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Context Is Everything

FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSSR

In previous newsletters, I have tried to make the point that “content is not your friend.” I have tried to illustrate how important it is not to fall for the scrupulous trap, which promises that just one more answer, one more detail, one more question will forever resolve all your doubts and worries. Nothing could be further from the truth. More content is a rabbit hole, not a promised solution for peace and serenity. If more content were actually helpful, most scrupulous people would have controlled their scrupulosity years ago. Rather, it is a guaranteed trigger for more anxiety, more fear, and even a feeling of hopelessness—being tossed about like a rag doll.

Collecting new content feeds your scrupulosity and makes everything more confusing. Even content that presents itself as a solution is often fraught with difficulties, particularly when it is shared by a teacher, confessor, or spiritual director who does not truly understand the condition. Content is not your answer; it is not the path to healing and wholeness. It is nothing that it promises to be. It is, in fact, exactly the opposite. The only content that is helpful is content that is specifically intended to help you navigate and manage your scrupulous condition—not by providing more rules and regulations or by blaming forces outside yourself as the culprit, but by helping you honestly understand the

dynamic of scrupulosity as both psychological and spiritual.

If content—in particular, content that is misinformed or misleading—is not your friend, then **context** is your friend. Knowing the context of what you are reading or what someone is telling you, even if he or she has the best of intentions, is very important; in fact, it is essential. Understanding the context of what you read and what you practice enables you to become more mature, healthy, and possessed with the graced conviction that you are in the gentle and compassionate hands of God.

Healthy and informed context helps you understand that the *Code of Canon Law* is intended for canon lawyers, not for the general public. Look at the references and the footnotes. Do you understand them? Have you studied them? Or how about the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*? Look at the front cover of the book. Where does it say on the cover—or, for that matter, anywhere in the book—that it is an answer book? Again, have you read the footnotes and the references that provide the full context and tradition of what you are reading? Do you know the difference between a dogma, a doctrine, and a prescript? Do you know why one word was chosen over another word? If you cannot answer “yes” to each of these questions, then



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you are, in fact, misusing the *Catechism*. You are trying to make it something that it is not.

You do not have to access a written resource to understand the importance of context. How many times have I heard this complaint from the readers of this newsletter: "I get different answers when I ask priests the same question. Why can they not give me the same answer?" I could respond to this question in a variety of ways, but often the most useful response starts with, "What was the context of your question? Might context, rather than disagreement, be the real reason that you received different answers?" This might seem evasive, but it is not.

***The context of the question changes the answer,
but the original teaching is not compromised.***

For example, the question is, "Is it a serious sin to miss Mass on Sunday?" The answer is, "Yes, it is a serious sin." It is a simple, straightforward answer to the question. However, what happens if the person asking the question is 95 years old, is dependent on someone else to bring him or her to Mass, and uses a walker or a wheelchair to navigate? The answer would then be, "No, it is not a serious sin for you to miss Mass on Sunday." The context of the question changes the answer, but the original teaching is not compromised. We are not talking about relativism here but rather compassionate, necessary, and appropriate pastoral care.

In the aforementioned question, the context seems to be clear and uncomplicated. There are very few people who would disagree with the pastoral remedy to the question I referenced. However, sometimes the context is more complex and not as straightforward, resulting in a little more room for interpretation and application. For example, "Is it a serious sin to miss Mass on Sunday because I am going on a cruise vacation, and I do not know for sure if Mass will be available?" I suppose some might respond that you cannot go on the cruise if you cannot guarantee your ability to celebrate Sunday Mass. This is admirable as a free choice but not

required in practice. A person who is choosing to go on a cruise is not choosing the vacation to miss Mass. He or she is choosing it to relax and to travel. The person fully intends to attend Mass if he or she is in port, can find a church, and can make arrangements to attend the Mass, or if the cruise line provides the opportunity for Mass. The context is different, and the situation provides acceptable interpretation to make a choice, all the while respecting the obligation.

For scrupulous people, paying attention to the context might be helpful and even crucial, but it is only one tool, not the complete answer. There is still the element of "risk" involved in recognizing

the context, reflecting on making the decision, and then applying your choice to the dilemma/question. The ultimate question still remains: "What if I am wrong, and I misinterpreted the context because I am looking for a way out or the easy path?" In partial answer to that question, I can only reply, "When something good and holy is turned on its head and becomes something other than good and holy, that is scrupulosity." Or, if not scrupulosity, it is rigidity, something other than good pastoral care.

