



## Our Christmas Stocking

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In celebration of the great feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, it's appropriate to go to the "SA Mailbox," our Christmas "stocking." Our mailbox has always provided a popular monthly reflection. It's a perfect forum for answering concerns in a shorter amount of space than a typical column. I hope my two selections and answers help you. I wish you and yours a Merry Christmas and a happy and healthy New Year.

**Q.** *I consider psychiatric medication to be a method of cheating. I've finally managed to express exactly what I feel and think about psychiatric medication as a treatment in the cases of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), anxiety disorders, and depression: that it's CHEATING!*

**A.** I understand concerns about medication, but medicine helps many with the disorders you mention, and scrupulosity as well. I hope I can help allay your fears.

Theologically, it's incorrect to imply or assert that God singles out otherwise healthy men and women and inflicts them with disorders so they might suffer. On the contrary, Christianity celebrates a loving incarnate God in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus came to unite us and to connect us even more profoundly to our

heavenly Father. There are many reasons people struggle with ailments and disorders, but it's not because God has decided they should suffer.

Second, the opinion expressed in the question exemplifies the vastly off-base thinking found in scrupulosity. Medical science clearly benefits humanity in correcting or managing many problems, including scrupulosity. It isn't cheating to take a pill for, say, pain. A pain pill can help. And under the care of a doctor, people with scrupulosity often benefit from medicine.

My friend, I suggest it would be healthy for you and others who may have a similar opinion to praise God for the gift of medical aids that enhance our personal growth and development. Such thinking reflects a healthy perspective and a mature spirituality.



**Q.** *Impure thoughts and desires, especially those that arrive unwanted right before our celebration of holy Communion, continue to be my main source of suffering. I have tried everything, but I just cannot make such thoughts stop. It seems to be hopeless, and I feel as if I am condemned as a result.*

**A.** I can feel your level of frustration and anxiety in the summary of your condition you have shared. It speaks of a terrible and nonstop form of suffering, effectively denying you peace of mind and the satisfaction of knowing that you have tried. You have described both the pain and the struggle of one form of scrupulously.

While I can't offer you a clear directive, perhaps I can give some insights that are helpful. The first is to say what I advise, and that is you'll probably never control your thoughts and your desires, but you can learn to manage your emotional reaction to such thoughts. In order to achieve some sense of peace and effective management, a change in perspective and understanding is required.

There are no impure thoughts. Placing normal human erotic energy in an "impure and sinful" category represents a misunderstanding of human sexuality. It's not a sin to be a sexual person. It's not a sin to feel erotic energy. On the contrary, it's normal and part of a healthy and mature life. People who don't feel such energy or accept themselves as sexual would be unhealthy and likely lacking in

their psychosexual development. Sexual energy is a result of life. There is no condemnation in feeling it.

With this small insight as a starting point, the issue you may be dealing with is anxiety about holy Communion. You may feel uneasy going to Communion, and you've learned that the most effective emotive response that reflects the depth of your unease is best expressed by associating a sexual thought or feeling with your anxiety. The depth of what you feel is probably the result of the importance you've assigned to sexual energy and your perception that such energy ultimately displeases God. Without the complication of sexual energy, you could have the same impulse of anxiety but you might ultimately feel completely different. It's the combination of both the anxiety and the sexual energy that produces the feeling you dread. None of these feelings are sinful or reflective of a free and conscious choice. Rather, they are the result of scrupulosity manifested.

For you and others who feel similarly, the pathway to some sense of peace is to learn to manage and ultimately separate anxiety from sexual energy during the time you experience holy Communion. You might find it helpful to explore your sexual identity and feelings with a trained medical professional or, if you prefer, a trusted confessor or counselor. If you can learn how to manage your thoughts and understand your erotic impulses, you may well achieve some peace. ☀



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# Seeing Things through the Lens of Mercy

**T**here's a wonderful anecdote about Pope Francis visiting his optician in Rome. Emerging from the appointment, he faced a crowd of people who had gathered in anticipation of seeing him. When asked how the appointment went, the Pope replied, "My optician says I need new lenses. But I'm going to keep the same frames."

Vatican watchers have speculated that in making such a statement, Pope Francis was offering us an insight into his papal ministry: he is not meddling with the Church's fundamental doctrine ("the same frames") but is urging us to see things through a new lens, the lens of mercy.

In his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia)*, Pope Francis remarks how people sometimes feel that the Church's message "does not clearly reflect the preaching and attitudes of Jesus, who set forth a demanding ideal, yet never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman or the woman caught in adultery" (AL 38).

"In proposing values, we have to proceed slowly, taking into consideration...age and abilities, without presuming to apply rigid and inflexible methods. The valuable contributions of psychology and the educational sciences have shown that changing...behavior involves a gradual process..." (AL 273). This approach is known as the law of gradualness.

Saint Alphonsus Liguori would often begin a reflection on moral issues with the statement: "*Guardando la fragilita umana...*" ("Looking at human fragility..."). He shows extraordinary sensitivity to the actual experience of people

and their lived reality, "*guardando la fragilita umana.*" Alphonsus questioned the application of rigorous principles without any understanding of what lay at the root of certain practices among uneducated country shepherds. He took people as they were and worked from there. This is also an issue today as reactionaries criticize Pope

Francis for his openness to dialog with people, listening to their stories, and understanding their human fragility. He asserts in *Amoris Laetitia*, "No one can be condemned forever, because that is not the logic of the gospel." A

benign approach is rooted in one's faith in a God of compassion and mercy.

Alphonsus would never attempt to impose on penitents something that they were not ready in good conscience to accept. Though he may not have used the same words, Alphonsus would identify with Pope Francis' approach of "accompaniment, discernment, and integration of weakness." Alphonsus, during his sixty years of ministry as a priest and later as a bishop, never refused anyone absolution, although sometimes he may have delayed it as part of the "accompaniment" and "discernment" phase until people were ready. He understood the laws of gradual growth and transformation, giving priority to bringing people to a deep knowledge of and relationship with the person of Jesus the Redeemer as the necessary foundation for following his teaching. ☀

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# Mailbox

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We receive many letters with questions from the readers of this newsletter. I am most grateful for all of them. Questions help me understand the needs of our readers and keep the pastoral perspective that I offer up to date and relevant. Your questions also reflect the trust you have given to our SA newsletter over the years. I appreciate that trust very much, and I will never take it for granted.

I pray that this Christmas season will be an opportunity for you to deepen your experience of the living Jesus who is in our midst. May it be an occasion for the grace of God at work in your life to call you to a greater experience of knowing that you are loved and forgiven. Now and forever. Amen.

—Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR

## HOPE IN GOD STRENGTHENS US

The prophet Isaiah says,

“They that hope in the LORD will renew their strength,  
they will soar on eagles’ wings;

They will run and not grow weary,  
walk and not grow faint” (Isaiah 40:31).

They who place their confidence in God shall renew their strength; they shall lay aside their own weakness and shall acquire the strength of God; they shall fly like eagles in the way of the Lord, without fatigue....[They] who hope in the Lord shall be encompassed by his mercy, so that they shall never be abandoned by it.

—Excerpted from a sermon by St. Alphonsus Liguori

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