

A LITURGICAL AND CATECHETICAL MOMENT



Origin and Use of the Confiteor Prayer

- What is the Confiteor Prayer? What is the origin of the Confiteor Prayer?
- Is it required to be recited by the community of gathered faithful in the Divine Liturgy of the Mass (at the Mass's beginning or Introductory Rite) during the Penitential Act?

The Confiteor is a prayer that originated from an early date in the Church's history as a private prayer said by the celebrant priest in his vesting sacristy before Mass. Some prayers similar to the Confiteor appear earlier also in liturgical documents and practice used outside Mass. The first recorded mention of the Confiteor is in Bernold of Constance's introduction to the Mass, which dates back to around the year 1100 CE. The form of the Confiteor changed considerably during the Middle Ages.

The prayer was introduced to the Order of Latin Mass during the Middle Ages. In the 1962 Latin Mass Sacramentary/Missal—still used to celebrate the extraordinary Latin Mass form—required the priest to offer the Confiteor at the foot of the altar (bottom step) before entering into the sanctuary area and then by the altar servers (representing the congregation). Additionally, priests could offer the Confiteor a second time before he received and distributed the Holy Eucharist; making the prayer offered three times during the liturgical Order of the Divine Liturgy (Latin Mass).

The word "Confiteor" comes from the first words of the prayer, which in Latin means "I confess" or "I acknowledge".

The Confiteor remains a prayer of contrition that prepares Catholics for the Mass.

Is the Confiteor Prayer required during the Divine Liturgy of the Holy Mass? As Penitential Prayer #1 of three Penitential Acts, the prayer in the current used November 2011 form of the Roman Missal may still be used at the discretion of the celebrant priest.

That said, however, while in modern day, the Confiteor may not be frequently used at every Mass as in years or decades past, there are a number of priestly liturgical practices used worldwide. Some celebrant priests pray at the beginning of every Mass or only Masses on solemnities and Sundays; while others utilize it at Masses with a penitential theme (especially during the Seasons of Advent and/or Lent); or on First Fridays.

In hindsight, Holy Mother Church in her wisdom offers each of us a centuries-old means of *preparing* ourselves for the Penitential Act of forgiveness of our venial sins before the Mass—so that our minds and hearts are purified to be worthily fed and receive from the two tables within the Mass: *the Word of God and the Holy Eucharist*—especially before the celebrant priest says: “... *let us call to mind our sins.*” Without such preparation, we could potentially be rushed to recall those venial sins we seek to offer to and ask to be forgiven of, by God Himself.

By utilizing the Confiteor before the Mass (not just during the Mass)—in conjunction with an earnest self-examination of conscience—we can and will more fully offer those venial sins that we have committed since our last Mass and/or Sacrament of Reconciliation.

NB: As an important note and a quick reminder, if we have mortally sinned, we must participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession), to be absolved of these more grave and serious sins before attempting to receive the Holy Eucharist. The Mass’s Penitential Acts cleanses us of only venial sins—not our mortal sins.

Since 2011, the text of the Confiteor in the Roman Missal is as follows:

*I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers [and sisters],
that I have greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words,
in what I have done and in what I have failed to do,
through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault;
therefore, I ask blessed Mary ever-Virgin, all the Angels and Saints,
and you, my brothers [and sisters], to pray for me to the Lord our God.*

When examined in context closely, the Confiteor is a general public prayer seeking forgiveness of our venial sins, however, in itself it **does not contain** any means of absolution from the celebrant priest (who throughout the Mass is acting in the Person of Christ: *In Persona Christi*).

While the Blessed Mary, Mother of God and all the Angels and Saints are particularly important intercessors of our daily prayers and intercessions, they do not possess the ability to forgive us of our venial or mortal sins. That is reserved to God, Himself.

That is why, following the Confiteor, the celebrant priest includes the (Penitential Prayer #2 or #3): “*Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.*” followed by a formula of absolution (modified, but similar to what is used within the Sacrament of Reconciliation):

“*May Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to ever lasting life.*”