

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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One Liguori Drive
Liguori, MO 63057-9999
www.liguori.org

New Beginnings



Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

Every year on January 1 we celebrate the new year. Not everyone of course—the Chinese follow a lunar calendar, so January 1 is not the first day of a new calendar year—but for most readers of this newsletter, January 1 starts a new year. Liturgically, in January we celebrate the solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God.

In some parts of the world we also pray during this month for world peace and also for Christian unity, along with other great feasts and memorials. For example, on January 1, 2003, Pope John Paul II prayed for peace from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica (*Pacem in Terris: A Permanent Commitment*). He knew nothing of the so-called Arab Spring we're mindful of, but he was acutely aware of the conflict and the violence—the "fratricidal struggle"—that is part of everyday life in the Middle East.

When we reflect on conflict, when we reflect

on the places we perceive as powder kegs, we do so from our own limited perspective. I say this not as a political statement, but as a statement of the limits of human beings. We can see only so much, and our attention is captured primarily by what affects us the most. Nevertheless, we form opinions and judgments, some of which we hold on to for dear life. We identify with labels and generalizations and even with particular commentators and columnists because it's one way to feel like responsible, concerned citizens. I do this, and I believe very few people don't.

What is God's will?

Every day I'm more aware of the increasing role of theology and theological perception in the world. In one sense this is not unusual: The way a particular people and culture understand God and God's will for them has always played a role in human decisions. But from my limited perception, theology is assuming a greater role in what is going on.

Frankly, this alarms me. I hesitate to assert that an action or point of view is unreservedly the will of God. I've written about this on other occasions and have received both very positive and acutely negative feedback.

But I often ask myself, especially during this time of new beginnings, how good and sincere Christians, Moslems, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists—and anyone else—can be so at odds with each other and remain so confident that their viewpoint or judgment is God's will.

I also ask myself what it means to be a truly peaceful person. During January, I think about what I need to do in the coming year to become a truly peaceful person and which of my opinions and judgments are obstacles to the kingdom of God, which I assume is the primary definition of what it means to live in peace for all people who call themselves Christians.

How do we find peace?

If I admit that I have a limited perception of the world, if I admit and accept that I have strong

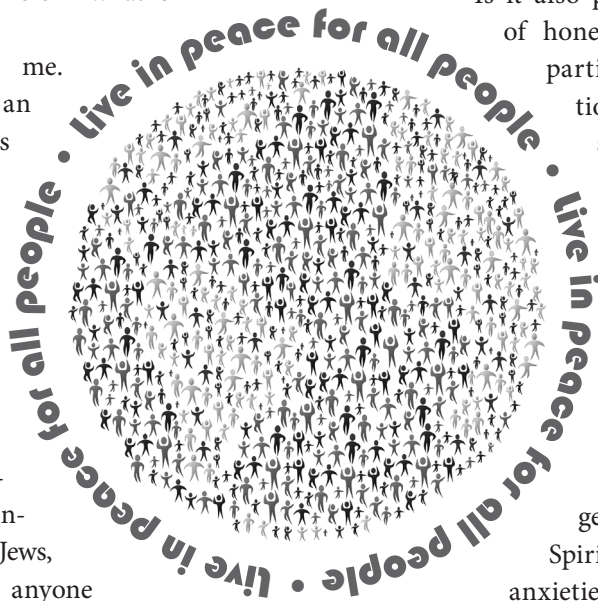
opinions and judgments, if I admit in that place within myself where I'm closest to God and God is closest to me that I am capable of making choices and decisions that are contrary to the kingdom of God, will I be more at peace? As a result, will the world be a little more peaceful?

Is it also possible that this process of honest reflection might also partially answer my question about God's will—or at least be part of the answer?

I have learned, but need to learn the lesson again and again each day, that it's important to spend time with the Lord. As I contemplate the Lord's presence in my life and listen to the gentle promptings of the Spirit, many of my hard edges, anxieties, and fears soften. And as I become softer, at least some of my opinions and judgments are much more peaceful than I ever thought possible.

In this month of new beginnings, I can pray for world peace. I can pray to the Mother of the Lord to help me be as open to the Spirit of God as she was. I can commit myself to being a peaceful person and to living in the expectation and the hope of the kingdom of God.

These actions will not solve any problems, will not necessarily even bring my questions and decisions into crystal-clear focus, but they will be at least a decision that seems to be, if I dare assert it, the will of God for me and perhaps the will of God for all.





Prayer

The following is adapted from *Every Tear Will Be Wiped Away: Prayers for Comfort in Times of Grief* by Gretchen L. Schwenker (Liguori Publications, © 2011).

When we pray, we open ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit and to God's transforming presence. We allow the Spirit to guide our hearts and bring enlightenment. We learn to hear God in the silence beyond the words of prayer. In responding to what we hear, we are changed. Prayer renews our spirit, freeing us of whatever obscures our path toward a more Christ-centered life.

Our prayer can praise God, express gratitude, and seek forgiveness, but we can also petition God when we are in trouble, asking for assistance and support. This petitioning is the most common form of prayer, and it is a safe way to speak our truth, whatever it may be. Healing can begin in this kind of conversation with God.

When we try to make sense of our lives without someone we dearly valued, when our grief seems overwhelming, prayer can console us. Coping with grief after the death of someone close to us can take time, and there is no formula. Through our faith, we can find the will to continue, but our heart may still hold a brokenness from that loss.

Making room for regular prayer—and allowing the silence that is part of our dialogue with God to envelop us—can nevertheless help mend that brokenness as we move through grief. Sometimes prayer can offer revelation as we receive the wisdom to see beyond our own story. Suddenly our focus shows us more clearly what we are called to do. Prayer widens our hearts so that we can recognize the needs of others and respond to their needs in love. Ultimately, prayer can bring us deep joy.

During the more than two thousand years since Jesus lived among us, we have found ourselves made better by following him and listening to the Word of God, our Bible. Praying with Scripture regularly can give us a greater understanding of everything God has done for us as well as everything we are asked to do in return. Beyond the Bible, we have a wealth of ancient traditional prayers from which to draw, including those from our liturgy.

Finally, we can look to generations of witnesses to our faith who have led by their fidelity. They have modeled how God hears our prayers; these prayers are answered—we are never alone—even though the outcome may not be what we had hoped.



SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

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Q *I was recently reading a newly published book about scrupulosity. I took your advice and paid close attention to the date of publication and discerned that it was not simply a reprint of old material, but I'm puzzled. The material seemed to make scant mention of advances in the treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder. What gives?*

A I can't know the intention of the author, but perhaps the scope of the book was to present a specific and rather focused traditional viewpoint about religious scrupulosity. If this was the author's intent, this book certainly has a place on your shelf as long as you have a companion volume that considers the effects of OCD and scrupulosity. Perhaps this is an example of "both/and" instead of "either/or."

Q *Would you please publish a list of priests trained in scrupulosity? It's so frustrating trying to find a confessor who understands what I'm suffering, and I'm getting worn out.*

A I am unable to publish such a list because it doesn't exist.

The best way to find a more understanding confessor is to ask your current confessor for a recommendation. He won't take this request as an insult and will be more than willing to direct you to a confessor who can provide the help and guidance you seek.

If you're reluctant to ask your priest directly, give him a copy of this question and answer outside of the confessional and ask for his help.



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