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The Dark Side of Fear

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All human beings experience fear. It's an integral part of our lives. Fear helps us survive by motivating us to avoid harmful situations, helping us develop a sense of appropriate caution, and causing us to examine specific experiences before we commit to them.

For example, a healthy fear of unpleasant or harmful consequences prompts us to make sure a ladder is securely anchored, a safety harness is locked into place, or a life vest fits snugly. We use a potholder before we open the oven door. We carefully read the labels on prescription medicine and schedule regular medical and dental check-ups. In each of these instances, we understand and correctly fear what might result if we don't take precautions.

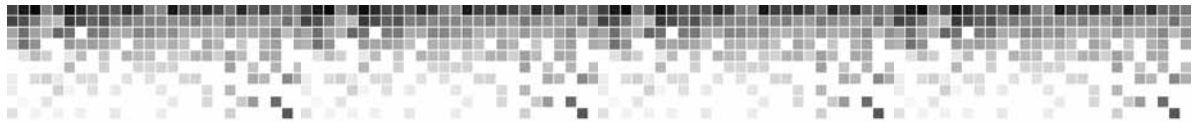
But the dark side of fear is an entirely different experience. When we permit fear to dictate how we feel about certain events and experiences—for example, nourishing an exaggerated caution—fear inhibits growth and personal development and can even grind it to a halt.

Frozen with fear

One exaggerated fear is that a single action or experience, even one that is harmless in the extreme, will forever change or end a relationship. We worry that one harsh word, one raised eyebrow, or one show of emotion will lead to our being alone and unloved, and we may expend a huge amount of energy trying not to give any indication of our mood or temperament.

By extension, in our spiritual relationship with God we fear that any impure thought, flash of doubt, harsh or angry word, or hesitation will have the same disastrous result.

When fear dominates our life, when it seeps into every decision we make, or when we become hard-pressed to remember a time we were not fearful, we verge on emotional paralysis. We



freeze in our tracks, unable to take a step left, right, ahead, or even back. No decision seems right, and every decision risks disaster. Our everyday lives become very small as we uselessly try to keep everything under control.

In 2008 the major news organizations reported that a woman had spent two years confined to her bathroom because she was afraid to come out. Her boyfriend brought her food and eventually called the police, who removed her from the house so she could get the help she so desperately needed.

A similar dynamic can be at work in the SA community. Some SA readers' fear of offending God has effectively isolated their spiritual selves into a very small space, with little room for movement or growth and development. They may not be physically confined, but their lives become severely constricted and emotional paralysis results.

The light who leads to life

In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks to us about the kind of fear that tightly controls our world or that holds us in an unhealthy pattern of living. He invites us to let go of the fear that binds and to embrace the Light who leads to life:

- *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (3:17).*
- *Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away (6:37).*
- *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me (14:1).*

- *Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid (14:27).*
- *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe (20:29).*

Jesus' powerful and comforting words invite us to put our trust in him and to let go of whatever binds us, limits us, or makes it difficult or impossible for us to live to the fullest.

The grace to be free

The American writer and clergyman Charles R. Swindoll once observed, "We are all faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as impossible situations." Our daily struggle with fear and the guilt and anxiety it inflicts on us might best be perceived as an opportunity to grow in trust and love. Or, as the singer and actress Judy Garland once said, "For it was not into my ear you whispered, but into my heart. It was not my lips you kissed, but my soul."

The grace we need to be free—to live life abundantly, to let go of the fear that may paralyze and inhibit us—has already been freely given to us at baptism. "The grace of Christ is the gratuitous gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1999).

Perhaps today is the day we begin our journey to the fullness of life and love, letting go of fear that binds us and embracing the grace God gives us.

Catholic Faith in Jesus

The following is adapted from *Jesus 101: God and Man* by John L. Gresham (Liguori Publications, 2010).

At the heart of Catholic teaching is a person, the person of Jesus Christ. According to the Catholic faith, Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, who became man, who taught us by his words and example, who died for us upon the cross, was raised from death, and now lives forever as God and man—two natures united in one person.

The goal of catechesis, the teaching and handing on of the Catholic faith, is to bring others into communion with Jesus, that in union with him they may know the love of the Father and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The person of Jesus Christ brings us into communion with the Holy Trinity. Through Jesus Christ, we come to share in the eternal exchange of love between Father and Son in the Spirit (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [426]). We come to know the triune God because the Father sent his eternal divine Son to be born in the world as man, to reveal the fullness of divine truth.

The book of Hebrews con-

trasts Jesus to all those who came before him. God spoke in the past in many ways through many prophets and teachers, but now in the fullness of time God has spoken by his Son. As divine Son, Jesus is the mediator and fullness of divine revelation (Hebrews 1:1–2, CCC 65).

The confession and proclamation of Jesus as Son of God is at the center of the Catholic Church. When Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Simon answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus responds by renaming Simon as Peter, the rock, declaring that it was on this rock that he would build his Church (Matthew 16:15–19) and acknowledging both his office as the first pope and his confession of faith (CCC 424, 552, 881).

Through the ministry of Peter and his successors and the faith they proclaim, we come to know Jesus as the living stone, rejected by men but chosen as the foundation stone for the new people of God to whom we are united as living stones in his Church (1 Peter 2:4–9; CCC 756).



***Take love when love is given,
But never think to find it
A sure escape from sorrow
Or a complete repose;
Only yourself can heal you,
Only yourself can lead you
Up the hard road to heaven
That ends where no one knows.***

SARA TEASDALE

FROM THE POEM “TWILIGHT”

EXCERPTED FROM *HIDDEN GRACES:*

POEMS FOR CRISIS, STRUGGLE, AND RENEWAL

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SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

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Q *My granddaughter is getting married on a beach in Hawaii. After all the money we spent on Catholic schools, including a Catholic college, this is what we get for our investment. I don't feel I can attend the wedding without committing the sin of scandal, yet my absence is going to tear the family apart.*

A Many people have found themselves in a situation like this. You don't give your granddaughter's reasons for doing this, so I won't speculate. But I don't understand why you would commit the sin of scandal by attending the wedding. I also don't understand why, in your words, you would "tear the family apart" by choosing not to attend the wedding.

Your granddaughter wants you there because she loves you. Her only intention is to have her family with her on an important day in her life.

I highly recommend you not complicate the experience by making it something more

than it is. Get a good beach dress, a nice beach hat, and your biggest smile and be with your granddaughter on her special day.

Q *If I'm not aware that something I'm doing is a sin and I later discover that it is, must I also confess the bad confessions and blasphemous Communion I received during the time I was unknowingly committing the sin? I need your help and guidance to find peace in this matter.*



A Only a mortal sin would have the ramifications you describe, and I'm at a loss as to how one accidentally commits a mortal sin. I've checked an exhaustive list of mortal sins in a reference book and am unable to imagine how any of them can be committed without full consent of the will, which requires personal awareness.

Talk to your confessor about this and get some clarification and good catechetical direction. You seemed to be confused, and your confusion isn't helping your spiritual growth.

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