



Thoughts on Thinking

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Thoughts have none of the magical powers found in books, movies, TV, and other media.

You can't project thoughts outside yourself, nor can your thoughts elicit actions from people or things. People can't know the content of your thoughts unless you tell them. Mind-reading is impossible. All of that may be obvious, but it underpins my main points.

Also, there's no difference between a thought you generate willfully and one that's random. Each thought, whether random or willfully generated, is just that: a thought. It is not good or bad. It just is.

I also believe there is no such thing as an impure

thought. The subject matter of a thought may be associated in some way with purity or impurity, but the thought itself can't be impure. So-called "blasphemous thoughts" are not expressions of blasphemy. The subject matter of the thought may be associated in some way with blasphemy, but the thought itself is not blasphemous. The subject matter of a thought and what it may be associated with does not change the fundamental reality that a thought—on its own—produces nothing.

To illustrate the truth that thoughts are just thoughts, I stopped writing this article for a few moments and purposely generated five thoughts



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that I believe are routinely associated with the virtue of purity. I also generated five thoughts that I believe are routinely associated with blasphemy. Each of the ten thoughts has the power to produce within me a variety of feelings and emotions. The ten thoughts, all on serious subjects, were only thoughts. Nothing more. And despite their seriousness, they were not and are not sinful. Again, thoughts are simply thoughts.

In addition to taking time to generate ten powerful thoughts, I also chose to watch five free movie ads on my streaming device. I chose trailers that I assumed contained violence, sexual content, one that some believe is irreverent and blasphemous, and one that was emotional. In each instance, depending on the effectiveness of the creative process used in making the movie trailer, I reacted differently to each one. Although my reactions triggered all manner of thoughts, I did not sin. The thoughts I experienced while viewing the movie trailers were not sinful in any way.

Some of you will object to my opinions. You may assert that my experience is not the same as yours. You may think the content of this article is unorthodox and not reflective of the moral teaching of the Catholic Church. You may even feel a rising anxiety and a desire to react to that anxiety in some way to lessen the feeling or emotion it generates.

To everyone, including those who wish to argue exceptions to my opinions or insist different opinions are correct, let me assure you that my opinions here are 100 percent orthodox. Thoughts do not generate any response outside of the person who thinks them. To reiterate, thoughts have no magic or intrinsic power.

Over time, thoughts can produce changes in attitude or a reoriented sense of self. For example, the first time you have a sexual thought, you might react with a stronger feeling than the second time you experience the same thought. Both thoughts are personal and not sinful.

Although I'm confident that my opinions are founded on Catholic teaching and reflect orthodox morality, my beliefs differ with others. I searched "When are thoughts sinful?" on my computer browser and found results stating thoughts can be sinful. But each result also said there are exceptions

to when thoughts can be sinful. I saw discussions about "dwelling on the thought" and others on "entertaining the thought." But no author or moral authority I read could state how much time needed to be dedicated to "dwelling on" or "entertaining" a thought to qualify it as a sin. The exceptions are so numerous as to make the assertion that a thought is sinful pretty meaningless.

Saint Alphonsus Liguori, patron saint of moral theologians and a doctor of the Church, made a moral point that is perhaps essential here. When there are many different opinions that are all reasonable, people can freely and confidently choose whatever opinion they desire to choose. In this instance, you can choose a strict interpretation (which may

well be the impulse of most scrupulous people), or you may freely choose an opinion that is less confining, which is the point of view I take.

Thoughts are private, known only to the person who thinks them. Although thoughts can generate emotional responses and/or strong feelings, emotions and feelings are different than thoughts. In no instance can thoughts be sinful, regardless of the feelings or emotions triggered. ✪



SAINT ALPHONSUS LIGUORI,
PATRON SAINT OF MORAL
THEOLOGIANS AND A
DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH

Facing Our Wounds

Looking at our pain means we can no longer pretend we are in control.

