supplies. I recently sent a check to pay for the food (with interest), and I'm saving to pay for the office supplies.*

A It has been the consistent advice of the priest spiritual directors of the SA newsletter that a person with scrupulosity should *not* attempt to engage in this practice. The only exception would be that restitution should be attempted only at the explicit direction of your priest confessor and then limited to the amount and in the manner determined by the confessor. I ask that you seriously consider this advice and seek the direction of your confessor in this matter.



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