



What Is Truth?

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Do you remember your first lie? Not the first time you might have feared you lied but your first lie. Can you remember the first time someone asked for a direct answer to a question and you then said something less than the truth? Perhaps it was the standard, “I don’t know,” or the whine, “Don’t ask me.” Whatever and whenever it was, we have lied. And the lies didn’t stop at childhood’s end.

As adults, our lying becomes more skilled and practiced. In our relationships we have learned the proper and acceptable way to deny something or someone without having to come right out with it. For example, we might say something like, “That’s interesting,” when all the time we’re thinking and feeling that it’s anything but interesting. In fact, it’s downright uninteresting, boring, and we wish it would be over or the person would go. In such a situation we have convinced ourselves that it’s better to hide our feelings and our true convictions—or so we’ve learned. In this instance we’re being less than truthful—not sinning—but engaging in socially acceptable less-than-truthful talk.

Other kinds of lies are more pervasive and subtle. Deep within each of us there is a whole collection of fear, anxieties, and guilt that we would prefer that no one ever knows anything about. We’ve learned to

make sure we never give ourselves away. There are many ways to hide the truth of our lives, to protect ourselves from being vulnerable, to resist the urge to trust another person with the deepest part of ourselves. I believe this experience of vulnerability lies at the heart of scrupulosity: The scrupulous person doesn’t trust any hint of vulnerability and perceives it as a profound failing, an unforgivable weakness and sin, not as a grace.

In the Gospel narrative of the passion of Jesus Christ, Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” Pilate knew human behavior well. He understood how people used one another. He understood that many times the people before him to be judged were often

not that much different from those in the audience, except they were the unfortunate ones who got caught. Pilate had heard every kind of lie, seen every kind of plot, experienced the never-ending dance of one person jockeying for position over another. To this man the question, “What is truth?” had to be answered: “Whatever it seems to be, and whatever is most convenient and useful at the moment.”

The problem for Pilate, so calloused and so tired, was that he had heard so many lies in his own life that he had become hardened. When the truth finally was spoken before him, he recognized it for what it was and was attracted to it, but he was unable to embrace it. Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent, that Jesus was being used by the chief priests and the scribes for their own political ends, but he did not have the courage to embrace the truth and make the decision that truth and justice demanded of him. Years of a practiced and hardened heart had eaten his soul away to the point that he was no longer able to embrace any real experience that would give life.

Contrast Pilate with Jesus, who lived and embraced the truth yet knew well the father of lies—Satan—and had in fact wrestled with him in the desert. Truth alone brought Jesus face to face with his opposite. Not ambition, power, the desire to dominate to make a difference, or any other fundamental lie.

What is truth? The choice, the contrast, and the result are all clearly presented for our meditation and reflection right now. Perhaps it’s an important question for each member of our SA family as we come to the end of 2017 and begin 2018. It’s important because it can bring us face to face with our experience of scrupulosity. It brings us face to face with our human fragility and vulnerability, an experience that is shared by all human beings without exception.

Think of it in this way. The scrupulous condition is the ultimate liar, the ultimate experience of what it means to be caught in a lie. The scrupulous condition persists in repeating a mantra that never gets old: *You are not good enough, this thought is a sacrilege, you are responsible for everything, anxiety is a sign that you did something wrong and immoral.* And the list can go on and on. They’re all lies, the opposite of the truth about ourselves and our relationship with God.

Because we have heard so many lies that originate in our scrupulosity, we are like Pilate, hardened to the truth and unable to embrace the truth even when we feel we should. There is a part of us that just believes real truth *has* to be another lie. It cannot be the truth, and so we pass by again and again the opportunity for the manifestation of God’s grace and life.

The end of one year and the beginning of another is a good time to pray for the grace of a soft heart that is open to the experience of truth. Now is the time to pray for the grace to risk believing that the good news of the gospel is good news for us, too, not just for everyone else. It’s important to find a way each day to embrace what is truthful and to find a way to resist what is not.

