

The Adulterous Woman

FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSsR

A gospel that we hear proclaimed during Lent, the Gospel of John 7:53–8:11, is a powerful story about Jesus and the woman caught in adultery. When we study the formation of the sacred text, we discover that this story has an unusual history—or at least an unusual history as far as gospel stories go. What makes it unusual is the fact that this story was not included in the original Gospel of John, where it appears today, nor in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. In fact, to this day, this story does not appear in any gospel except for John. Why would this be? Is it simply a story that was forgotten and then later rediscovered? Is it a story that only the community that gathered around the evangelist John remembered from their encounters with Jesus, and, as a result, only they could record it as part of the Jesus event? Or is there some other reason why this story is found only in John's Gospel, was added much later after the gospel first appeared, and is not found in Matthew, Mark, or Luke?

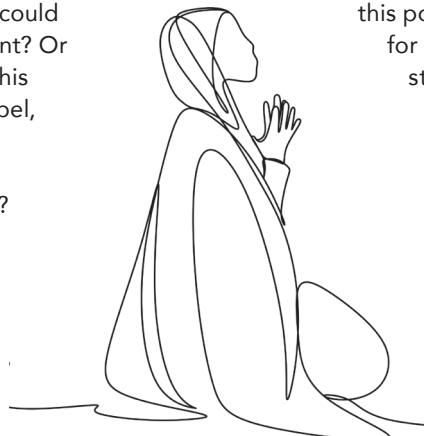
The answer seems to be that some members of the early Christian community were embarrassed by this story. First, the story has to do with sexual behavior and perceived sexual sin, and these are things that Christianity has always

struggled to talk about. Second, Jesus appears too lenient—he lets the woman get away with her sin. And, third, Jesus appears as someone who is willing to forgive everyone and everything, including sins that demanded that harshest of penalties according to Jewish law. As we can see from this story, the penalty for the woman caught in adultery was stoning.

Jesus is unconventional; he does the unexpected; he makes people upset. For some members of the early Christian community, this was simply too much. This was a part of Jesus they did not like, so they attempted to forget what he did and did not record the story.

Thankfully, however, despite the discomfort of some members of the early community, this powerful story has been preserved for us. And, because we have this story, we are presented with the opportunity to reflect on the actions of Jesus and the purpose for which they might have been intended. Hopefully, by reflecting on the story, we can learn something important for our spiritual journey, something we can apply to our lives as Christians.

For me, when I read this story, the overwhelming thought I am left with is the fact that



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Jesus identifies with the pain, embarrassment, and suffering of the woman. He does not identify with the righteous indignation of the crowd. Jesus is concerned with how the woman feels; he seems completely unconcerned with anything else. And the woman knows it. It cannot be any clearer or more profoundly revealed.

The woman knows that Jesus is, in fact, identifying with her and associating himself with her in a profoundly intimate way—much more profound and even more intimate than her association with the man with whom she committed the sin of adultery, who seems to have conveniently disappeared. In her sin, she did not achieve the commitment and intimacy that she craved, but she does achieve it, very unexpectedly, in this encounter with the Lord. He identifies with her, fills her, and gives her life. And—the greatest gift of all—Jesus does not demand anything more of her and expects nothing from her but the freewill response to never again put herself in the position where she is used by another. Then, he sets her free.

Jesus does not lecture her about the sixth commandment. He does not tell her how much she has hurt her family, or how terrible it is to sin—especially how terrible it is to sin sexually. He does not even give her penance. He simply tells her to go and, from now on, avoid this sin.

This story may not have appeared in the earliest gospels because of the reasons I have already mentioned, but I think there is also an even more important, and even more embarrassing, reason: Jesus abuses the power he has over the woman. We might not think of it as an abuse of power, but it may come into focus upon further reflection.

From the perspective of the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus abuses the power he has over this woman, caught in sin, because he does not use his power to punish her or permit the crowd to carry out the penalty. He chooses not to be powerful, but to be merciful. He chooses not to be righteous,

but to be accepting. He chooses not to preach, or teach, or make a point, but simply to love. And, by not using the power he has, by not seizing the moment to make a point about sexuality, sin, and those unfortunate enough to be caught in sin, he reveals himself intimately. He demonstrates the heart of God, the patience of the Father, and the

understanding and forgiveness offered to us by the Son through the power of the Spirit.

The early Christian community understood the power of this story.

It is not, when all is said and done, a story about an adulterous woman. It is rather a powerful indictment of those who are prone to judge, those who are caught up in the rush to exact justice for perceived faults and failings, and those who are unwilling or unable to see themselves in another who has been exposed. The early Christian community also understood that this is a story that proclaims an intimate God, a God who puts people and their feelings above the law and the expectations of others, a God who ultimately loves, forgives, and consistently calls us not to death, but to life. Now—and in the life to come.

