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The Miseries of Mystery

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

Christians proclaim our belief in one God—a triune God consisting of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We can proclaim our belief, but we cannot explain what it means.

That doesn't stop us from trying. We say the Trinity is like a triangle or a shamrock. But every time we try to say the Trinity is like something else, we come up short. We're brought face to face with the frustration that always occurs when we try to put theological mystery into words. We might call it a misery of language.

We experience more serious misery each day when we read, watch, or listen to the news as we're brought face to face with the continuing conflict among Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Even though these three great monotheistic religions share and revere many of the same ancestors in faith, we cannot seem to get along culturally, politically, or theologically.

We're assured that these conflicts aren't religious wars, but all war has a religious aspect in that Christians, Muslims, and Jews alike call on God for the strength to prevail against their enemies. Again, our feeble attempts to explain

what we proclaim to believe comes up short. It's the misery of history repeating itself, a source of great suffering for all.

How did we get to this place in faith and this place of misery, this celebration of the mystery of a Triune God?

The journey wasn't fast or easy. It took the Christian community hundreds of years to agree about the Trinity and how the mystery of the Trinity can best be expressed. People of good faith had strong disagreements and offered well-thought-out arguments and opinions about how God is revealed to us. It was tricky for them to insist that there is one God expressed in three persons, just as it's tricky for us to comprehend and appreciate the mystery of what we celebrate.

We can say many things about God, but we can never fully explain or comprehend who God is. Despite our theology, our creeds, and our dogmas, God still comes to us shrouded in mystery. For every answer, another question arises.

This is why I hesitate to speak for God. I hesitate to insist that something is God's will or that something is intended by God to be a certain way.

I'm more than willing to assert that God is the final answer, but I'm unsure where we are in the process of the revelation of the Truth that is God. Are we at the beginning, the middle, or the end of the revelation we identify as mystery?

People with scrupulosity prefer certitude. When the answers to our questions only bring us face to face with more questions and mystery, we're not satisfied or assured. It's the misery of never completely knowing.

But perhaps it's in the mystery, or the attempt to understand the mystery, or the process of the mystery slowly being revealed to us that we discover

an essential lesson of faith. Perhaps something in the experience of not knowing is essential for the spiritual journey. How would our relationship with God be different if our questions were replaced with certitude?

Upon reflection, I believe I *prefer* the questions. I'm attracted to the mystery, to the idea of more to come, that we're nowhere close to the finish line.

Either way, despite scrupulosity and our shared miseries, as people of faith we continue to pray with a growing confidence, "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen."

Fr. Tom's Radio Show Discontinued

Due to scheduling conflicts and increasing demands on Fr. Tom's time, his scrupulosity call-in program on Radio Maria USA has ended. You can, however, still listen to the podcasts of previously aired programs at radiomaria.us/scrupulosity.

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Practical Advice From St. Alphonsus: Conforming Our Wills to God's

The following reflection is adapted from *Plentiful Redemption: An Introduction to Alphonsian Spirituality* by Fr. Dennis Billy, CSSR (Liguori Publications, © 2001. All rights reserved).

1. Ordinary or Common Accidents. Conformity with God's will means that we accept things that happen to us from *without* (great heat or great cold) and from *within* (hunger, poverty, disgrace). Even in imaginary cases the mind (or the devil) cooks up, our deepest desire should be to seek and carry out God's will.

2. Natural Defects. Alphonsus tells us not to be upset by our natural limitations. Whatever it is—a bad memory, a weak limb, or poor health—we should not complain about our condition. Only one thing is necessary for salvation: conformity to God's will.

3. Corporal Maladies. Alphonsus tells us to embrace our infirmities “willingly, both in such a manner, and for such a time, as God wills.” If normal remedies fail, we should resign ourselves to God's will and unite our sufferings with Jesus' Passion.

4. Loss of Useful Persons. Loss of a spiritual director does not mean God has abandoned

us. Alphonsus recommends that we ask God to give us the strength to carry on.

5. Spiritual Desolation. Alphonsus points out that the ordinary condition of the saints was one of spiritual dryness. Such desolation is not always a punishment; sometimes it's for our greater good.

6. Death. It doesn't matter our age when we die, the time when we die, or even how we die. What matters is that we resign ourselves to God's providential care and place our trust entirely in him. It does no one any good to remain alive longer than God wills.

7. Spiritual Goods. God promises to give us what we need. When we fall short, we should not lose heart, but humbly admit our faults, do penance, and seek even greater assistance from God. What is more, if God does not elevate us to a high degree of sanctity, Alphonsus bids us to conform ourselves to God's will and pray for God's mercy.



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NEWSLETTER@LIGUORI.ORG

Q *I woke up abruptly at 3 o'clock in the morning with blasphemous thoughts about the Blessed Mother. Did I cause these thoughts? Have I have committed a mortal sin?*

A You're not responsible for the expressions of your unconscious mind or your dreams. Weird, unexplainable, and even terrifying thoughts, words, and images are part of the dream state. We don't fully understand the experience, but we do understand that we're not responsible for what happens.

Q *My next-door neighbor has a dog that barks nonstop. I often prayed the dog would die so I could get some peace. Then he died unexpectedly and suddenly. Did I somehow cause his death?*

A You do not have the power to make things happen by thinking or wanting them. Healthy dogs die unexpectedly. You just happen to live next door to a neighbor whose dog died unexpectedly. Enjoy the quiet and stop thinking you are responsible for the dog's death or the quiet.

See page 2 for important announcements.

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