



## ***A Source of Faulty Perceptions***

FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSSR

**A**ll people—regardless of who they are, their education, net worth, or any number of other attributes—have at least one shared quality in common: a unique way of understanding and interpreting human experiences. No two people see the same thing exactly the same way. I'm sure you can easily think of examples of the differences between your recollection of an event and another person's memory of the same thing.

The uniqueness of the individual is a gift from God; a manifestation of God's grace at work in the world; a result of the creative energy and power of God. Diversity surrounds us, helping create the pulse of the universe, the energy of all life. We should never tire of experiencing and praising the many gifts of God.

Because each individual is unique, experiencing life in diverse ways, it is quite possible for two people to arrive at the same conclusion after taking different paths to get there. Two different interpretations of the same experience also are possible, if not likely.

But what happens when an individual's primary source of decision-making information is faulty? If one's perceptions are "out of whack" or even slightly unfocused, the decisions that result will become a concern. The person's unique, faulty way of understanding and interpreting experiences may cause trouble and, if they are far off base, lead to a conclusion of disordered behavior. That is a



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problem for the sufferer and the people who are in relationships with them.

There is a crucial distinction between “diversity” and “disorder.” People with diverse perceptions might simply view the same event in different ways. Disordered perceptions, often a problem for people with scrupulosity, bring unfortunate feelings into play.

Our perceptions drive our thoughts, beliefs, and acts. Experiences can confirm our unique belief systems, but if our perceptions are disordered, our belief system will be disorientated. The persistent fear and anxiety scrupulous people experience trigger disordered thinking and often result in them making unfortunate decisions.

I believe faulty information keeps people with scrupulosity from correctly perceiving experiences, interpreting them in a healthy way, and acting with positive consequences. Scrupulous people have disordered perceptions, not diverse ones. Their perceptions must be understood, managed, and—hopefully—healed at some point.

When experience is “confirmed” through life encounters rooted in a faulty information system, what gets confirmed is the disorder, not diversity of experience. The strong emotions of fear and the anxiety block or distort the reality of experiences, causing interpretations that fit the disordered system of belief.

For example, let’s say a person has a random thought that suggests a sexual response. The natural sexual feeling produces an interpretation. For a person unburdened by a psychological disorder, the feeling may be interpreted as

pleasurable, appropriate, or inappropriate, but it is quickly dismissed and forgotten.

For a person with the disorder of scrupulosity, whatever feelings may be a natural part of the erotic are also overwhelmed by feelings of fear and anxiety. Strong feelings, filtered through a faulty belief system, suggest the presence of mortal or venial sin. Since sexual “sins” are, by definition, always to be considered “serious,” sin is inescapable in this person’s mind. With sin comes the obligation

to confess. With confession comes the demand for firm purpose of amendment, and the list goes on. All of this creates an energetic whirlpool of suffering, unfortunately strengthening the faulty perception that sin has to be present since the suffering is so great.

Faulty information, which provides a filter through which experience passes on the way to interpretation and the identification of value, also is

important to understand when seeking healing. If a spiritual director or confessor places his energy and expertise on trying to correct the understanding of sin by the person he’s helping in the hopes of assisting the individual with his scrupulosity, such counsel is misplaced. The effort should be focused on the emotional imbalance that is at work, not on sin. The correction of faulty information—in this case a misunderstanding of sin and forgiveness—is counterproductive and not helpful.

Profound emotional suffering is at the root of the scrupulous disorder. Catechetics is not helpful, no matter how fervent or committed the confessor may be. The scrupulous person must undergo therapy. Professional expertise is crucial and necessary. ✨

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“If everything we did in this world met with success, then where would be the eternal rewards of faith?”

—ARCHBISHOP FULTON J. SHEEN

## THE AGONY OF THE CROSS, THE ECSTASY OF THE CONFESSIONAL

“Our Lord...did not show us how to avoid defeat or failure, but rather he showed us how to transcend it,” says Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. “His cross suggests that there is nothing we can do to prevent certain defeats but that we can control every single reaction to those defeats. He left us the law of salvation: Unless there is a Good Friday in our lives, there will never be an Easter Sunday; unless there is a crown of thorns, there will never be the halo of light; unless there is the cross, there will never be the empty tomb.”

“If everything we did in this world met with success,” the archbishop says, “then where would be the eternal rewards of faith? Our Lord said that when life is most successful in a very worldly way, then we must fear him telling us on the last day, ‘You already have your reward.’ If our Lord had been a worldly success, he would have been

forgotten. But having lost the battle and won the war, having allowed evil its hour and yet winning the day, then who shall be without hope? For by rising from the dead, he has taught us to dig where we fall and find the pearl of eternal life.”

“Pleasure comes from without, but joy comes from within,” wrote Archbishop Sheen. Inner joy, therefore, is not contingent upon sources outside of us. But how

many times have we allowed our disposition to be affected by others, by our possessions, and by forces beyond our control? Conversely, there are times when we’ve burdened and depressed others by dwelling on our own minor disappointments, ailments, and challenges of life. God desires us to be happy. Laughter reminds us how good it is to be alive.

Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos—known as the “Cheerful

Ascetic”—belonged to the Redemptorists, a Congregation that bears the title of the Redeemer. To redeem is to set free, and Fr. Seelos (1819-1867) brought freedom to those held captive, particularly those in the confessional who were overly burdened by scruples and the harsh legalism of the time.

People readily sensed his genuineness as he conveyed the magnanimous source of healing and inner peace that awaited them in this sacrament. Blessed Seelos’ own words from a sermon beckoning penitents to the confessional attest to his understanding of our gentle God: “Yes, my beloved people, God is merciful....If you sincerely

repent and amend your life; if you forsake forever all those evil ways in order to follow Christ in self-denial and penance; if you really prepare for the life to come, rejoice, for here I present you the balm for all your wounds—the infinite mercy of God.” ✨



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**Q.** *The Fourth Commandment says to “honor your father and your mother.” Am I obligated by this commandment to renew a relationship with my abusive father?*

**A.** No one, under any circumstances, is required to sustain or renew any relationship that is abusive. If your father desires a relationship with you, he must first honestly address his behavior and demonstrate both remorse and the ability to respect boundaries. If the abuse was sexual, and from your question I assume it was not, a more stringent set of rules would be required.



**Q.** *The clerk at the supermarket did not charge me for an item in my grocery bag. I did not discover the error until I was home. What kind of restitution, if any, is required on my part?*

**A.** There is no requirement. These kinds of errors are routine and are included in the calculation of the price for conducting a business enterprise. However, if you choose to do so, on your next visit, stop by the customer service counter and inform them of the error. Offer to pay for the item that was not originally scanned as part of your bill. They may or may not accept your payment, or they may have a program to help needy groups or food banks that is in place for just such an occurrence. Thus, your effort might be very worthwhile.

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**Please note,** a sentence in our January 2020 newsletter on experiencing mystery was stated incorrectly in the version we mailed, but we rewrote it in the online version. The sentence should read: “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.”



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