It would be a very useful Lenten practice to take some time to meditate on these points. It would be a very useful Lenten practice to contrast the unrelenting demands of scrupulosity and its false perspective of sin with this authentic story about sin and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel. It would be a very useful Lenten practice to claim the Good News of the gospel that Jesus announces and to cling to the life that this Good News promises. I think if you compare and contrast what Jesus actually did with the lies that scrupulosity tells you about Jesus, you may discover a necessary grace that enables you to take a positive step. ☺

Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR, is the president and publisher of Liguori Publications, his second assignment as the company's leader. Professed as a Redemptorist in 1973, his ministries have included retreat work and writing reflections for the *Scrupulous Anonymous* newsletter.

What Do Catholics Believe?

A common misconception among Catholics is that everything the Church teaches is of equal importance. Some Catholics believe that all teachings are infallible teachings of the pope or that each discipline, practice, dogma, and doctrine of the Church is directly revealed.

Understanding what is required to be a “good Catholic” can be overwhelming. Some people, disrespectfully categorized as “cafeteria Catholics,” supposedly choose what they believe and practice, disregarding the rest. Others embrace a form of so-called “traditional” Catholicism, believing that to find clarity, they must reclaim a purer discipline. It is not surprising that there is often confusion,

misunderstanding, and even frustration that lead to a disconnect from Tradition and the Church. This could be the unintended result of poor catechetical training or insufficient education, but the role of dueling social media “talking heads” also cannot be discounted.

There is a kind of trench warfare going on in social media, and people who become confused and disheartened are seen as the unfortunate casualties of the battle for theological purity.

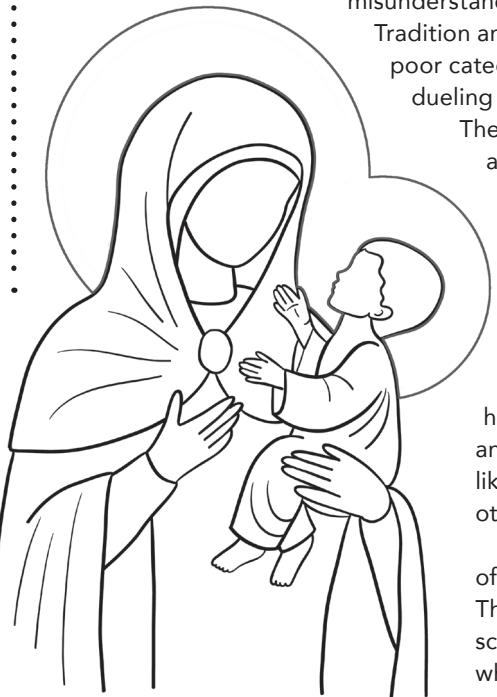
“In Catholic doctrine there exists an order or ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 90). If we understand the teachings of the Church within the context of this hierarchy, it may be easier to focus on what is important and necessary—what is essential truth—without feeling like a bad Catholic and without passing such judgment on others.

Dogmas, doctrines, beliefs, and practices are reflective of the hierarchical system that is in place in the Church. The system, reflective of the prayerful work of many scholars and saints, is intended to direct, form, and inform what it means to be Catholic. A **dogma** is different from a pastoral practice. A **doctrine** can emerge from Tradition or sacred Scripture or can be discerned by an ecumenical

council. **Practices and disciplines** can change from one place to another, at one time or another. This is what we understand, live, and put into practice each day through the guidance and the inspiration of the Spirit of God. ☀

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YUCALORA / SHUTTERSTOCK



Q. I recently felt a call to abstain from YouTube. The call is very real, like my call to become a Catholic. I feel that watching YouTube again would be a mortal sin. Can you help me?

A. It is amazing how scrupulosity and the demands it makes can be so compelling. A clue that reveals it is scrupulosity and not God is that scrupulosity isolates, while calls from God are relational and life-giving. This call to give up YouTube is isolating, demanding, and nonsensical, draped in the fear of mortal sin to compel your unhealthy choice.



CHRISTAKHOVA / SHUTTERSTOCK

Q. What can I do after acknowledging absurd hypotheticals in my head? How can I repent from such thoughts?

A. Repent from what? Unwelcome thoughts that you did not generate and do not accept, but that you somehow have convinced yourself that you are responsible for? How can you repent for something that has no moral content? It is a thought, nothing more. ☀

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](https://www.youtube.com/catholicoecd).

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](https://www.patreon.com/CatholicOCD). (Patreon offers a direct mail feature that can be used to answer your personal questions and concerns.)

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