



Embracing Our Fragility

FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSsR

Human beings are extremely fragile. Not as frail as some other creatures on the planet, but nonetheless fragile. Humans are more hardened and protected than a hummingbird, but certainly lacking in the brute strength of a humpback whale. A moth can be brushed away easily. A human being can be also discarded, but not easily. And some people will not go away when discarded.

As fragile as we are, we are quite capable of denying our fragility. It is amazing how so many people seem to live their lives without any reference to their brittle and vulnerable personhood. If there is any awareness of fragility, it seems to be shielded from everyday experience with a type of bravado that attempts to cover it up or to make it less obvious. Some people are good at projecting a strength that they have it altogether, but in reality their fragility is in no way bolstered by this kind of behavior. It just makes the fragility seem less operational, but all the while it persists.

In spite of the ability to deny or to mask human fragility with a sense of bravado, experience has a way of

inviting people to consider, if not accept, truths about themselves that they prefer to ignore or not dwell on. Some experiences are so powerful that it is impossible to deny what has occurred. An experience may invite reflection and maybe a new way of thinking or living. There is no guarantee, however, that new thinking will happen. It is also quite possible to retreat even more into a false sense of security and live in denial.

A random list of ordinary human experiences that invite reflection illustrates the manifestation of human fragility. Sickness, the loss of someone we love, the abrupt change in a relationship that is important to us, the unexpected fender bender that changes our driving habits, a well-placed criticism of something or someone that we value and care for, even an unexpected



GOOD STUDIO / SHUTTERSTOCK

Acknowledging your fragility and the suffering you are experiencing is not a denial of God or God's will for you. It is rather an acceptance of who you are as a person.

change in the weather that leaves us unprepared and forced to change plans. Each of these are examples of events that can trigger fragility.

In addition to the events and experiences that happen outside of ourselves, there are also the experiences that are within the depth of our being. Scrupulosity is an example of human fragility. The disorder has the power to wreak real emotional havoc in the life of a person who suffers with the disorder. The emotional upheaval that a single unwelcome but nonetheless intrusive and powerful thought can inflict on a person is remarkable. Even when an individual is aware of not being in control of his or her thoughts, none of that seems to matter. The thought generates guilt, fear, anxiety, shame, remorse, an almost never-ending list of emotional responses and possibilities. Each experience reveals a deep experience of fragility and vulnerability that is unwelcome.

Unfortunately, a common behavior when faced with fragility is the impulse to “tough it out.” There are a variety of reasons why human beings engage in this posture in order to encourage and perhaps even console themselves. For some, it is the “manly” thing to do. For others, it is a sign of personal strength in the face of adversity. For others, it is the “cross” they must bear.

If our struggle is rooted in mental illness, other reasons for endurance rather than fully addressing the issue are quite common. Chief among this other kind of reasoning is a distrust of therapy. The distrust is often founded on the fear that acknowledging to another a mental struggle will somehow mark a person or tarnish his or her reputation. And there is the deep distrust that many people have for any kind of behavioral, cognitive, or medical therapy. The possibility of addiction is often cited as a reason used to support the reluctance for therapy.

The inclination to deny what is being experienced and the tendency to try to endure the experience is not only *not* helpful, but it strengthens the disorder. Mental illness thrives on isolation. When the experience is religious scrupulosity, isolation from community and relationship is particularly paralyzing and ultimately deadly. Authentic spirituality and worship require relationship and community in order for the disciplines and practices to make any kind of sense. Sitting alone, isolated in your pew in the dark and repeatedly engaging in compulsive ritual expressions is not healthy religious expression, it is an indication of a disorder, often a serious medical disorder. It is certainly not expressive of a healthy spiritual practice.

Amazingly, in the confused mind of the individual who suffers from scrupulosity and who has become isolated in response to suffering, there is often a false belief that to choose to become healthy might displease God. Some believe that to choose to break an unhealthy ritual is a sin. That just makes the suffering more intense and the isolation more secure. It is not from God, nor is it a manifestation of the will of God. Rather, it is the disorder running free and unmanaged.

The beginning step to engaging a healthy and integrated life and spirituality is to completely let go of the need to manage everything that is marked by the disorder at once. Trying to do it all at one time is a recipe for failure. It is too overwhelming. A good place to start—and as good as it is, it is not an easy place to start—is to embrace your fragility as it is experienced. Acknowledge you are suffering. Don’t deny it, try to lessen it, or cover it up. Acknowledging your fragility and the suffering you are experiencing is not a denial of God or God’s will for you. It is rather an acceptance of who you are as a person. ✨

Sitting alone, isolated in your pew in the dark and engaging in compulsive ritual expressions is not healthy religious expression. It often indicates a serious medical disorder.

Sexual Misconceptions

Sex is one of the most important human realities. Saint Thomas Aquinas ranks it with food. The pleasures of taste and touch are fundamental joys in human life, but they also create the possibility of the most serious sins.

