

## ***Drowning in Perceived Sin***

THOMAS M. SANTA, CSsR

**T**here is no easy way to write what I need to say in this reflection. Almost anything I say on the topic I have chosen is pretty much guaranteed to be misunderstood. I can almost feel the wave of panic that will more than likely result. However, what I am about to say needs to be said, and it needs to be fully understood: we are drowning in “sin.” I do *not* mean we are surrounded by sin and need redemption. I do *not* mean the human race is suddenly engaging in a more sinful life than ever before. Plenty of voices are proclaiming this perception, and I do not need to add my voice to the noise and confusion.

When I say we are drowning in “sin,” I am asserting that there is too much *perceived sin* all around us. Everything is sinful, at least from certain perspectives and most certainly from a scrupulous point of view. Every human action, emotion, feeling, thought, desire, or whatever is somehow sinful. Mortal, serious, venial, temptation, or whatever on the scale of sin measurement, there is just too much perceived sin. From this perspective, sin is unavoidable, and

even the most vigilant are doomed to failure of some kind.

Moral theologians wax eloquently, or sometimes not eloquently at all, about the “New Jansenism.” They mean the old heresy of Jansenism is popping up all over the place. Good men and women are falling prey to this distorted heresy, spawned in the 1600s, which is characterized by moral rigor and severe self-discipline. This may be true, and I do not doubt it, but some quarters say the world is well beyond Jansenism. A nitpicking spirit seems to be at work in the lives of good, faithful people. Harmful nitpickers are more disturbing among the most vulnerable, the scrupulous.

Social media platforms teem with

misinformed interpreters of Catholic doctrine and so-called teachers of the Catholic catechetical tradition. I do not know what church they supposedly represent—if any—but it most certainly is not the Roman Catholic Church I know. Without a doubt, these interpreters have not felt the sanctifying warmth of the Holy Spirit from the Second Vatican Council.



ZAUR RAHIMOV / SHUTTERSTOCK

Vatican II (1962–65) effectively redirected the attention and focus of the barnacled Church away from centuries of accumulated debris. The bishops at that ecumenical council called the people of God to a new life, a new baptism, and a mature and healthy way of living and believing. This mature Catholic life invited men and women of faith to enter into mystery, to walk away from false certitude, and to permit the Spirit of God to breathe and create once again. It called for the appreciation of a nuanced understanding of the truths of our Tradition that had been faithfully handed on to us. We are not called to blindly fall into lockstep with a manner and way of life that is lifeless. That is certainly not gospel living nor kingdom living.

All Catholic doctrines and dogmas are nuanced. I do not mean they are relative or not truthful. Rather, I mean to state what is obvious. They are not complete and are open to interpretation as the people of God live and move in the Holy Spirit of God. They are nuanced because the way we understand a teaching depends on the present moment, the historical reality of time and place. The truth that is proclaimed is not nuanced, but the manner in which it is practiced, taught, and believed is most certainly nuanced. For example, it is ridiculous to put something into practice today in the way it was understood and practiced in the fourteenth century.

As a partial illustration, look at the big word we proclaim confidently in our Creed during the Eucharist celebration: consubstantial. When that word was inserted into the credal formula, it was understood as the Latin equivalent of the Greek word *homoousios* ("the same substance"). That is all well and good, but the understanding of "substance" many centuries ago is not the same today. Originally a philosophical term, today the meaning of "substance" goes beyond philosophy and includes a material

understanding, idea, form, etc. As it is with philosophy, so it is with biology, mathematics, quantum mechanics, the natural law, the observable universe, our understanding of the human person, freedom, gender, and the list goes on. The original understanding is nuanced by lived experience, new information, and an updated understanding.

We do not believe, as the systematic theologians once believed, that you can answer all questions and eventually discover all answers. Today we know there are far more questions than answers. Mystery is more abundant than certitude. The world is not static, a well-oiled machine, a mechanical clock with everything in its place between earth and heaven. Everything and everyone is subject to change.

The cloistered monk who faithfully tried to define every imaginable untruth that might exist was exercising a labor of love. He believed he was contributing to

humanity's understanding of the will of God. He was not trying to construct a list of sins that could later be consulted in an examination of conscience to identify possible sin at work. Unfortunately for some people, this kind of work became a weapon of spiritual discipline to be wielded to bring the unruly soul into submission. In the process, people lost sight of the sin and became caught up in the details and the description.

