



Answers from the Head and Heart

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It has been a few months since we've devoted the entire reflection portion of this newsletter to the "SA Mailbox." The mailbox has always been a popular feature of our newsletter, but I've put off expanding it. Not because there weren't enough questions to consider. Rather, the demands of other themes that were suggested seemed to be the place where our energy needed to be spent. This month, we'll remedy this absence and dive right into some recent letters from our readers. I hope you find this Q & A helpful.

Q. *I have confessed my sins to a priest, but I don't think I have explained them correctly. Shall I confess them again in order to make them clear to the confessor? My second question involves my decision to split up a mortal sin so that it wouldn't sound as bad to the confessor. If I split up a sin, is that wrong, or can you confess your sins in any order that you prefer?*

A. It's the confessor's responsibility to ask you any follow-up questions for clarity and for a fuller description of what you're confessing. If he doesn't ask questions, then you can rightly assume that he understands what you're confessing. Confessors are skilled listeners and know how to sort out the details that sin includes. Their skills are developed over time and are dependent on the grace of the sacrament. The only thing the confessor can't do is determine if you're deliberately hiding something, since he can't read your mind and heart. You're free to confess your sins in any manner you choose. There's no preferred order and no ranking system. Confess as you are able and as you see fit. That's all that's required, nothing more.



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Q. *How do you find hope when so many saints I know about have said that the vast majority of people are going to hell?*

A. There is a simple solution to this dilemma. Stop reading fiction. Especially heretical fiction. The opinion that most people are going to go to hell directly contradicts the teaching of Jesus and the Church. Jesus desires our salvation, not our damnation. That's why we have been redeemed. If Jesus wanted everyone to go to hell, he could have avoided the saving action and grace of the Incarnation. Jesus became human to save and redeem us.

Q. *Last night I potentially committed a mortal sin. However, I'm almost certain I did so in a dream. At this point I'm choosing not to confess it. If it was a mortal sin, though, how can I be sure that it will be forgiven unless I confess it? Or does the uncertainty regarding the possible source of the sin make it nonmortal, even if I'm wrong about it happening in a dream?*

A. No one can commit a sin in a dream. No matter how powerful it might feel, there is no possibility of sinning while dreaming. There is nothing to confess here.

Grieve for your brother and pray for him and for your family. Ask for the grace of God's peace in your life during this time of loss.

Q. *My younger brother died two weeks ago of a deliberate drug overdose, and I'm consumed with guilt. I know it's normal to feel like this, but I can't get past the spiritual guilt. I feel that I did not pray enough for him. I'm so afraid that his soul is lost and it's my fault. I hope that in his last moments he might have found grace so his soul could be saved.*

A. Your brother is not damned. Suicide is understood as the result of sickness, not free choice, and it certainly is not sinful. What you're feeling is tremendous grief for a person you loved. This is exactly what you should be feeling. Unfortunately, your intense feeling is complicated by the craziness of OCD thinking, which makes your emotions a real mess. There is nothing you could have done to prevent this tragedy and nothing more that you should have done. What you can do is what you're doing. Grieve for your brother. Pray for him and for your family. Ask for the grace of God's peace in your life during this time of loss. Your brother is with God. Of that I have no doubt.



Q. *As we are about to enter Lent [on March 6], I'm struggling once again as I always do in preparation for this holy season. I often feel as though my Lenten practices and sacrifices are insufficient and I need to do more for God, but then I make them burdensome. What are some good Lenten practices for people who struggle with scrupulosity?*

A. Prayerfully consider this suggestion. How about no additional spiritual practices? Additional practices will just be a continuing source of anxiety for you. Instead, how about a simple prayer: "My God I love you. Help me to love myself and to learn to be patient with myself and your grace. Amen."

Lenten practices are supposed to help. They should never be burdensome and should never require heroic virtue. Often, a simple spiritual practice is the best. This may be difficult for a scrupulous person to accept. If you find yourself struggling with your own spiritual work, please read 2 Kings 5:10-14. Perhaps the experience of Naaman and the prophet Elisha will be helpful.

Q. *My question is about gossip. I sometimes speak before thinking. If something pops into my head for a split second and then comes out of my mouth, I feel like I gossiped. Is this a mortal sin? I know we can't sin mortally by accident, but if I only thought about it for a second, is this enough time for reflection? This is driving me crazy.*

A. As is often the case, the correct answer and the answer you seek is in the question itself. You can't mortally sin accidentally. Random and uncontrolled thoughts are part of the human condition and experience of life. They are not descriptive of moral culpability and responsibility. ⚙

That concludes our extended sampling from the "SA Mailbox." If you have a question to be considered, please submit it through our Facebook page, *Scrupulous Anonymous*, or via scrupulousanonymous.org, our website. Due to volume, not all questions will be answered, but all are read and considered. Many contribute to the determination of a monthly theme that informs the topic for this monthly newsletter.

Scrupulous Anonymous **Mailbox**

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*I discovered a prayer that I find helpful, and perhaps you will, too.
It's from St. Gregory of Narek, an Armenian Orthodox mystic.*

Lord, take me out of my prison and free me from my bonds.
Remove my chains and rescue me from drowning.
Free me from anxiety and release me from my irons.
Deliver me from preoccupation and banish my doubts.
Console my sadness and calm my vexation.
Dispel my afflictions and quiet my agitation.
Cure me of my tears and stop my groaning.
Drive away my lamentations and heal my sobbing.



Help Me to be Gentle with Myself

Loving God, so many times when I look back at my life, I focus on my failures and inadequacies—all the things I didn't do and should have done, and the many things I didn't do well. I am my own worst critic, and often I am far more critical than kind.

Of course, my life has not been perfect. Yes, I did make mistakes, I failed, and I sinned. But none of that makes me a failure. You still love me unconditionally, and I want to love myself that way, too. Teach me to be gentle with myself.

My flaws do not make me a loser. I am a winner precisely because I am made in your image and like-

ness—and even with my flaws, that will never change. Besides, there is nothing you cannot forgive. You have forgiven my worst sins and set me free.

In being gentle with myself, I want to be set free from the harsh, judgmental attitudes I so often manifest toward myself. I want to learn to be as kind and gentle toward myself as you have been to me. I believe that, with your help, I can learn to relate to myself in this way.

For your gentleness and for the gracious love, mercy, and compassion you show to me every day, dear God, I thank you with all my heart.

Amen.

Litany of Forgiveness

For the times I lacked compassion and concern for others—*forgive me, Lord.*

For my failures to pray and take the time to talk to you—*forgive me, Lord.*

For not sharing my resources: my time, talent, and treasure—*forgive me, Lord.*

For holding grudges and refusing to have a forgiving heart—*forgive me, Lord.*

For the times I have criticized and gossiped—*forgive me, Lord.*

For not caring for myself physically, emotionally, and spiritually—*forgive me, Lord.*

For the ways I misused nature and damaged the environment—*forgive me, Lord.*

For my prejudices, biases, and deliberate acts of discrimination—*forgive me, Lord.*

For the misuse and abuse of the wonderful gift of sexuality—*forgive me, Lord.*

For failing to see your face in the homeless and the helpless—*forgive me, Lord.*

For believing I could save myself—*forgive me, Lord.*

For not living fully for you—*forgive me, Lord.*

For my lack of faith, hope, and love—*forgive me, Lord.*

For doubting that you can and will forgive me unconditionally—*forgive me, Lord.*

For doubting that you love me with an everlasting love—*forgive me, Lord.*

Amen.

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