We see this borne out as we recognize the seriousness of addictive behavior. Just think about how hard it is to overcome addiction to food, alcohol, or drugs.

The drive for sexual satisfaction is even more powerful because it engages our entire personalities. Perhaps because of its power and importance in our lives, sex gets a lot of attention, but not always in a good way.

This is especially true in the Church, where many Catholics identify sex with sin, or simply with “no.” This is unfortunate because our tradition has far more to say about sex than that.

Sex is holy; sex is a sacrament; sex is the way we participate in God’s own creative act.

Sex can also be violent, manipulative, and destructive.

Three common misconceptions about sex:

1. Sex is only about acts, or about what I do.

The reality is that because sexuality exists prior to sexual activity, it is really concerned primarily with persons and with who we are. I might never have sex, but I’m still a sexual person, a man or a woman who has a biological sex as well as a masculine or feminine sexuality. Acts are important, but they’re secondary to my overall sexual personality.

2. Sexual sins are somehow worse than any other kind.

Our society is very conflicted about this. On the one hand, we see all kinds of sexual activity on TV and in the movies. Much of it is casual and appears to be harmless or recreational.

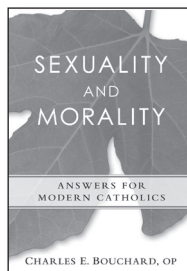
On the other hand, we have dozens of laws prohibiting sexual harassment, and we recoil in horror if a woman is raped, or a child is sexually abused.

Sexuality is a profound human power, and that is perhaps why the Church has historically devoted so much attention to it. But it is wrong to say that sexual sins are worse than others.

Sins against justice, charity, and truth can be far worse and far more destructive. We need only think about the economic disparities in the world or the lies and hubris that lead to war to know that this is true.

3. Sex is just physical and therefore has no lasting psychological or moral effects.

Adults know—and adolescents learn quickly enough—that sex can have enormous psychological and spiritual ramifications. Sex can have physical consequences like pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, but the most lasting effects of sex are often emotional. ☼



Adapted from *Sexuality and Morality: Answers for Modern Catholics* by Charles E. Bouchard, OP, copyright © 2014 (Liguori Publications, 824845).

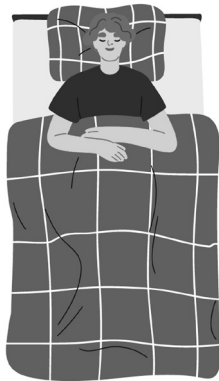
To order, visit Liguori.org or call 800-325-9521.

Mailbox

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

Q. *Are dreams important? Do they have any value to us that would indicate something that we should pay attention to or are they just harmless imaginings of the mind while we are sleeping?*

A. Dreams are important and are a necessary part of what it means to be human. There are many theories that are helpful in understanding the interpretation of the meaning of dreams. As a general rule, the emotion or feeling that you are left with when you recall the dream, rather than the particular content of the dream, is what might be the most important part of your dream. And although you did not ask this question I will answer it anyway: dreams are morally neutral. They are not sinful, no matter how powerful they may be.



GOOD STUDIO / SHUTTERSTOCK

Q. *In the matter of the obligation of attending Sunday Mass, am I correct in believing that mature Catholics who are serious and disciplined in the practice of their faith may for a good reason and without the penalty of sin excuse themselves from the obligation when it is necessary to do so?*

A. Not only are you correct, you are right on. A mature, practiced, disciplined, and discernible practice of the faith, in all matters great and small, is the expectation and hope for all Catholics. You have the obligation to be informed and formed, but you also have the obligation to make the choice that you need to make that is appropriate for you.

Please support this
Scrupulous Anonymous
newsletter and the ministry
of the Redemptorists.

Scan the code to donate
using PayPal.



To manage your newsletter subscription, please call 800-325-9521 or email Liguori@liguori.org.



Please help us continue Scrupulous Anonymous and other Liguori Publications ministries by making a tax-deductible donation or remembering us in your will. Our legal title is

Redemptorist Fathers dba Liguori Publications, Federal ID 43-0653409. To donate by credit card, please go to ScrupulousAnonymous.org and click on "Support the Ministry." To donate by check, please use the enclosed envelope or mail to Liguori Publications, One Liguori Drive, Liguori, MO 63057.

© 2022 Liguori Publications. All rights reserved. **Policy on copying or distributing:** **Individuals** may download, print, copy, and/or share issues of *Scrupulous Anonymous* provided 1) you don't remove this copying/distributing policy and 2) you don't seek or accept payment for the copies. **Nonprofit organizations** may quote SA in publications offered at no cost as long as you identify *Scrupulous Anonymous* as the source and include the issue number or date and the publisher (Liguori Publications, ScrupulousAnonymous.org). **For commercial or other purposes**, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of Liguori Publications. Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of the Redemptorists (Redemptorists.com).