My point in asserting we are drowning in perceived sin is that we must pay more attention to nuance and mystery in our relationship with God. We get lost in the descriptive details of what we are struggling with and have become somehow convinced that it is virtuous to master the details. Let us instead set the details aside and grow a loving, mature relationship with God, self, and others. That is the real grace. A misguided understanding of sin is misplaced. Even though we are drowning in perceived sin, God gives us the ability to swim away. ☸

***In our relationship with God,  
we must pay more attention  
to nuance and mystery.***

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# *Nine Distinctive Ways to Embrace Our Call to Discipleship*

## **1. Positive understanding of the person.**

Catholicism insists that the human person is essentially good, ever more graced than sinful. Indeed, we are capable of dreadful sin and destruction, but this is not what first defines us. When the radical reformers insisted that the human condition is totally corrupt (Calvin more than Luther), the Catholic Church rejoined that the divine image was never lost to us, even in the Fall of Adam and Eve.

**2. Committed to community.** Catholicism has consistently taught that God creates us as communal beings, making us responsible for and to each other—even beyond the grave. Because the bond of baptism is never broken, we can pray to the saints and for the souls. This communal emphasis of Catholicism is also the foundation of its social ethic that emphasizes every citizen's responsibility to the common good of the whole society.

**3. Sacramental outlook.** The Catholic faith sees all of God's creation as essentially good. Catholicism has never condemned dancing, singing, celebrating, good food, or alcohol. Yes, anything can be abused, but all is a gift of God. This graciousness of life in the world finds its high point in the sacramental principle that is so core to the Catholic faith.

## **4. Catholics cherish Scripture and Tradition.**

The Council of Trent (1545–63) reaffirmed the centrality of sacred Scripture as “the norm of norms” for Christian faith. But it reiterated that Christian Tradition is also a “fountain” of divine revelation. This was Catholicism's way of insisting that the Holy Spirit is ever present with the Church, helping to deepen our understanding and to address new questions

and circumstances with the wisdom of Christian faith.

## **5. Catholics embrace holistic faith.**

Christian faith demands our whole being—head, heart, and hands. There is no aspect of our lives from which our faith can be excluded.

**6. Commitment to justice.** Christian faith demands that disciples oppose unjust social structures and work to ensure justice for all. Like God, God's people should side with the poor and oppressed, favoring those to whom justice is denied.

**7. Universal spirituality.** Catholic spirituality can be summarized as “putting faith to work”—allowing Christian faith to permeate every aspect of daily life.

**8. Catholics are catholic.** To be catholic calls a community to welcome all people, regardless of their human circumstances. Parochialism and closed-mindedness are against the Catholic faith.

**9. Devotion to Mary.** Since the beginning of the Church, Mary has held pride of place in the communion of saints. Yet our turning to Mary is also based on a human instinct. Remembering how she interceded with Jesus at the wedding in Cana, if Mother Mary intercedes for us, how can Jesus decline? ✨



Adapted from “Nine Things that Make Us Catholic” by Thomas Groome (*Catholic Update*, September 2004, C0409A). To order, visit [Liguori.org](http://Liguori.org) or call 800-325-9521.

# Mailbox

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

**Q.** *I am male. Is it a serious sin for my brother and I to undress in front of each other? I worry it may be a serious sin against modesty. My brother is not concerned, but I am.*

**A.** No, it is not sinful or against any standard of modesty. It is common behavior and practice with siblings. Nudity is not against the commandments of God. It is a natural state, and there is nothing fundamentally disordered with nudity. You are probably feeling a little more self-conscious as part of your own growth and development. This also is a natural development and feeling and not an indication of sin.

**Q.** *I am preoccupied with restitution issues. I have recently returned to Catholicism after a few years of nonpractice, and I am aware that I was not as careful as I might have been and as honest as I should be as a Christian. Any guidance in this matter would be helpful.*

**A.** I advise you to avoid this scrupulous trap. Scrupulosity tends to propel a person into the future with worry and anxiety about what might happen or repel people into an imagined past, where people always come up short and something is missing. Your anxiety is not about reparation for sin, it is the anxiety of scrupulosity, plain and simple. Resist it.



## JUNE 27 IS THE FEAST DAY OF OUR MOTHER OF PERPETUAL HELP

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