

PENITENTIAL ACT

Have you ever been in a conversation and sensed some tension? Maybe you said something you shouldn't have or did something in the past that hurt or offended another person. Unless you want the uncomfortable feeling to continue, you realize that you need to say something to clear the air—apologize perhaps—so you can move on and past the issue. In a similar way, this is the case where we approach God in prayer—a *plea for mercy*—intentionally undertaking in the Liturgy of the Mass at the beginning (before the Open Prayer or Collect).

When we arrive at the church for Mass, we may be burdened with things we have done during the previous days and week; sins committed against God and against our neighbor. These can cause distance and tensions between God and us. So, at the beginning of the Mass, we acknowledge our need to set things right with God, so we will be able to offer the highest form of prayer to him during the Liturgy of the Word and Liturgy of the Eucharist. But we do more than just “clear the air”; we announce our faults and our need for forgiveness in the Penitential Act. (To be “penitential” means to be sincerely sorry for our sins.)

The Penitential Act (also known as the Penitential Rite) has three forms. The longest form includes the *Confiteor*, which begins. “I confess to Almighty God, and to you my brothers and sisters ...” You probably recognize the prayer. In it, we confess that we are sinners, acknowledging that we are at fault for our sins during our recitation of the *Mea Culpa*: “Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault” (in Latin, “*Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*”).

Whenever we pray these words we should seek to call to mind anything we have done that has offended God and hurt others. The Church not only asks us to admit our most grievous faults, but also that we demonstrate our need for repentance by striking our chests three times, as we say the words. By doing this, (much like the Roman soldier of old as a sign of loyalty and respect; as in the early years of the Church) we associate a physical action with our words—to give our worship a fuller meaning. We are not “beating ourselves up” about it, but showing ourselves—and one another—that true and complete repentance involves our entire person, soul and body.

In praying the *Mea Culpa*, Christ's Church invites us to realize that, if we are going to say we are sorry, we need to really mean it. We are actually doing more than merely saying that we are sorry for our sins and asking God for his forgiveness. We are admitting that it is *our fault*, and that we need God's grace and the prayer of our community to avoid sinning again.

At the end of the Penitential Act, the priest [leading the assembled faithful] the following words of absolution: “*May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.*” Notice that these words are indeed different from the words of absolution we hear in the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession). There, after we have confessed our sins and prayed an Act of Contrition, the priest says: “... and I absolve you of your sins, in the name of the Father, † and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” In the Mass, then, the priest is *asking* God to forgive his and our venial sins, while in Confession he is acting *in persona Christi* (in the person of Christ), with the authority given him by God in his priestly ordination to be Christ's instrument to forgive sins—after all it is not just the priest who hears and gives absolution—but Christ Himself present. Why is this important? Because it highlights our need for Confession when we have committed serious (i.e., mortal) sins, while venial sins are forgiven during the Mass itself, in the Penitential Act, and in our subsequent reception of the Holy Eucharist.

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