



## ***Encountering the Sacred***

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Even the casual reader of the Jewish scriptures or the Christian Old Testament are familiar with the stories of the men and women who are routinely identified as our ancestors in faith. Most people are familiar with the patriarch Abraham and his invitation to be in covenant with the Lord (Genesis 15). Most also know the story of Sarah, who receives the gifts of fertility and the birth of a child long past the normal age (Genesis 21:1-7). Still others will easily recall the story of Jacob as he wrestles with an angel and enjoys the vision of a ladder of angels going up and coming down from the heavens (Genesis 32:23-31). Other great personages of the Bible also emerge with their stories including Noah, Cain and Abel, Ruth, Rebecca, Joshua and the walls of Jericho, and the prophet Jonah and the whale, just to name a few.

When I, not unlike many other people, read and reflect on these stories, I easily sense the awe and wonder, the moments of grace that are necessarily part of the encounter with the sacred and the profound. At the same time, however, I also experience another feeling. There is often within me a kind of longing mixed with a certain kind of questioning. "Why does it seem so different today?"

The men and women of the Bible experienced an almost effortless encounter with the divine and the sacred. It seemed they never were surprised when they encountered God or one of God's angels. They almost expect such encounters and experiences of God. That doesn't mean they don't recognize the fact that they are blessed and chosen. In this month's reflection, my intention is to illustrate what seems to be an experience of God that is in stark contrast to our experience.

The experience of the sacred and the profound is not denied to people today, but it is also not routine. We don't easily bump up against the sacred. We don't normally encounter one of God's angels. We have to seek out the holy. In contrast to the experience of our ancestors in faith, it seems we choose to prioritize our time and portion some of it to our church, our community, and our life of prayer. More often than not, if we spend a restless night, we're not wrestling with God but more than likely with a specific anxiety or frustration that emerges from our life. Unfortunately, it seems that stress is often more recognizable than the sacred.

A partial truth can emerge as we meditate and pray about our relationship with God. Is it possible



that perhaps what has changed in the relationship is not God but us? In the ordinary times of our life, have we given up the expectation that we might encounter the divine and the graced moment? Have we gotten to the point where we might learn to compartmentalize and organize a little more than necessary? Is it possible that we may have used some of our gifts while at the same time ignoring other gifts and, in the process, lost something of importance?

I don't believe this change in our focus was deliberate, nor do I believe the men and women of the Bible were any more holy than us. Something has happened to us, not a result of a decision, but rather as a consequence of the accumulation of past choices and decisions that define who we are and how we are formed.

The reason we don't routinely encounter the sacred and the divine is because we're no longer convinced it's possible. We have succumbed to a vision of life that suggests there is a proper time and place for everything. Spontaneity is often mistrusted. We tend to dislike being surprised. We want to understand the result of something before we commit to proceed. Some of us have become so protected, so isolated, and so sheltered that it might seem impossible to experience anything other than that which is already present to us.

Perhaps we need to refocus our attention and perhaps shift some of our priorities. If we desire to encounter the sacred and awe-inspiring presence of God, we must desire to place our-

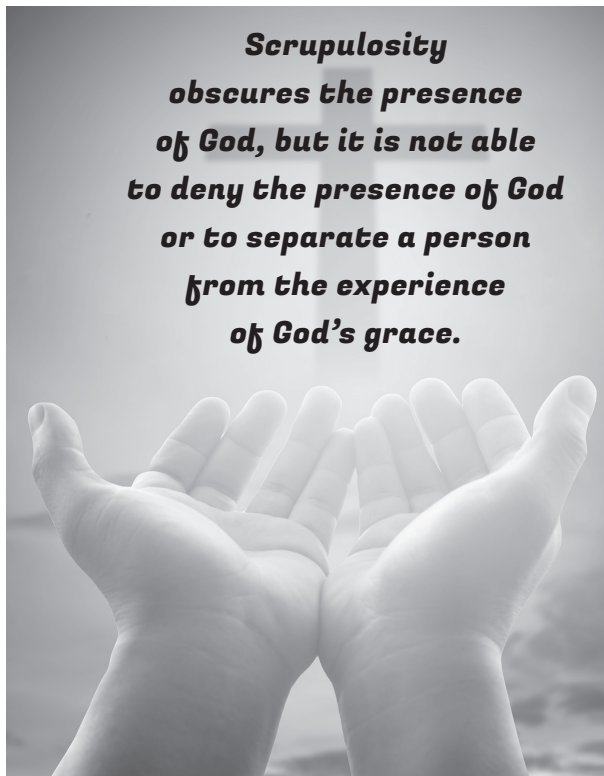
selves into a position where it is at least possible. Thankfully we do not have to go very far in order to encounter the possibility of a profound experience of God. God surrounds us, and grace is everywhere when we are open to the experience of encountering it.