As I’ve said in the past, living the truth will bring us face to

face with the experience of fragility and vulnerability, core experiences of being human. Our scrupulosity insists that the truth of vulnerability and fragility is false and must be avoided or confessed. The truth is exactly the opposite. We *are* vulnerable and fragile, and to pretend to be other than who we are is the ultimate untruth.

What is truth? It’s both uncomfortable and often tinged with anxiety, but it leads us ultimately to the experience of our humanity, and in that experience we encounter the God who loves us. ✨



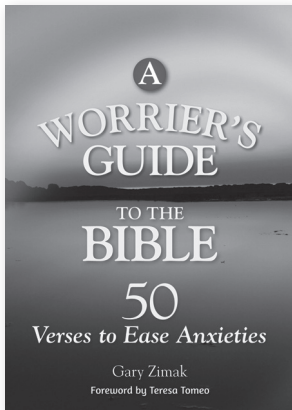
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“Pray, hope, and don't worry!”

—Padre Pio

If there was ever a case for fear, this was it! The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and asked her to become the mother of the long-awaited Savior. The details? It will happen by the power of the Holy Spirit. How would we respond to this invitation? I can honestly see myself saying, “No thanks...I'm not the right person for the job,” or, “Let me get back to you in a few days.” Mary's response? “I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). She had such trust in the will of God that she went along with the plan without knowing most of the details.

For many of us, the unknown can be a great source of anxiety. When my father was diagnosed with cancer, he was very nervous about the effects of the chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Would he feel sick? Would he become very weak? Would there be a lot of pain? His anxiety increased as he neared the date of the first chemotherapy session. When the day arrived, I sat with him as the drugs were administered and we spoke about many things. I discussed problems with my job and he offered his wise, fatherly advice. As the minutes passed and he wasn't feeling any worse, he began to relax. Afterward, the entire family celebrated with a big lunch and a nice dessert. Once Dad knew what to expect, he was able to relax (to some extent) because the previously cloudy side effects of the treatment were now known.



While learning the facts can turn fear into peace, we are often asked to face frightening situations without knowing the facts. Illness, job loss, marriage difficulties, pregnancy, and many other occurrences are sometimes thrust upon us unexpectedly. Just like Mary, we must sometimes face an uncertain future with few or no details. The secret to experiencing peace in these situations involves trusting in God.

When faced with the unknown, we can take comfort that many, like Mary, have lived with great faith. Mary experienced uncertainty when the angel appeared, but she trusted in the Lord's provisions. Do you find it difficult to say yes when facing an unknown future? Mary understands. Ask for her help. You'll be amazed at how much peace you can feel once you stop trying to face your problems all by yourself.

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Holy Mary, you trusted in God's plan even when it didn't make sense. Pray for us, that we may develop a greater trust in the Lord's perfect will for our lives. Amen. ✨

Q. *At this time of year, I get many unsolicited requests for donations. I have no problem ignoring most of them, but I'm conflicted about appeals that come with cards, medals, and other religious items. What am I supposed to do with those things? Do I have to send a donation because I received an item in the mail?*

A. Solicitations for a religious purpose or some other purpose can all be understood in the same manner. It's a solicitation, an invitation to you from an organization or another person to meet their needs. Any solicitation can be ignored, and there is no obligation to pay for any item that has been sent as part of the appeal. If you're uncomfortable with throwing away the items that arrive in the solicitation, there's usually a place in your parish or at the parish office where religious items can be recycled and put to good use.



Q. *During the holidays I see many unfamiliar faces in church. Many of these people, whom I will never see until the next holiday, get in the Communion line and receive Holy Communion. Do I have an obligation to inform them that they should not be in line until they have received the sacrament of reconciliation?*

A. The short answer is no. The long answer is that you have no obligation to police the church Communion line. The pastoral practice of the Catholic Church applies in these situations, and the pastoral practice is that people can't assume they know or understand any other person's conscience or relationship with Jesus. What you think you may know may not be the truth. Be concerned about your own spiritual practice and not the spiritual practice or any perceived lack of spiritual practice of your brother or sister.



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