Context is essential. It is descriptive. It helps us understand the whole picture, not just part of it. When context illuminates, it is not something to be afraid of. The fullness of something, or a different perspective, or a point of view we may find surprising is all part of the adventure of being a human being. It is also part and parcel of a skill that is necessary to live and to celebrate the kingdom of God. Recall how often Jesus would remark, "You have heard it said _____, but what I say to you is this _____." Each time he said this, it was an invitation to see and to understand some event or experience in a different way, to widen the picture, and to try to observe what was not initially perceived as important or necessary. That is the power of context—a useful component in managing scrupulosity. ⚙️

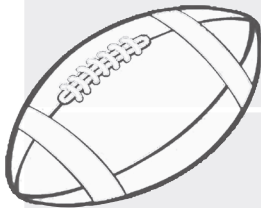
Jesus' Draft Pick

While NFL [National Football League] general managers and head coaches seek the most talented athletes to fill their rosters, Jesus took a slightly different approach. Instead of choosing political or religious leaders of his day, the rich or influential, Christ personally selected simple fishermen and common people. He even handpicked a member of society from whom the Jews traditionally distanced themselves—a tax collector. Given that Palestine was under Roman domination, inhabitants had to pay Caesar what was Caesar's, and then some. Tax collectors were typically Jews in the employ of the Roman government. Any sum over and above what was due Rome usually lined their pockets. As you might imagine, such "civil" servants were not welcomed with open arms, as their wealth came at the people's expense. Yet, Jesus specifically called on one such individual [Matthew] to join his team.

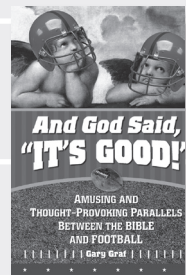
Analyzing Jesus' draft, we realize that there is great hope for the larger team of humanity. Think about whom Christ chose. Peter admitted he was a sinful man. Matthew was scorned as a pawn of the Roman government. Nathanael was initially skeptical about Jesus and his

ministry: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Later in the gospels, we learn that Thomas was a cynic, thus the term "doubting Thomas." Jesus did not choose the righteous, the powerful, the influential, the rich. He chose the everyman: the sinner, the skeptic, the cynic, the scorned. In other words, Christ has chosen us.

NFL minds wonder if anything good can come from a seventeenth-round draft pick. Then Bart Starr shines bright for the Green Bay Packers.... Sixth-round selection Tom Brady [won seven Super Bowl rings]! Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Jesus Christ conquers death and sin, giving hope to humanity. An aristocrat named Ignatius comes out of Spain to form the Jesuit Order. Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu is born in Skopje, Macedonia, and earns the Nobel Peace Prize as Mother Teresa. A goalie in his youth and later a volunteer librarian, Karol Józef Wojtyla never forgot his Polish roots, even after becoming the beloved Pope John Paul II. So, too, are we capable of great things, whether they be the raising of our children, helping out at a hospital, joining Habitat for Humanity...or offering a smile to a complete stranger. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Darn straight it can! ⚙



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Q. *If I accused myself of mortal sin and insisted to myself that it was, all the while knowing that I did not have all the evidence I needed and that there was good reason to doubt, was this then a form of slander, which is in and of itself a mortal sin?*

A. Can you feel the tension and the anxiety in this question? The convoluted thinking that it represents? This is a good example of the tortured thinking of the scrupulous mind. This is fantasy, not reality. No one thinks this way and honestly believes that it is, in fact, discernment. When you are all tied up in knots over a question, and you are scrupulous, always identify it as scrupulosity, not as reality.

Additional Resources Online for Those Seeking Help

Liguori Publications offers resources online that people with scrupulosity have found very helpful:

For helpful videos, please visit [YouTube/Catholic OCD](#).

For pastoral care and spiritual direction opportunities, please visit [managingscrupulosity.com](#).

For direct support and to access new helpful videos, please visit [Patreon.com/CatholicOCD](#). (Patreon offers a direct mail feature that can be used to answer your personal questions and concerns.)

Q. *Is it a sin to play football outside in below-freezing weather when you are sick if there is a good chance you might get more sick from the exposure to the cold?*

A. No, it is not a sin. It may well be an unwise health choice, but that is all. Not every human decision that may be iffy or even wrong is a sin. Many times, it is just a poor choice, not a sin.



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