For the people of God who suffer with scrupulosity, the desire to encounter God in a profound manner is often complicated by the disorder from which they suffer. Scrupulosity has a way of scrambling the truth and forcing experiences and emotions through the tight and disfiguring lens of sin. The result is not a celebration of grace and the mystery of God but rather the experience of fear and anxiety. In such a state, God seems far away.

It doesn't have to be that way. I believe God is very much present in the experience of scrupulosity. I understand that the experience of the disorder can be a gateway to deeper faith and a profound experience of grace. What is required is resisting the temptation to label the intensity of the experi-

ence as somehow sinful. Instead, recognize the power of God and the presence of grace.

I can say this because I know that scrupulous people are extremely sensitive to the experience of God in their lives. They are so sensitive that they desire, above all else, not to offend God. Scrupulosity is not a sensitivity to sin but rather a sensitivity to the presence of God and the work of grace. Scrupulosity obscures the presence of God, but it cannot keep a person from God's presence or separate anyone from the experience of God's grace. ✨



# An Accurate Indicator of Faith

*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light. –Ephesians 5:8*



Imagine yourself lying in bed some night: You have just had a good time in prayer and are flooded with feelings and images about God. You have strong, clear feelings that God exists. On that particular evening you have no faith doubts; you can feel the existence of God.

Now, imagine another night, a darker one. You wake up from a fitful sleep and are overwhelmed by the sense that you don't believe in God. You try to convince yourself that you still believe, but you cannot. Every attempt to imagine that God exists and to feel his presence comes up empty. You feel an overwhelming emptiness inside because of that feeling. Try as you like, you cannot shake the feeling that you no longer believe. Try as you like, you can no longer regain the solid ground on which you once stood. Try as you like, you can no longer make yourself feel the existence of God.

Does this mean that on one of these nights you have a strong faith and on the other you have a weak one? Not necessarily. It can just as easily mean that on one night you have a strong imagination and on the other you have a weak one. On one night you can imagine the presence of God and on the other night you cannot imagine it. Imagination isn't faith.

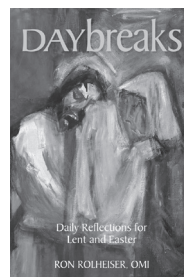
We all have had the experience of being inside of certain commitments (marriage, family, church) where, at times, our heads and our hearts are not

there, but we are there! The head tells us this doesn't make sense; the heart lacks the proper warm feelings to keep us there; but we remain there, held by something deeper, something beyond what we can explain or feel. This is where faith lives, and this is what faith means.

Mother Teresa, for long periods of time, suffered anguish inside of her head and heart every time she tried to imagine the existence of God. Yet her life indicated she believed in the existence of God. Her problem was that the human imagination has limits. Simply put, she couldn't picture how God exists.

But nobody can picture God because the finite can never picture the infinite, though it can sense it and know it in ways beyond what the head can imagine and the heart can feel.

Being unable to imagine God's existence is not the same thing as not believing. Our actions are always a more accurate indication of faith than are any feelings about God on a given day. ✨



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# Mailbox

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**Q.** *Is there a listing of what might be common experiences, in detail please, of the kind of thoughts that scrupulous people generally experience? It may be helpful to have a handy list.*

**A.** There is no such list. Each person's experience of scrupulosity is unique to him or her. No generalization is possible, and no common list can be generated. Even if it were possible, a list would be counterproductive. Scrupulous people could use such a list to encounter fear and anxieties about subjects they had not considered.

**Q.** *Is it permissible to touch your "private parts" for medical reasons? I sometimes touch myself, and it generates a sexual feeling, and I feel that I may be sinning.*

**A.** It is totally permissible to touch your body, even if it generates feelings, some of which may even be sexual. Even other feelings that may be intense might result. That is the way God created the human body to respond. It is natural, it is most certainly not sinful.



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