



Lust

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Introduction: Preachers, teachers, and all those who are entrusted with the ministry of helping people form a healthy and integrated spiritual and moral life need to be responsible in their teaching. It harms the spiritual life of the people who look for guidance and discernment if they are misled or distracted from what is essential and important by those in the helping ministry.

The decisions that people with scrupulosity make in choosing resources for spiritual guidance and pastoral care are very important. A scrupulous conscience produces more than enough anxiety and suffering. It is never helpful for a teacher to mislead those with scrupulosity or dramatize their normal human actions by stating they have committed serious sins when they have not. There is no excuse for bad or careless pastoral care. The readers of this newsletter can be assured that this resource always takes the moral teaching of the Church seriously. The application of orthodox spiritual and moral teaching is never compromised.

The reflection that follows is designed to exemplify good pastoral teaching and helpful guidance.

When we reflect on a topic, it is not unusual to have difficulty finding a clear, descriptive illustration of the subject. Not so in the case of lust, where the vivid story of King David and Bathsheba is found in 2 Samuel 11. The story is memorable because it features King David, an essential biblical personality, and it clearly depicts the sin of lust and its consequences.

Many, including scrupulous people I know, believe lust is basically the sin of having an impure or sexual thought about another person. They base their interpretation and understanding about lust as a sin upon the words of Jesus: "You have heard that it was said,

'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:27–28). The teaching is unambiguous, but not in isolation. The interpretation depends upon the complete context of the story.

This is where the biblical story of King David and Bathsheba helps us understand what lust is and is not. In order for a normal, natural sexual attraction or erotic thought to become the sin of lust, something more is required. The thought alone is not sinful. The sin includes using power to engage the thought into action. David committed lust, not because he was

sexually attracted to Bathsheba, but rather because he arranged to meet her, engaged in sexual intercourse with her, attempted to cover up their actions, and then ordered the murder of Uriah the Hittite, the husband of Bathsheba. It is an erotic story, but it also illustrates the raw misuse of power.

For a sexual thought to be understood as lust power is essential. The person committing the sin of lust must have the power to engage in some manner with the focus of the lustful desire. It is not just the thought, as strong as the thought or desire might be. It is most importantly the actions that follow, with all the decisions and consequences that are part of the action.

Lust is not just something that occurs in the mind, a strong but fleeting erotic thought or impulse. Lust takes root in the person. It begins

to define a person's thoughts and actions. It becomes more and more focused. The desire that is nourished by lustful thinking and planning becomes all-consuming. All of this focused energy on the person or the object of desire eventually takes root in the heart, a person's center for physical, emotional, intellectual, and moral activities.

This is where the story of King David and Bathsheba becomes more helpful and illustrative. In order to use his power to take the actions he took, David had to plan. He did not act on impulse. His actions were deliberate and showed real effort as he achieved his ends. Bathsheba did not suddenly appear in his bed because of wishful thinking or magic. David's sustained and deliberate maneuvers resulted in her appearance.

When we think about sin, especially when we consider stating something is a serious or grave sin, we should take care in our discernment. We do a real disservice to our moral and spiritual life when we casually label everyday, normal, God-given human emotions and feelings as something they are not. Erotic thoughts and feelings are God-given gifts. They are essential to who we are. If I have a powerful feeling that causes me anxiety, that does not mean I have committed a sin. It only means I had a strong feeling or emotion that causes anxiety.

Lust is a big word and can be a serious sin. Jesus seriously considered lust to be disruptive to respectful human living and not at all helpful in building the reign of God. Jesus warned his apostles and disciples about becoming distracted in the pursuit of kingdom living by reorientating personal energy and effort to something or someone that does not give life. He was well aware of the consequences of this kind of disorientation and strongly warned against it. Jesus counseled a kind of "single-mindedness" for the reign. He advocated the kind of single-mindedness that includes the normal human emotions, feelings, thoughts, and desires our loving Father created us to have. ☸



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Trading Sorrow for Salvation

To surrender control of our lives to anyone or anything is scary. We prideful creatures can be reluctant to see our need for a Savior because we believe that giving ourselves to him means giving up who we are. We would rather handle our problems with determination—struggling through our sorrows with clenched fists raised to heaven in indignation—than admit we are powerless before God.

And yet, Lent begins with a surrender. With the sign of our salvation etched on our foreheads, we are called to remember that we are but dust and ash, made of this earth, and still God loves us. He proved this infinite love by sending his Son to take on flesh and heap upon himself the sins of humanity. This perfect sacrifice breaks the shell of our hardened hearts, leading us to take the first step on a narrow path through the wilderness, where our selfish sins lay bare and our sorrow overwhelms us until his love turns it all to joy.

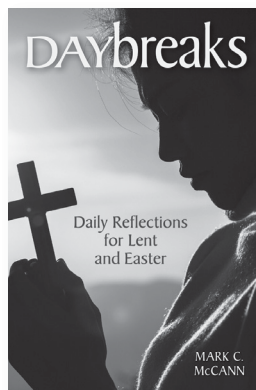
While our Lenten journey is personal, we remain connected to our brothers and sisters in Christ through the cross and his eternal once-for-all sacrifice. In the quiet of the confessional, our repentance brings relief and restoration. At the table of the Lord, the Eucharist unites us with the moment when humanity and heaven are reconciled forever. In this holy season, with the sign of our frailty and hope upon our heads, we know we are forever held in the perfect love of God.

Lord of our salvation, may we walk this desert way of hope knowing that your Son came from heaven to walk this world and transform our lives. In Jesus' name I pray, amen!

At Christmas, we may focus on Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. During Lent, it is also proper to celebrate his courage and faithfulness. Through Joseph, Jesus received his birthright as a legal descendant from David's royal line. Beyond this, Joseph accepted God's call to take Mary and Jesus into his home, to protect and serve them as husband and father according to the perfect plan of God.

Joseph is a model of faithfulness we can look to during the days of Lent. Over and over, God's word reveals his plan for the royal Son, Jesus our Savior, unfolding through the course of salvation history in the lives of men like Joseph. We also are part of this eternal story of deliverance, living out our own call to play our part in God's plan for the redemption of humanity. Lent teaches us to surrender our fears and arrogance so God may reveal his regal will in our lives to rescue souls from death.

How will we, like Joseph, submit to the King of Kings as we take our place in his kingdom and help to bring the gospel to the world? ✨



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Q. *Your answers and reflections are often helpful, but they lack the clarity of detail and the specific guidelines that I find helpful. I do not deal well with grey areas, and I need answers that are black and white, right and wrong.*

A. In a newsletter, I cannot provide you with the detail you seek. In reality, no one can honestly provide you with that kind of direction. Details will lack the clarity that you crave. That is unfortunately the ravages of scrupulosity at work. Life is often grey, as unacceptable as that answer might seem to you.

Q. *Is sloth always a mortal sin? It is difficult to find any directions about this.*

A. My guess is that you are having difficulty because the general understanding of what sloth is has changed drastically over the years. What might have been perceived as sloth a long time ago is perhaps more accurately understood as a symptom of the mental health issue of depression. The reluctance to make an effort is more often than not a mental health issue, not a sin.



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Announcement

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