



The Limits of Free Will

The other day I looked in my bathroom mirror and saw my mother. My mother wasn't really in my bathroom; she was hundreds of miles away in her own home. What I saw was a reminder of my mother in my reflection.

Upon reflection, and not just the reflection provided by the bathroom mirror, I've learned that I'm a lot like my mother. I'm thankful I share with her many qualities that are positive and life-giving. We share a sense of loyalty and commitment, sometimes to a fault, but nonetheless they're essential parts of our lives. I have her work commitment, some of her sense of humor, and we both have a deep devotion to our Catholic faith and practice.

Through the years I've come to realize that when we had conflicts, it was mostly because our personalities clashed. We were and are much like each other. At times that worked well, other times it didn't. Even though we've had many different experiences in life and even though we often perceive life and its meaning in different ways, we

share enough with each other that there are more similarities than dissimilarities. I certainly enjoyed seeing her in my reflection.

Human beings like to think they are unique. We like to imagine ourselves with perhaps more freedom than the evidence would suggest and

support. Regardless of how one-of-a-kind we might be, we share with members of our family certain behaviors, hereditary traits, DNA, RNA, and physical attributes over which we have no real control. We're also more influenced by culture, context, sociology, and psychology than we may have imagined or thought possible.

At the same time, we continue to learn and, hopefully, appreciate our own sense of self and direction. Part of that journey includes personally accepting all that we are, even the parts of ourselves that have been shared with us by others.

When all of this is thrown into the mix of our existence, when we learn more each day about what it means to be human, we might gain a greater perspective about free will. God gave us free will. That's central to our understanding of our

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relationship with God and the role of grace at work in our lives. But our will isn't as free as we may imagine. Said another way, we're not as isolated as we feared, and we're more connected than we may believe. Indeed, some decisions for which we may have assumed full responsibility aren't as clearly ours to own as we might believe.

Just look at everyday life and the challenges that come with being connected with and dependent on things over which we have little or no control. If you smell baking bread and Grandma's house comes to mind, you have no more control over that memory popping up than you do over the color of your eyes. On a deeper level, when you're dog-tired and ultra-discouraged and ending it all pops into your head, that's no sin or anything to worry about. It's a normal reaction to being tired and worn out. In another example, if you see someone attractive, it's



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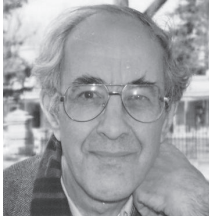
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natural to feel physically attracted to that person, not something to feel guilty over.

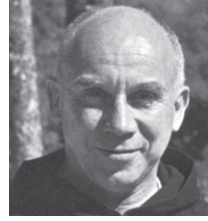
Obviously, the list of examples could go on and on. What's important is to realize that your free will may not be as great as you think it is. This is especially true for those who suffer from scrupulosity. One of the symptoms and sufferings that accompany those with scrupulosity is an exaggerated sense of responsibility and free will. In the examples in the previous paragraph, a person with scrupulosity may conclude that he generated the thoughts of grandma's house, suicide, or lust. These thoughts are natural and out of your control. Free will doesn't come into the equation at all.

When I looked at myself in my bathroom mirror and saw my mother looking back at me, I was merely experiencing further understanding and appreciation into who I am. Of course, being human includes exercising free will responsibly. But just as important is to learn, accept, and appreciate aspects of ourselves that are simply part of who we are: spiritual, grace-filled children of God. Reflect on that. ☸

God Changed History Through Motherhood



HENRI NOUWEN (1932-1996) taught at Notre Dame and Harvard. Always restless, he spent time living as a monk in the Trappist Monastery of the Genesee in Upstate New York.



THOMAS MERTON, OCSO—Trappist monk, hermit, peace activist, poet, retreat leader, and spiritual writer—was one of the most charismatic religious figures of our time. He died in 1968—fifty years ago this

month—at age fifty-three.

I am deeply moved by the simple and mysterious encounter [of the Visitation]....Two women meet each other and affirm in each other the promise given them. The humanly impossible has happened to them. God has come to them to begin the salvation promised through the ages. Through these two women God has decided to change the course of history. Who could ever understand? Who could ever believe it? Who could ever let it happen? For three months Mary and Elizabeth live together and encourage each other to truly accept the motherhood given to them. Mary's presence makes Elizabeth more fully aware of becoming the mother of the "prophet of the Most High" (Luke 1:76), and Elizabeth's presence allows Mary to grow in the knowledge of becoming the Mother of the "Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32) (from Nouwen's *The Road to Daybreak*).

Prayer: *Lord, as we prepare for your birth as Mary's Son, may we find our own "Elizabeth" to be a refuge of wisdom, comfort, and joy. Let us acknowledge to you that we are never too old, never too filled with the effects of sin, never too far away to receive you and your Mother with all hospitality and trust. Amen.*

PHOTO OF HENRI NOUWEN BY FRANK HAMILTON

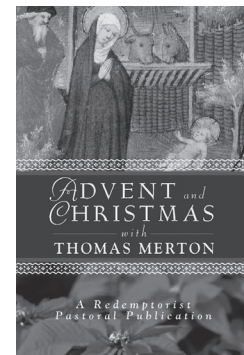
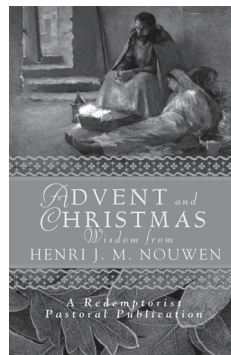
The genuine significance of Catholic devotion to Mary is to be seen in the light of the Incarnation itself. The Church cannot separate the Son and the Mother....

Mary, who was empty of all egotism, free from all sin, was as pure as the glass of a very clean window that has no other function than to admit the light of the sun. If we rejoice in that light, we implicitly praise the cleanness of the window. And of course it might be argued that in such a case we might well forget the window altogether. This is true. And yet the Son of God, in emptying Himself of His majestic power, having become a child, abandoning Himself in complete dependence to the loving care of a human Mother, in a certain sense draws our attention once again to her. The Light has wished to remind us of the window, because He is grateful to her and because He has infinitely tender and personal love for her (from Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation*).

PHOTO OF THOMAS MERTON BY CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE

Sources:
Advent and Christmas Wisdom from Henri J. M. Nouwen (812187) and
Advent and Christmas with Thomas Merton (808432).

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Q. *My younger brother committed suicide two weeks ago by overdosing on drugs. I'm so afraid that his soul is lost. Maybe in his last moments he could have found grace so his soul could be saved. I could have prayed more or done something more. It just hurts so much.*

A. Your brother is not damned. Suicide is understood as the result of sickness, not free choice, and most certainly it's not sinful. What you're feeling is tremendous grief, which is exactly what you should be feeling. Unfortunately, your experience of grief is complicated by OCD thinking that makes your emotions a real mess. Grieve for your brother and pray for your family. Your brother is with God. Of that I have no doubt.

Q. *Is it normal for scrupulous people to be scared of sin, especially of impure thoughts? I'm consumed by impure thoughts and blasphemy. I'm trying to hold on to my understanding that there is no sin here and no grave matter because I have not freely chosen them. I think I'm just experiencing emotional anxiety and fear. Am I correct?*

A. Yes, by God's grace. Hold on to that conviction despite your fear and your anxiety. There is no sin and no culpability even in the smallest sense. You have basically described how scrupulosity is manifested and also how it can be confronted and managed.



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