



Enter the Mystery

FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSSR

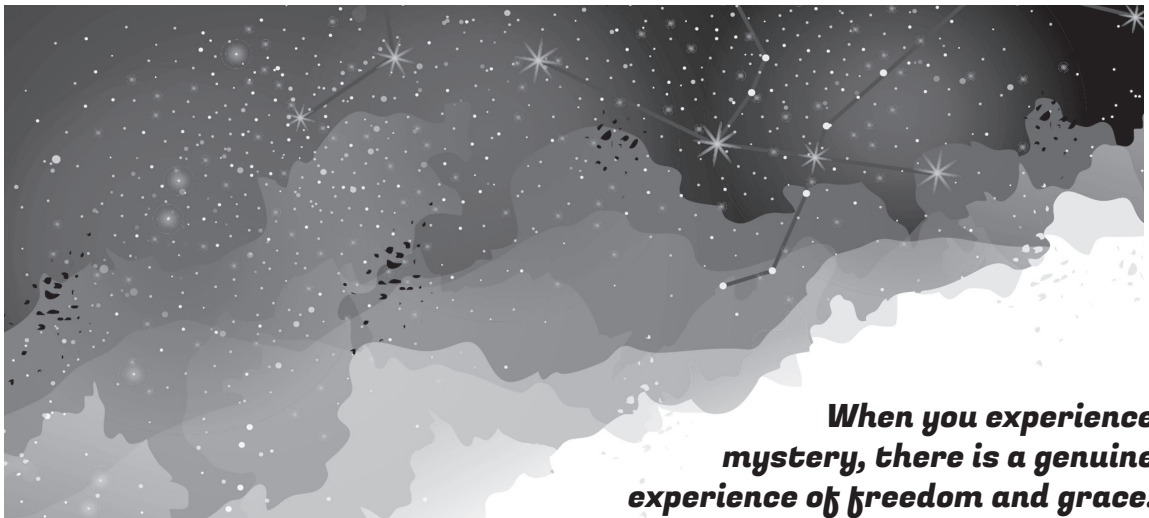
When I was a small child, I was motivated primarily by reward and punishment. I tried to be a good boy because that was what was expected of me. I tried to be good because I wanted to avoid the correction and the consequence that my mother would most certainly give to me if my behavior was unacceptable.

As I got older, the idea of reward and punishment, although still a part of my way of thinking, became replaced by a different set of values. With age and maturity, a different perspective and understanding about life seemed to be more inviting and necessary.

As I matured, I realized that I tried my best because I wanted to be the person I knew I was capable of being. I wanted to have honest and life-giving relationships with the people I lived and worked with.

I often chose to perform tasks when no one knew I was doing them simply because I knew they needed to be done and that the world, my community, my family would be better for my efforts. The idea of being rewarded for my good deeds never occurred to me.

Today I understand that the reason I live and behave the way I do and value what I value has little or nothing to do with reward and punishment. It has little or nothing to do with what might come next but has everything to do with who I am as a man, as a Christian, as a priest. I make the choices I make because I know them to be what I expect of myself. Rewards are unnecessary. I know the power of grace is much more life-giving and essential.



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mystery, there is a genuine
experience of freedom and grace.***

I believe I have been created by God in a wondrous manner that far exceeds the basic reality of biology. For me, biology only tells me part of the story of who I am and what my life means. I believe that, for unknown reasons, I have been called by God to enter into a mystery that is much bigger than me. I understand that this call invites from me a response in faith that will lead to action. I believe I share that call with many other men and women of faith, and I am grateful for that gift. I stand in awe and wonder as a witness to the mystery of life. And I believe, in some manner that's also unknown to me, the mystery of life is eternal, whatever that means.



Although Christians are people of the resurrection, with our entire faith anchored in the belief of the resurrection of the dead, we know nothing about it. Whatever we say about it always seems to end up being incomplete and unsatisfying. Frankly, some of the traditional ways we have spoken about this subject have mostly lost value for us today.

For example, what reasonable and thinking person who hears all the time about billions and trillions would be impressed with the scriptural number 144,000? Many people have paid more than that figure in dollars for a house or way more than that in a lifetime of debt and taxes. For a person who lived 2,000 years ago in the time of Jesus, 144,000 was a huge number. For us, not so much.

I think most people today are far more impressed with the fact that our galaxy is one among billions of galaxies. Our solar system is the system in the universe that has the sun, and the earth rotates around it. We are thankful for this gift, but we know there are many suns and many solar systems. When we place ourselves in the context of the bigger picture we realize how small we are and how difficult it is to count when the numbers are too huge to imagine.

And that really is the point. Not the numbers, not the ability to explain anything, but rather the experience of mystery and of unknowing. We can stand

in faith and in unmerited grace before the mystery of God and the universe and be willing to believe, to hope, to love.

I understand there is vulnerability in mystery. It is difficult to enter into a mystery we don't understand. For a scrupulous person, it's perhaps even more difficult. Mystery clashes, sometimes quite dramatically, with the desire for certitude and answers. It is uncomfortable to believe and not know, to act and not react. But even though it is difficult to do so, I believe that to enter the mystery is the most grace-filled choice. The vulnerability of not knowing and not being certain is the ultimate experience of life, the lived experience of the day-to-day moment. Any other perspective is just smoke and mirrors.

When you experience mystery, there is a genuine experience of freedom and grace. Vulnerability is not an indication of weakness. Anxiety and fear is not an indication of the presence of sin. A question, even a question about God, is not a sign of weakness in faith. Random and powerful thoughts, even those that seemingly come out of nowhere, manifest what it means to be human. Even violent, sexual, and blasphemous thoughts that are random and not chosen willfully are simply manifestations of the mystery of what it means to be human in a world that is ultimately unknowable.

