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How Can I Be **Sure**?

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Occasionally I find myself humming an old song called “How Can I Be Sure?” It was written by Felix Cavaliere and Eddie Brigati, two members of the band The Young Ras-

cals, which recorded it in 1967. The lyrics ask how a person can be sure of a relationship in an ever-changing world. That question touches a nerve in me because it can also apply to the human journey toward health and wholeness.

At its heart, the question is about the search for certitude—the desire to know that what I believe, feel, or experience to be true is, in fact, the truth. It’s the need to rest in the conviction that I’m not confused or misled. Readers of *Scrupulous Anonymous* may understand this feeling.

All human beings want to know the truth with certainty—not just readers of the *National Enquirer* want to know the whole story! Everyone wants to know. People want assurance that they’re making the correct decisions, assurance that they’re resisting to the best of their ability what they understand to be evil and instead choosing what is good.

People also realize that their own truth might not be the same as another’s. As a result, men and

women of faith can find themselves shaking their heads in disbelief and wonder at—or even having conflict with—others who believe differently.

Searching for **truth**

In their struggle to find certitude and confidence, people often turn to spiritual leaders willing to make a pronouncement, explain a teaching, or define a doctrine. Their confidence in their own opinion or judgment comforts people of faith by giving them the clarity they crave. But when spiritual leaders are unsure or confused or divided, people often feel a creeping anxiety—a frustration—and their search goes on.

When reading Scripture for help and direction, I find myself turning often to the book of the prophet Jeremiah. He tells us about shepherds who were corrupt, unknowing, and not at all truthful or helpful. The people who trusted them for leadership and guidance were confused, disoriented, and filled with anxiety and a lack of peace. Jeremiah promises that this situation won’t continue and that the Lord will work mightily on their behalf.



Soon, soon, the prophet promises, the people will get the direction and guidance they need to proceed in faith and confidence. Soon they'll get the spiritual leadership they deserve.

As I reflected on the Book of Jeremiah, I quickly related the experiences of those people of so many years ago to the experiences of many people today. Many reasonable modern people have unanswered questions—real doubts and concerns—about spiritual leadership.

But, true as that statement may be, I moved beyond the assertion that others need to get their act together, instead concentrating on my own leadership—the good points and the not-so-good.

I realized that a quiet shift has taken place within me. At one time in my spiritual life, I was absolutely convinced I was right, that I believed correctly. I found real solace and comfort in that belief. However, the certainty I once so easily claimed has in many instances given way to reluctance to insist on any absolute.

Embracing **mystery**



I don't deny dogma, and I'm not ignoring Church teaching. I've simply discovered that I'm more comfortable with mystery—with embracing the experience of *not knowing*—than I ever imagined I could be. Where once I believed that the role of religion was to provide all the answers and definitions of all that is important, today I'm not so sure that's what spiritual leadership is. Perhaps it's not certainty and clarity at all at the core of belief, but some other value that is much more essential and important.

My desire for assurance and clarity was a distraction. I thought they are the real goal of the reli-

gious experience, but they are not. If there is a goal in spirituality, it is to develop a sense of awe and wonder and mystery—to learn to experience whatever happens in this human journey we call life as gift, as a mysterious outpouring and manifestation of the presence of God—and to resist the urge to categorize, define, restrict, or limit.

This shift in emphasis can be frightening and can produce all kinds of anxiety, and I'm well aware that this kind of anxiety is particularly troubling to readers of this newsletter.

But I don't believe for even one moment that a person with scrupulosity cannot embrace mystery, wonder, and awe. It may be difficult and challenging, but it is most certainly not impossible.

Finding **peace**



How can I be sure, in a world that's constantly changing?

Part of me will always want clarity, will always seek the final answer to all of life's questions. There are prob-

ably, when all is said and done, absolute truths that cannot be denied and must be accepted in their entirety. And, I suppose, one of the roles of leadership, whether spiritual or some other kind, is to set direction—to define, sort, and separate.

Knowing all of that and learning to be comfortable with it, I also hope I can always maintain a real appreciation for not knowing—for mystery—and for the unanswered questions.

I hope this attitude is life-giving rather than misleading. The kingdom of God promised to us by Jesus assures us that this is our ultimate blessing and hope.

Digital Dependence

The following is adapted from
Prayer in the Digital age by Matt Swaim (Liguori Publications, © 2011).

I broke my smartphone, but not on purpose.

Perhaps it should have been on purpose. As someone prone to the perils of workaholicism, I had been checking the thing far more than necessary.

Roughly a month into my dependence on this miracle device, I decided to go on a brief retreat at a Benedictine Abbey in Washington, DC. My trusty multifaceted digital companion was slated to join. I didn't realize it at the time, but the haste with which I was preparing my belongings for the two days of semisolitude (with, of course, access to satellite coverage) was just one more indication of how badly I needed the slower, more contemplative experience offered by the monks.

Then tragedy struck.

Shortly after beginning a load of laundry, I began to look, first with mild frustration, then with growing panic, for my omnifaceted electronic sidekick. I stopped just short of calling after it as though it

were a lost beagle. With the terror that comes from realizing all too late one's inadvertent folly, I raced to the basement, flung open the washer, and with trembling hands, fished my waterlogged personal assistant and life manager from the swishing tank of retreat apparel.

Towels were hastily laid out. Batteries were removed. Rudimentary surgery was performed. I threw my smartphone in a plastic bag full of rice, and with trembling fingers, dialed customer service using a (gasp!) landline. The prognosis was met with sickening silence on my end. In words framed sympathetically so as to try and lessen the tragedy, I was told that my warranty didn't cover water damage, and because I hadn't invested in eight dollars' worth of insurance when I bought my phone, nothing could be done. I'd have to buy a new one.

My robotic friend had been cut down in the prime of its youth.



SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

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Q *I've recently been received into the Roman Catholic Church, and I brought my OCD with me. Now that I can receive the Eucharist, my anxiety and anguish are intensifying. My great fear is of offending God, of losing grace through sacrilege.*

A It's no surprise that your obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) made the journey with you. OCD is a disease, and a change in venue doesn't cure it. If that were true, countless others would be making the same journey in hopes of finding relief.

You do have one advantage: You know you have OCD, and you know its manifestations. You can choose not to let it seep into your religious practice. Stop it in its tracks. You're not helpless. You can choose to say no.

Q *What if I committed a sin in my youth that now in reflection I see was perhaps mortal. I'm far too embarrassed to confess to a priest, but I have prayed and prayed many times to ask God to forgive me for it. Am I forgiven?*

A Your memory of sin from your youth is a memory, not a sin that must be rehashed or replayed within the sacramental forum of reconciliation. The sin has long been forgiven, and you needn't confess it or submit yourself to embarrassment.

Let it go and be at peace. There is no need for further worry, anxiety, or regret. God has forgiven you. It's time for you to forgive yourself and move on with your life.



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