People begin twelve-step programs, like **Alcoholics Anonymous**, by admitting they have a problem. This is a very hard step to take. It is difficult to be honest about our wounds because, over time, without us ever intending, we've developed coping mechanisms that help us get by in the moment. They protect us from vulnerability and let us hide our problems from others. We distract ourselves with social media, binge-watching, and busyness. We self-medicate with food, drugs (legal or otherwise), or alcohol. We shop and hoard, hoping we can pack the gaping emptiness of our wounds with stuff.

Stripping all of that away and facing our broken places with honesty can be terrifying. Won't it give our demons more power to torment us? Without the flimsy protection of our coping strategies, we'll have to admit that we're powerless against our own pain, that attempting to control everything around us causes more harm than good.

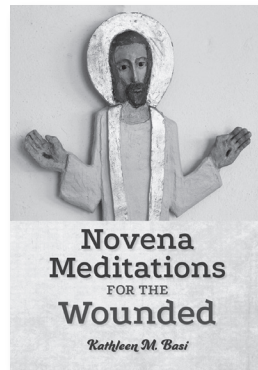
Being honest could mean upending our lives—home, employment, and in some cases, our families. It could mean rethinking opinions we thought sacrosanct and being open to realities that challenge the safe, black-and-white worldview we grew up with.

Facing our wounds means we can no longer pretend we are in control. We have to fall on God's grace. That can be hard because don't we sometimes blame God for failing to protect us in the first place? To face our weakness, we must admit our need for help—both divine and, in many cases, earthly help from a professional. We must abandon saccharine, distant, and safe piety, and wrestle with God, as Jacob did in Genesis 32.

Oh, God, how I know my weakness. All my choices are calculated to protect me from coming face to face with it. How often I flee from the stillness, fearing what monsters might leap out and crush me! For so long, I've tried to avoid facing my pain. I find so many ways to distract myself. (Pause to acknowledge what those ways are in your life.)

I know you want more from me. The wounds I bear are beyond me, Lord. I can't heal them alone, but I'm also used to them. I'm always in pain, but it's pain I can live with. I'm afraid to shift the burden. What if I make things worse? It's hard enough just to get through each day as it is.

You promise that your grace is enough, that my weakness will be filled up by your power. Do I dare trust you enough to wrestle with you and allow myself to be overcome by your love? *Anima Christi!* Soul of Christ, sanctify me. Amen. ✨



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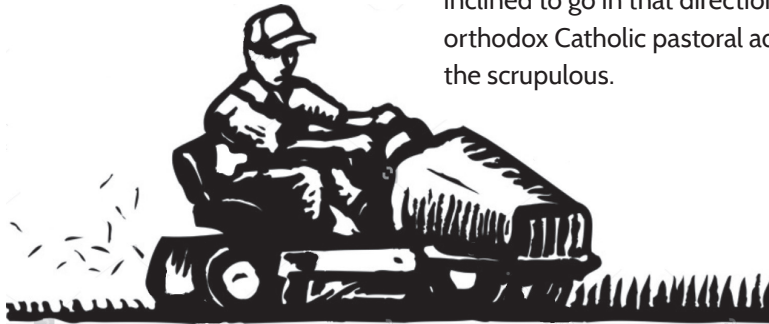
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Q. *I feel silly asking this question, but I am bothered by it. Can venial sins accumulate to the point where they can become a mortal sin? If that is the case, is there a number, a cutoff point that I should be aware of? Is it a different number depending of the type of sin?*

A. Venial sins do not accumulate and then become a mortal sin. Mortal sins are in a completely different category, and the requirements for mortal sin are different than the requirements generally applied to venial sins. There is no need to be concerned with counting venial sins in order to avoid the point where they become something else.

Q. *My neighbors go to the same church I attend. They regularly receive holy Communion, so I assume they are practicing Catholics. They also cut their lawn on Sundays and therefore dishonor the Sabbath obligation. Should I tell them? Perhaps they were never taught what was required.*

A. Absolutely not. The consistent teaching of the directors of the SA bulletin from the beginning has been to counsel our readers never to inflict their sense of what is right and wrong on another person. Take care of your own business and not the business of others. And no, this is not a sin of either omission or commission, if you were inclined to go in that direction. It is good, sound, orthodox Catholic pastoral advice and practice for the scrupulous.



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