

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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PART 1 OF 4

The Words of Absolution

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR

This is the first of four reflections on the sacramental words of absolution prayed by the priest in the sacrament of reconciliation:

God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

These powerful words invite our meditation and reflection. Unfortunately, because of the anxiety they feel in the confessional, many of our readers can't fully appreciate the power of these words and the amazing grace they proclaim. This and the next three issues of *Scrupulous Anonymous* will help all of us appreciate this sacramental encounter with the person of Jesus.

In this issue, we'll consider the following passage: *God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son.*

These words represent the revelation of Jesus and his personal relationship with his heavenly Father,

his *Abba*. This revelation is central to our understanding of what it means to truly celebrate Jesus' healing power when we encounter the Lord under the sacramental sign.

For a Jew of the first century—or any century, for that matter—the idea that the God of the Old Testament might be embraced as *Abba* was entirely beyond belief. The God of the Old Testament was the all-powerful creator God who demanded that his people remain faithful to him.

The primary interpreters of the relationship between Yahweh and his people insisted that he could best be obeyed by careful observance of each of the rules and tenets of the Law of Moses. Those who broke the Law risked alienation, not only from God, but also from the community of believers. This alienation was tantamount to death, because no one could imagine how life could go on without the support of the community, family, and friends.

In this context—and with this strongly held perception of Yahweh as the dominant experience of God—Jesus waded into the experience and turned it upside down. Without dismissing either the Law or the spiritual practices determined and measured by the Law, he invited his followers to an entirely different experience of God.

Experiencing God in this new way consists of three steps: 1) personal truthfulness, 2) a sense of vulnerability, and 3) an experience of profound intimacy and relationship. Jesus invited his followers to perceive their world, their community, and all of their relationships as manifestations of the kingdom of God.

It wasn't easy then, nor is it now, to accept his invitation. To embrace the kingdom of God and grow in personal relationship with *Abba* each person learns (to paraphrase Matthew 16:25 and Luke 17:33) to lose

his or her life to save it. In other words, each person learns to let go of the old ways of living, judging, perceiving, loving, and forgiving that are anchored in the fear of not measuring up and the anxiety of being less than perfect. Jesus fundamentally invites us to embrace something that comes purely as gift, as grace from God.

The first step is to learn to be as truthful as possible about yourself, your relationships, your thoughts and desires, and your real needs and expectations. Sometimes this is very pleasant and very freeing—for example, when you correctly identify your personal gifts and talents.

But this process can be painful as you recognize your faults and failings, when you accept that you're not always as loving and as wonderful as you might imagine or even hope to be.

Only when you've achieved the first step can you take the second step: You become vulnerable to yourself, to others, and ultimately to God when you accept that which is most true and authentic about yourself and then take personal responsibility for your thoughts, words, and actions.

For example, to experience vulnerability is to admit that you have scrupulosity and that this illness—through no fault of your own—colors your relationships, your perceptions, and your belief about important events and experiences. It's hard to admit and accept something painful that fills you with doubt and anxiety. But there is great power and grace in the vulnerability when you're able to embrace it and then continue living in hope and expectation of God's grace and concern.

The third step, and there is no short-cut to this one, is to grow in your relationship with the *Abba*, the Father, because you know you are loved and

beloved—not as you one day might be, but exactly as you are this day, at this moment. The intimacy of the experience is powerful because to know and to experience that you are loved, warts and all, is ultimately freeing and life-giving.

When Jesus reveals his truth—that the Abba is a God and Father of mercy, not one of judgment and condemnation—he invites us into a completely different way of perceiving and experiencing our world and that of other people. When Jesus stands in the ultimate position of vulnerability, first in his agony in the garden and then dramatically before Pilate and his accusers, he is powerless. He is perceived by those around him as having failed in his mission. He hasn't changed hearts, he hasn't changed perceptions, and his fate has been determined. The kingdom is seen as lost, and the old way of seeing and believing has triumphed once again. He has poured out everything, and it has not been enough—or so it might seem.

Only after every little bit is stripped away and poured out and nothing is left is the true love of the Abba, Father, revealed. God hasn't abandoned Jesus but has rather imagined something more, something beyond comprehension, something that is to be revealed as the final answer to those who refuse to believe, to see, and to live in the light of the kingdom of God.

The experience of resurrection is his final answer. There is no separation, there is no alienation, and all is and always was made whole and entire through the power of the grace of God made manifest.

The opening words of our prayer of absolution remind us that through Jesus' death and resurrection, the ultimate truth about his Abba, Father, is revealed. The opening words of absolution invite us to recall that life is a journey made up of many experiences, each graced by God in some way. The words of absolution remind us that the same grace that was active in Jesus' life—in the good moments and in the difficult moments—is also active in our lives.

We are not alone. We are not isolated. We are not alienated. We are not singled out for judgment and/or punishment. The words of absolution are words of hope and praise, not condemnation. They set the celebratory tone of the sacramental experience as an encounter with the living God, who is always active and alive in us.

Our heavenly Father, revealed to us as the all-loving Abba, is a Father of mercy. He is with us in all the moments of our lives, including death, calling us forth into the resurrection, the experience of Jesus—our way, our truth, and our life.

Be sure to listen to Fr. Santa's live call-in show, "Understanding Scrupulosity," on Radio Maria USA. The show airs Wednesdays at 2 pm Eastern Time.

To listen: Go to radiomaria.us/scrupulosity to access podcasts or listen to the program live

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Q *I buy too many books. I asked my confessor for direction, and he said to limit myself to three or four books per month. Am I bound by mortal sin to follow that, or may I do something else, like limit the amount I spend on books each month?*

A You are not bound by sin—venial or mortal—to follow your confessor's directive. The prudent thing to do is exactly what you did: Listen to his advice, and then apply it to your situation to the best of your ability. Your prudent discernment of his directive enabled you to come to a decision that is best for you. Feel free to follow that.

Q *You've said it's no sin to miss Sunday Mass if you're on a cruise, because you can't help it if there is no Mass on the boat. I think we shouldn't plan to be on a cruise on a Sunday if the ship doesn't offer Mass.*

A In planning you are required to exercise ordinary means of due diligence, not extraordinary or heroic means. If you have a choice between a cruise with Sunday Mass and one without, it might be reasonable to take the cruise with Mass *if all other things are equal*. But you're not obligated to do so and may choose whichever cruise you want in good conscience.



2014 Scrupulous Anonymous Retreat **Presented by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR**

Friday, Dec. 12 – Sunday, Dec. 14

Perpetual Help Retreat Center, Oconomowoc, WI

For information, call 262-567-6900 or visit

RedemptoristRetreat.org and click on "Calendar"

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