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Unfortunate Distractions

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa

There has been a recent uproar in some circles about a liturgical reform called *ad orientem*, in which the priest faces east during Mass. In most churches, this means he's praying with his back to the people. *Ad orientem* is standard in the Tridentine Mass, the approved liturgical practice of the Church for approximately 400 years, but the reforms of the Second Vatican Council call for priests to face the people during Mass.

The *Scrupulous Anonymous* mailbag has been overflowing with anxious questions about this so-called reform. Some readers even wonder whether it's serious sin to attend a church in which Mass is celebrated by a priest who doesn't practice *ad orientem*.

To be blunt, this is nonsense. This "liturgical reform" is not Church teaching; it's a strict interpretation of liturgical law by a group of people who struggle with change. It's not the pastoral or liturgical practice of the Church.

Unfortunately, a small group of people resists the reforms of Vatican II, and their voices were isolated and contained until the explosion of digital media.

Now they can reach new audiences through social media posts, elegant and official-looking websites, and blogs. People with scrupulosity are always looking for answers and certitude. Because the presentation and language of these media express unwavering certitude, *Scrupulous Anonymous* members often fall victim to this small but very vocal group, which includes some priests and a handful of bishops.

But despite the so-called certitude of this group, the ideas they express are nonsense. Vatican II reforms were inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit. They were necessary, they are embraced by Church leadership, and they should not be explained away or ignored.

Most Vatican II documents were approved by overwhelming votes. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*, 1964) was approved by a vote of 2151 to 5. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*, 1965) was approved 2309 to 75. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 1963) was approved 2147 to 4. People who oppose Vatican II reforms ignore

or minimize this overwhelming approval when they argue that the council was misinformed and misdirected, that its reforms prove the Church has lost direction.

My most serious concern is not that debate is taking place, but that the debate is harmful to people of tender conscience. Liturgically and theologically, this small but vocal group of people is on the fringe of our Church community and will remain so.

Pastorally, I'm concerned that some members of our SA family will continue to fall victim to the rantings and ravings of the fringe and be denied the peace and the confidence they should experience as people of God.

I regularly counsel people with scrupulosity to pay close attention to the publication date of printed material on scrupulosity to be sure they're getting up-to-date pastoral guidance. Now I'm adding a warning to avoid social media, blogs, websites, and forums that seem to be authoritative but are not sponsored by a diocese or the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (usccb.org). A theology degree or an official-sounding religious title doesn't guarantee helpful pastoral direction.

When all is said and done, the anxiety produced by fascination with supposed liturgical reform is an

unfortunate distraction for people with scrupulosity. We need to stay focused on lessening anxiety and arriving at a sense of peace. To engage in the frantic anxiety and believe the threats of heresy from the fringe community, either in liturgical or other so-called doctrinal debates, is not helpful and will not lead to a sense of healing.

Official change in liturgical practice or the interpretation of Church law is announced from the pulpit—and not just one pulpit, but all pulpits. Dioceses distribute materials explaining the change and allow sufficient time for a smooth and anxiety-free transition from one practice to another. If these components are not present, no official change is occurring.

Therefore, *without exception*, ignore discussion about change that hasn't been officially announced by a diocese or the USCCB.

The struggle with scrupulosity and the emotional rollercoaster that accompanies it are more than enough to deal with each day. We don't need to add even more worry and anxiety to the mix. To do so is counterproductive and an obstacle to healing.

God's healing grace is powerful, but grace is effective only with cooperation from us. Removing unfortunate distraction is one effective way to bring even more of God's grace into your life.

Reflection

The following is abridged and adapted from
From Fear to Faith: A Worrier's Guide to Discovering Peace
by Gary Zimak (Liguori Publications, © 2014).

Ever since I was a young child, I've been prone to anxiety. I'm not sure when this tendency started, but in first grade I began to worry that my father or mother would die suddenly. Although I had no basis for this fear (my parents were healthy), it was exacerbated when a second-grade classmate's father passed away unexpectedly.

Another fear was added in fourth grade when I discovered that President Theodore Roosevelt developed asthma at a young age. Once that seed was planted in my worry-prone mind, I started having breathing difficulties. As I continued to worry about this, the symptoms increased until tests revealed no illness. The symptoms vanished once I got a clean bill of health.

Overcoming anxiety is a big job that requires great effort. If you're like me, you've probably tried and failed many times.

A basic Internet search will reveal many step-by-step approaches for eliminating worry from your life. Unfortunately, the majority of them put the entire burden on us.

This isn't a good idea. For one thing, it's not easy for us to just stop worrying, especially if we're anxious by nature. It truly is a big job. More important, these I-can-do-it methods completely remove Christ from the equation when we should be letting Jesus do most of the work. Not only is it just about impossible to overcome anxiety without getting to know Jesus personally, it's also a bad idea. So if you've been unable to stop worrying on your own, be thankful.

It's not easy to trust God, especially when we've become accustomed to being in control. Turning your life (and your worries) over to the Lord can be difficult, but we must do it to experience his peace.



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MAILBOX

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Q *What's the difference between a sin of omission and a sin of commission?*

A For people with scrupulosity, I pastorally advise that your examination of conscience should focus on correctly identifying and naming sins of commission, that is, sins you actually committed. It's an unnecessary complication to also look for sins of omission. As even more fertile ground for a scrupulous imagination, they should be avoided.

Q *Billions of people either ignore or are unaware of the sacrament of reconciliation. Will all these people go to hell? What does this say about God and the judgment everyone faces at death?*

A It says that God is merciful and that God's forgiveness is not dependent on or limited to what we believe about sin and forgiveness. For Catholics, the sacrament of reconciliation is an obvious gift of God's grace. For people whose spiritual practice or discipline doesn't include the sacraments, God's merciful love and forgiveness are expressed in ways we cannot even begin to imagine.

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