

## A CATECHETICAL MOMENT: DO YOU KNOW THE 2 PLEAS WE SAY IN MASS? *The Penitential Act and the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God) During the Order of the Mass*

During the very first part (Introductory Rite) of the Mass (after the entrance song, signing of the Cross, and general greeting), there is a **Penitential Act**. Why? Even the best of us, invariably come to the Mass with some form of residual venial sin(s) still on our heart. The purpose of the Penitential Act is to ask (plea to) God (as part of a gathered assembly), at the very beginning of the liturgy, to forgive our sins—before we start the Liturgy of the Word and then, the Liturgy of the Eucharist; so that we may offer the Sacrifice of the Mass (our oblation) most worthily. Because, the Eucharist is not only a sacrament that we *receive*; it is also a Sacrifice that we *offer*.

The priest introduces the Penitential Act in the following words: “Brethren (brothers and sisters), let us acknowledge our sins, and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries.” This calls to mind for us the Lord’s instruction: “*Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift*” (Matthew 5:23).

There are two, more popularly used options for the Penitential Act:

1. The *Confiteor* (the petition that begins: “I confess to Almighty God, and to you my brothers and sisters ...”), followed by the petition (prayerful plea): “*Lord, have mercy*” or *Kyrie eléison*.
2. A set of three biblical statements regarding the life of Jesus that are followed by the petition (or plea): “*Lord, have mercy*” / *Kyrie eléison* or “*Christ, have mercy*” / *Christe eléison*.

After the chosen option is completed, the priest proffers the Prayer of Absolution: “*May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.*”

Note: This is **not** the same as a needed confession of and absolution from mortal sins (in the Sacrament of Reconciliation). Ultimately, these are heartfelt pleas to God, not mere statements.

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Dating back to the *Liber pontificalis* (Book of the Popes or Pontifical Book) (687-701CE), the *Agnus Dei* is an integral part of the Mass. It was a chant sung by both the clergy and the laity to accompany the breaking of the bread after the completion of the Eucharistic Prayer; before the distribution of Communion; and has continued until today. The text was comprised of one simple Latin petition or plea: *Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis* (Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us). The assembly continues to sing until the Presider has completed the fraction of the consecrated host. The *Agnus Dei* is meant to be a vocalized petition (or plea) before God.

*Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.*

*Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.*

*Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem. (Lamb of God....grant us peace.)*

The image of the Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*) is important in sacred scripture. In the account of the Crucifixion in St. John's Gospel, Jesus is identified as the Paschal Lamb of God, and in St. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians: “*For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed!*” (1 Corinthians 5:7).

The Book of Revelation contains more than **36** references to the Lamb; references to the paschal lamb and the lamb of sacrifice; inevitably recalling Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection.