

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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A Christmas Bundle

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR

As my Christmas gift to the members of the Scrupulous Anonymous family, I thought it might be appropriate to offer some “stocking stuffers” in the spirit of the season. These little gifts will be short reflections on subjects of interest to the readership that seemingly don’t merit a full-blown presentation. I’m taking this approach not because they’re not important considerations, but rather because they’re concerns that are perhaps a little more limited in scope and interest. Normally in this newsletter we try to discuss subjects of general interest, so enjoy this variety of shorter subject matter.

Novenas, devotional practices, and other prayers

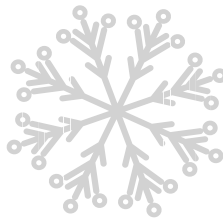
It’s not at all unusual to find, tucked away in a pew or lying on the parson’s table in the back of church, a copy of a novena to St. Jude or some other saint. Often the novena is packaged with the promise that if it’s prayed for nine consecutive days—if the chain of days is unbroken—the person who prays will be

rewarded with an answer. I’m often asked whether I encourage the praying of such novena prayers.

My consistent answer is *yes and a no*. I encourage the praying of novena prayers and prayers of devotion because they represent a strong spiritual practice within our Church family. We’ve long been encouraged to invoke the intercession of saints, and such intercessory prayers have a prominent place in our community.

However, intercessory prayer is not considered magical or manipulative, and results aren’t guaranteed. If such prayers always produced the intended result or action, every person in the universe would pray in this manner. We’d have a lot less sickness, many more happy families, many more lottery winners.

That doesn’t happen, so I believe we fundamentally understand that prayer isn’t intended to be anything more than an expression of faith and of our ultimate dependence on God. If you understand this, then yes, by all means pray—but “no” the results of your prayer are simply a grace from God.



The Dark Night of the Soul

One of the great spiritual masters of all time is St. John of the Cross. His reputation as a saint and mystic is beyond reproach, and his spiritual directives have aided many people on their spiritual journey. Perhaps his most well known—and most misunderstood—spiritual dictum is the “dark night of the soul.”

A person enters the “dark night” after practicing mental prayer and contemplative silence for prolonged periods. It doesn’t just spontaneously occur, but it’s a necessary step in the process of growing in spiritual discipline and practice. It’s not inflicted on a person out of the clear blue sky—it’s an invitation from the Spirit of the Lord to a deeper maturity. As such, a true experience of the “dark night of the soul” is very rare.

However, people commonly mistake that term to mean any period of dryness or difficulty in prayer. A trained spiritual director or mentor is very helpful in directing and navigating a person through these occasional experiences, which are normal in any spiritual practice. A true experience of St. John of the Cross and his directives for navigating the deeper contemplative and mystical experience of the dark night of the soul requires an even more experienced and mature director.

In general, people with scrupulosity that is a manifestation of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) don’t usually have an experience of the dark night. Their spiritual struggle is more the result of the draining and damaging manifestations of scrupulosity. People with scrupulosity who believe they’re having an experience of the dark night should seek trained, experienced, mature spiritual direction. You need to clarify your experience to receive the most helpful guidance on your spiritual journey.

Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit

The Scripture passage that provokes the most fear and anxiety in a person with scrupulosity is this: “Therefore, I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven” (Matthew 12:31).

I’ve written about this sin and the fear of this sin on numerous occasions in the SA newsletter. It’s also a topic we discuss at length during SA retreats.

A very small percentage of people do commit this sin, but I believe that people with scrupulosity—people who want so much to please God that they constantly doubt that they’re capable of doing so perfectly—are *incapable* of committing the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The decision to commit this sin and the necessary components of the conditions of grave and serious sin are simply not operable.

Many scrupulous people *imagine* that they’ve committed this sin and are capable of assuming the fear and anxiety that go along with it. However, there’s a huge difference between the sin and the fear of the sin.

I know that, after reading my assertion that scrupulous people are incapable of committing the sin against the Holy Spirit, some readers have already dismissed the validity of that assertion. They’re so gripped by their scrupulosity that even when they receive positive and life-giving direction that should relieve and free them, they assume it doesn’t apply to them. Such people consistently see themselves as the exception to everything because they’re so bad, so sinful, and so misunderstood.

For these people, I repeat my earlier assertion. “Even *you* are incapable of committing this sin, although you are most certainly capable of imagining you’re somehow guilty of it.”

To Yield Fruit

The following is adapted from *God Is Always There: Psalms for Every Moment* by Kathleen Atkinson, OSB (Liguori Publications, © 2012).

To live in faith is our birthright rather than something we earn. It's a sacred gift for us to receive with open hands. It's a gift from God—from God—so how could we not welcome it fully? Yet sometimes we forget. When we live in faith, we stand tall when everyone around us cowers. It is to live with deep faith as all around us changes. It is to live with a resounding yes when everyone around us says no. Living in faith is the daily walk of those who live from the interior of their heart rather than from external circumstances.

As we lift up our souls with the psalmist, groan with thirst, and ponder in amazement, we create space for prayer and a place for God within us. This is how it's possible to live in faith. Living in faith means to believe in the transforming power of God and to move beyond fear into a new and uncharted way of living. Faith doesn't undo fear but unravels it little by little as a safe place is created where we can name it. That place is with God.

PSALM 1

Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.
The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

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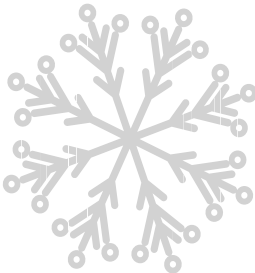
MAILBOX

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Q *Is “regifting” a sin? If I regift, must I inform the recipient that I didn’t buy the item specifically for him or her, but instead received it as a gift?*

A No. “Regifting” is in no circumstance considered sinful. It may even be considered a virtue—a type of frugality that’s beyond reproach.

If you’ve received a gift that you’d just as soon return or exchange but you choose to give it to someone else, that is perfectly acceptable behavior. There’s no need to inform the person you’ve chosen this option.



Q *I always feel anxious this time of year when someone asks about my New Year’s resolutions. How do I inform someone in casual conversation that I avoid such resolutions because of my scrupulosity? I have a tendency to get all concerned about “private vows” and promises, and my confessor has advised me to not engage in this practice for my spiritual health and well-being.*

A Congratulations on your determination to follow the prudent advice of your confessor! This is a very important component of your spiritual practice, and it’s admirable.

When people ask about this, they’re not trying to probe into your personal practice—they’re just making conversation. You can casually say, “Oh, I’ll probably give something up.” That usually gets an understanding response from everyone, because we’ve all been down that road.

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