

Forgotten Sins—Really?

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Every family has shared memories about important people, events, and experiences that collectively summarize their family story. Sometimes, it is a particular event that has retained special meaning in the life of the family. Other times, it might be common memories of a special grandparent, aunt, cousin, or other significant family member. These stories are treasured and enjoyed, and—even if mildly exaggerated—they retain a place of privilege in the family’s history.

Occasionally, these treasured stories vary in their details. The core of the story is true, but the specifics are not always the same, depending on who is remembering. My family has one such shared and debated memory.

My two sisters both vividly remember—with certainty—that my mother had a wringer washing machine in the basement of our home. My mother insists this is not the case. She says we never had a wringer washer in the basement, and she clearly remembers having an automatic washing machine. Every time this discussion comes up, she informs my sisters that their memories are not accurate. She reminds

them that there was a wringer washing machine in a neighbor’s house and one in my grandmother’s house, but we did not have one in our house. My sisters disagree, and then they inform my mother that *her* memory is not accurate. They even remember stories about the wringer washing machine.

As the eldest sibling, I can confirm that my mother is correct, and my sisters are not. The wringer washing machines my sisters remember were in the homes of our neighbor and our grandmother. My father purchased an automatic washing machine for the house we lived in before we moved into the new home we remember so fondly. The washing machine was intended for the kitchen, not the basement—my mother would not go into the basement of the old home because it was full of spiders. When we moved into the new house, the automatic washing machine moved with us and took its place in the basement, where there were no spiders to contend with.



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When you compare these memories, there are elements of truth in each of them. My sisters' memories of an old wringer washing machine are true memories. At the same time, my mother's memory of the automatic washing machine is accurate. She knows what my father purchased, when, and why. My memories of the wringer washing machine in the houses of our neighbor and our grandmother provide useful context and some details that fill in the gaps and clarify the memory. All of this establishes the background I need to illustrate the central point of this article.

Numerous studies have revealed a variety of factors that affect how/why/what we remember. For example, emotional events can produce erroneous memories, even though they are vivid.

Additional factors—for example, misleading information, interference, and leading questions—can increase memory distortion. These instances reveal something about memory that is important to understand and that has far more significant ramifications than whether or not there was a wringer washing machine in my childhood basement. Scrupulosity, and scrupulous people's so-called remembrance of sins they forgot to confess or details of sins they did not fully disclose, is one obvious example of the distortion that often occurs.

Most psychologists and mental health providers agree that there are certain key points to consider when determining the accuracy of a possible memory. These include:

- **No direct measure:** There is no direct way to measure the accuracy of a memory without external verification; even the person recalling the event may not be able to distinguish between a true and false memory.
- **Confidence is not always accurate:** Just because someone is very confident about a memory does not mean it is an accurate memory.

- **Factors affecting memory accuracy:** Several factors can affect memory accuracy, including the emotional intensity of the event, the time elapsed since the event, and leading questions and/or misinformation about the event.

Despite what many people believe, memory is not a repository of past experiences but a dynamic mechanism that ensures the stability and coherence of the self across situations. In recent decades, researchers have documented the striking limitations and plasticity of memories.

Today, scholars recognize that memories are **reconstructive** rather than **reproductive**.

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Instead, memories are often stitched together into plausible—but not necessarily accurate—narratives based

on beliefs, feelings, intuitions, guesses, and memory fragments. (See the National Center for Biotechnology Information.)

William James observed more than a century ago: "False memories are by no means rare occurrences in most of us.... Most people probably are in doubt about certain matters ascribed to their past. They may have seen them, may have said them, done them, or they may only have dreamed or imagined they did so" (*The Principles of Psychology, Vol. 1, Holt, 1890*).

Science supports and confirms what the Church understands about memory, distortion, and diminished capacity, and how scrupulosity affects those who suffer with the disorder. It may be a wonderful, pious discipline for a person without scrupulosity to "remember" sins from their past and confess them within the sacrament. For a person with scrupulosity, it is not piety; it is torture. Under no circumstances, with no exceptions, should a scrupulous person mine his or her memories in search of possible sins. Such "remembered" sins and forgotten details have been contaminated by scrupulosity and cannot be trusted. ☸

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Recognizing the Risen Christ

FR. LUIGI GIOIA

The fact that the disciples didn't acknowledge Jesus immediately following his resurrection isn't their fault, nor is it a result of negligence. During the years they had spent living with Jesus, they had seen God in the form of a human being who was like them. After the resurrection, Jesus appears to them as the Lord. He is no longer perceptible in the same way as before.

Luke's Gospel recounts the story of the two disciples who, after the crucifixion of Jesus, had lost hope and resolved to leave Jerusalem and return to Emmaus, which we can presume was their native village. Luke says that even though Jesus was walking with these disciples—the Jesus they had lived with for several years—they did not know it was him. A major obstacle to recognizing Jesus is that the two disciples were so caught up with their take on the events that they were not able to pay attention to the stranger who had joined them. They were focused on the past, "conversing about all the things that had occurred" and afraid because their expectations for the future had been crushed: "We were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:14, 21).

Interestingly, their sorrow, anxiety, and distraction were heightened to the point that not only did they lack awareness of the Lord's presence by their side, but they also had no self-awareness. They were unable to realize at the onset that something inside them began to change the very moment the stranger joined them. They acknowledged this reality only after "their eyes were opened" as he joined them for a meal: "Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:31, 32).

Too often, we prevent ourselves from being in the present with worry about the past, anxiety for the future, sorrow, and disappointment. These mental blockades keep us from abiding in the present moment and realizing that the solution and the salvage to our woes are right under our noses. ⚙

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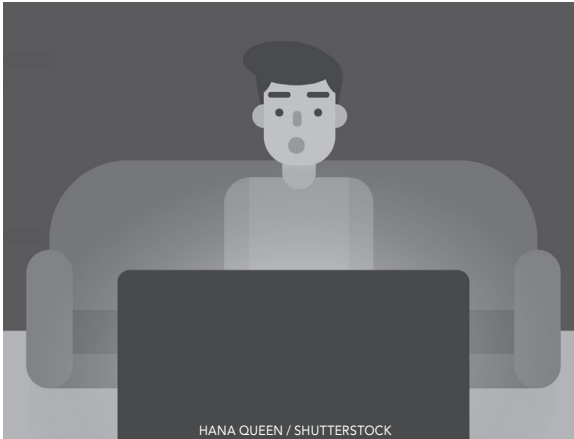


Q. I was watching a movie, and there was a suggestive scene in the movie that caused a physical reaction within me. Is this a mortal sin? I am not sure that I fully consented to it.

A. Stop this nonsense. Quit looking for sin and consent in every thought, word, and action. You are permitted to be a human being. You are permitted to have feelings, including sexual feelings and so-called “stirrings.” This has nothing whatsoever to do with sin. Instead of condemning yourself, why not choose to thank God that you are alive?

Q. I feel like I am not making progress in my spiritual life. I feel like more is required of me. Do you have any suggestions to help me grow spiritually and closer to God?

A. Yes. I suggest you refocus your attention away from yourself and your efforts and think rather of God, who has called you into life and who has blessed you this day. Spiritual growth begins with awareness and thankfulness, and it does not require heroic effort on your part. Accept the gift of God’s love and commit yourself to sharing what has been given to you.



**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.)

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