



The Words of Absolution

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR

This month I conclude my four-part series on the 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 people with scrupulosity feel in the confessional, they can't fully appreciate the power of these words and the amazing grace they proclaim.

In this last of four reflections, we consider the closing passage: *and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

For older readers of our newsletter, these words capture the true meaning of the sacrament. Schooled

in the traditions and the practices of the Council of Trent, the Catholic ear was trained to hear these words: “*Ego te absolvo.*” These words proclaimed to the penitent that the priest, as judge and representative of Christ, had accepted the penitent’s confession of sins in number, matter, and kind. The priest had determined no reason to refuse absolution. All that was now required was the penitent’s dutiful performance of the penance.

On hearing “*Ego te absolvo,*” penitents understood that their sins had been forgiven. They felt relief, but they were also aware of the “temporal punishment due to sin” that hadn’t yet been satisfied. Purgatory awaited them—but most assuredly hell and the eternal damnation of the fires of hell had been staved off, at least for now, unless the penitent had deliberately concealed a mortal sin. In that instance, those words confirmed the sacrilege of the penitent, who remained both the unrepentant sinner and was most assuredly damned. Sacrilege, which was considered even more damning than a mortal sin, was to be avoided.

At this point, the beautiful theology of the prayer of absolution seems to give way to a cold and sterile

canonical requirement for the valid dispensation of the sacrament of penance. Perhaps that's unavoidable—after all, these words were originally intended as a “sentence of the law.”

But this is one reason many people—with and without scrupulosity—dread confession and penance. Who among us doesn't feel anxiety and dread when we're judged—even when we're innocent?

When the Second Vatican Council renewed the liturgy and ritual of each sacrament, it also addressed the anxiety associated with the sacrament of penance by changing the sacrament's emphasis to healing and the power of God's grace.

Catechetical teaching about the sacrament's new emphasis was enthusiastically embraced, but for people who remember the emphasis of the older theology, the words “I absolve you from your sins” suggest that the priest remains the judge and that a standard must be met. The law seems to confirm this viewpoint for anyone with scrupulosity who often feels anxiety with the sacrament instead of the joy of reconciliation. This is unfortunate but understandable.

For people with scrupulosity, the pronouncement of the words of absolution signals the end of the

formal ritual of the sacrament—but it doesn't necessarily end their anxiety, questioning, and constant ruminating about sin.

It would be better for them to consciously choose to dwell on the rest of the prayer (see the July, August, and September 2014 issues of this newsletter) so that instead of feeling dread and uncertainty from the canonical experience of judgment, they feel the sacrament's beauty and grace. A slight change in emphasis might help people with scrupulosity move away from the feeling of being judged and sentenced and allow them to experience the sacramental idea of the celebration of God's active grace and life.

I hope these four reflections about the beautiful prayer of absolution have deepened and expanded our appreciation for the power of the prayer and enabled us to understand it within a theological context of redemption and mercy, with less emphasis on the required canonical words and more emphasis on the entire prayer.

As a priest confessor, I'm aware of my canonical responsibilities when I pray this prayer for you, but I'm all the more inspired and encouraged when I fully appreciate and understand the *entire prayer* as a proclamation of God's grace and life at work in the world.

ScrupulousAnonymous.org



Reflection

Adapted from *Grateful Meditations for Every Day in Ordinary Time, Weeks 19–34*
by Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney (Liguori Publications, © 2013).

Humility is not to be confused with humiliation. God has no wish for us to be ashamed of who we are. God will never ridicule us. God will never cause us embarrassment. Humility lies in knowing the truth of who we are, the all of us—positive, negative, strong, weak, faithful, doubting, loving, indifferent—and knowing that God loves us just as we are. Humility awakens us to the enormity of our shortcomings while reassuring us that we are beloved of God. Humility allows us to approach God in love, in remorse, in gratitude, in supplication, and know that God will hear and answer us with mercy.

We would not approach God at all if we didn't have some hope and trust in God's mercy and forgiveness. We know the power of forgiveness. We know how it sets us free. We know how light and unburdened we feel when we forgive others. We know that God made us for love, not for punishment.

When we acknowledge our failings, our weaknesses, our flaws, we open ourselves to God's healing.

In our brokenness we know that only God can heal us. In our brokenness lies the kernel of our humility—the truth that we are dependent on God and rely on God to make us whole. In our brokenness we are exposed to the reality of God's love.

Ponder: What do I pray for?

Prayer: Lord, I am grateful you are close to the brokenhearted. In my brokenness I call on you. Have mercy on me, a sinner, small and precious in your eyes.

Practice: With a grateful heart, I will acknowledge my strengths and weaknesses and offer them all to God in humility.

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 live

To call in: 866-333-MARY (6279)

To e-mail a question to Fr. Santa: Go to radiomaria.us/scrupulosity and complete the form.



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Q *I'm quite concerned about my responsibilities as a voter. I feel so conflicted and anxious, and I'm afraid I might make the wrong decision. Do you have any advice to put my mind to rest?*

A I can't take away your anxiety, which is part of the process of discernment and isn't limited to people with scrupulosity. I can, however, suggest you go to the archives at ScrupulousAnonymous.org and read the October 2012 newsletter. In it I reflect on some common issues and concerns voting brings to mind. Judging from the feedback I've received, that issue of the newsletter has helped many people.

Q *I was listening to your radio program and was very taken by the obvious suffering of one of your recent callers. You seemed so kind and patient with her persistent questioning. How do you do it?*

A My supposed patience and understanding have little or nothing to do with me; they're the manifestation of God's grace in action. You heard the caller's obvious struggle and suffering, but what I heard was her gentleness and her goodness. This is what I usually encounter in people with scrupulosity. I just wish they could see themselves in the same way I see them and God sees them.

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Presented by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR

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