It may seem odd and, at first, a little confusing to accept that when a scrupulous person is filled with the most fear and anxiety, when the questions flow in an unceasing torrent, when the fear of sin is rampant, it is in that moment when that person potentially is closer to God than at any other moment. It is in the experience, it is in the vulnerability—with all of the emotion that entails—that God can be most clearly experienced. Why? Because the experience is all there is. Only the moment. Only the feelings. And in that moment, we have the ability to let go and be in the mystery.

My friends, that moment is grace, not sin. Look to the prophets and the saints. They will witness to the truth of what you are experiencing in the mystery of the moment. ✨

Who Are Today's Wounded?

They are those who have been traumatized by betrayals of trust—in childhood, adolescence, or adulthood—from parents, other family members, authority figures, and strangers. They struggle to believe in their dignity as beloved children of God.

They are those who bear the marks of abuse, assault, addiction, discrimination, harassment, and bullying. They include those who have lost loved ones, suffered infertility, miscarriage, extended illnesses, the dissolution of marriage, and more.

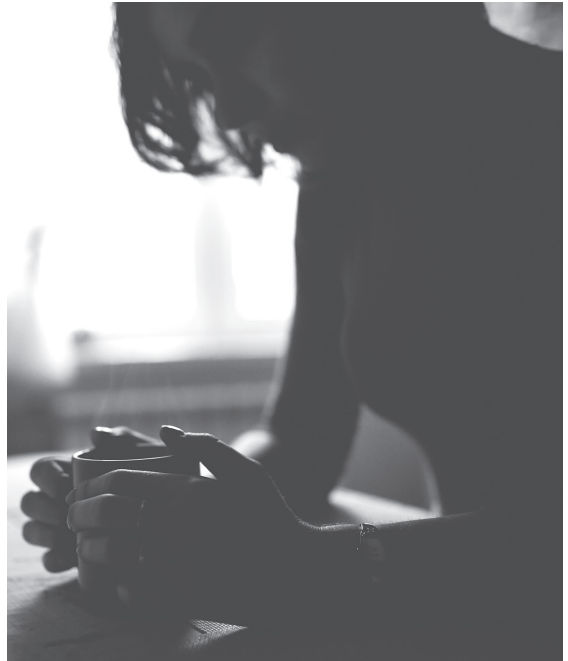
Today's wounded are those whose fears—of the future, financial insecurity, harm—so overwhelm them that they feel compelled to control their world by avoiding change at all costs. They are those whose relationships have suffered because of bitter divisions within families over religion, politics, identity, or unresolved conflict.

Who are today's wounded? They are us.

Our wounds—and especially the ways we react to them—are precious scars that make us unique and beautiful children of God. When people say well-meaning platitudes, *God's ways are not our ways, God has a plan, or God never gives us more than we can handle*, it's easy to start thinking God gave us this pain on purpose to torment us. But the wounds we suffer are not the will of God. They are the reality of living in a fallen world in which the effects of sin ripple outward.

One thing is true, though: God can use our pain—our broken places—to do something beautiful within us. With his love and healing we become more sensitive to the richness life has to offer.

God does not abandon us to despair. If we give him the space to work within us, he can transform our pain. We may not recognize it until years later, if ever. But trusting that his hand is at work, even in suffering he did not wish upon us, can free us to hope for the future.



Lord, I'm reminded of a legend about St. Teresa of Ávila. The devil once appeared to her, disguised as you. But she wasn't fooled. She immediately dismissed him. Satan asked, "How could you be certain I wasn't Christ?"

"You don't have wounds," Teresa replied. "Christ has wounds."

Jesus, I know you went through more suffering than I or anyone else on earth ever has—more than I can imagine. And what came from your suffering was salvation for the whole world.

I'm trying to accept that those who follow your path must also expect to suffer. You've promised that, in the end, all things work for good. Help me entrust you with my suffering. Use my pain to bring a little piece of your kingdom to earth. Give me the grace to seek joy despite my woundedness. Amen. ✨



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Mailbox

ONE LIGUORI DRIVE, LIGUORI, MO 63057 • NEWSLETTER@LIGUORI.ORG

Q. *I have been listening to Catholic radio and have heard some commentators talk about why it is a sin to engage in yoga. They say it is the worship of false gods and that Catholics should not engage in the practice. I find yoga helpful for healthy living. Do I have to suspend my yoga practice?*

A. No. The practice of yoga is not sinful. It has entered into the mainstream of healthy living and disciplined practices for maintaining a sense of deliberate and sustained nutrition and exercise. That being said, the practice of yoga is associated with a spiritual practice, but it does not have to be. Experiences can have many meanings. We light candles, for example, for church, for celebrations, and for numerous other practices—some of which we might find dubious—but that does not mean we should discontinue lighting candles. We are quite capable of living in a “both/and” world. Not everything is “either/or.”

Q. *I dread the resolutions that are part of the expectations for the new year. I make so many promises, and one by one I do not fulfill what I have promised. Just the thought of the promises that I feel that I must commit to fills me with a sense of dread and anxiety.*

A. There is no requirement to engage in New Year’s resolutions. It is part of the cultural experience of the new year, but it is not something we have to do. It is also not sinful to make a resolution and not fulfill it. That is an experience of what it means to be human. Some of our best resolutions, even those that would benefit us the most, are hard to maintain. Regardless, we just keep trying.



Experiences can have many meanings.



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