



WHY DO WE STRIKE OUR CHEST DURING THE CONFITEOR?

The *Confiteor* is one of those prayers every Mass-going Catholic needs to know, but may not be aware of its name. The name is taken from the very first word of the prayer in Latin, *Confiteor*, which essentially means “I confess”. Since Catholics have a whole sacrament dedicated to the confession of sins, they might wonder why the *Confiteor* is part of the Mass. Essentially, the *Confiteor* is a necessary preparation for what we participate in at Mass, a work of the Lord and is necessary to prepare ourselves interiorly as we orient ourselves to be fed from the Liturgies of the Word and the Eucharist.

Although fasting (for a minimum of 1 hour; except for the elderly and those on medication) before receiving Communion during the Mass is still a valid Church precept and practice of the faithful today, properly conforming our heart and soul to Christ also requires contrition for our sins. Through the *Confiteor*, we fittingly offer contrition to God for our VENIAL sins and prepare for our participation in the Divine Mystery of the Eucharist. MORTAL sins can only be relieved through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The revised translation of the 2011 3d revision of the Roman Missal, which is closer to the original Latin, is more emphatic and draws more attention to a particular pious practice. Although maintained within the rubrics (i.e., the prescribed actions to accompany the words said) of the Mass, this practice was often forgotten in the last few decades. The new translation (which will sound familiar to many older Catholics):

*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 the penitent reaches and recites the last two lines of the *Confiteor*, he/she takes their right hand, curls it into a loose fist and strikes his left breast. Why? Immediately, a few Bible verses come to mind. In the Old Testament for example, we find Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:19) saying, “I turn in repentance; I have come to myself, I strike my breast; I blush with shame, I bear the disgrace of my youth.” In the New Testament, the

contrition of the publican, the tax collector, in Luke 18:13 is recalled: “But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, ‘O God, be merciful to me a sinner.’”

In ancient Judaism, striking one’s breast was a sign of sincere, deep sorrow over one’s sinfulness. This continued into the Christian era, [as evidenced in much of the world occupied by the Roman Empire]. St. Augustine, one of the greatest Early Church Fathers, noted that, "No sooner have you heard the word 'Confiteor' than you strike your breast. What does this mean except that you wish to bring to light what is concealed in the breast, and by this act to cleanse your hidden sins?" (*Sermo de verbis Domini*, 13).

The secular world today, however, shuns such public displays, but the Catholic Church most certainly does not. As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has noted: “During the Confiteor, the action of striking our breasts at the words *through my own fault* can strengthen my awareness that *my sin is my fault*.” <http://www.usccb.org/liturgy/girm/bul3.shtml> Our physical actions, when done piously, help bring home to us spiritual truths.

Of note, within the revised translation of the Mass, it notes that we strike our breast once. In the traditional Latin Mass, Catholics struck their breast three times – once for each use of the word “fault”. In any case, the exact number is not important, but the sincerity of the gesture, while standing before God asking for his forgiveness for venial sins is however. The importance of such gestures should not be underestimated. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in *Sacramentum Caritatis*, “*the Synod of Bishops asked that the faithful be helped to make their interior dispositions correspond to their gestures and words... This is particularly important in a highly technological age like our own, which risks losing the ability to appreciate signs and symbols.*” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, 64)

But what is the point of all of this? When we pray the *Confiteor* – and we have to remember it is a prayer – we are professing our contrition to God, His angels and saints in heaven, and the faithful on earth. We are asking for forgiveness for all those sins - thoughts, words, deeds and omissions – which we have committed. Such a confession of sins makes it possible for our venial sins to be forgiven during the Mass itself.

The next time we are participating in the Mass –let us keep in mind the following written article by Fr. Nikolaus Gehr some years ago:

“The *Confiteor* is an open avowal of compunction of heart, a contrite and penitential prayer, which should cleanse the soul from even the slightest stains of guilt and from all sinful defects. But in order that its recital, together with the threefold striking of the breast, may prove cleansing and salutary to the soul, it must in truth be the outpouring of a contrite spirit, proceeding from the depths of a heart touched with love and sorrow.”
(Nikolaus Gehr, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass: Dogmatically, Liturgically, and Ascetically Explained*, St. Louis: Herder, 1902, page 358).

(SR: http://bishophelmsingininstitute.typepad.com/the_official_bishop_helms/2010/07/the-new-translation-of-the-roman-missal-3-the-confiteor.html)