

## Understanding the Mass: The Act of Penitence

Why do we confess our sins at Mass, when the Eucharist at its core is “*a sacrament of reconciliation?*”<sup>1</sup> In his book, “What Happens at Mass,” Fr. Jeremy Driscoll O.S.B, writes, “*the priest urges the people to acknowledge their sins, including himself in the*  *admonition. The basic reason for the beginning, is, as one of the may use states, to ‘prepare celebrate the sacred mysteries.’ that is beginning inevitably awakens in us a keen sense of how our sins stand in striking contrast to what we are to do.”* Ultimately, Fr. Driscoll adds, “*we are in the presence of the all holy God, and a first reaction to finding ourselves there, what can we do except beg for his mercy?*”<sup>2</sup> “*Although for centuries the Roman Mass, as generally celebrated, had no penitential rite. The Confiteor eventually appeared among the prayers said by the priest and ministers at the foot of the altar and was also said by a minister prior to the distribution of the Eucharist. Yet in both instances these were private rather than public prayers.*”<sup>3</sup> The Second Vatican Council, after much discussion concluded that even though the Eucharist is a sacrament of reconciliation,

*“It was decided to place a simple penitential rite at the beginning of the celebration. In a way this decision reflects both Scripture and tradition. In Matthew 5:23-25 Christ calls for reconciliation with others before offering sacrifice. [“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.”] Moreover, an ancient document known as the Didache states*

<sup>1</sup> The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Order of the Mass Pg. 17

<sup>2</sup> What Happens at Mass, Driscoll, Pg. 25

<sup>3</sup> The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Order of the Mass Pg. 17

*that on the Lord's Day people are to come together to break bread and to give thanks 'after first confessing their sins' so that the sacrifice will be pure.'*<sup>4</sup>

The Roman Missal has three options for the “Penitential Act.” The first option is the Confiteor, which is worth a brief study. It reads,

*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 the Blessed Mary ever-Virgin, all the Angels and Saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God.*<sup>5</sup>

In his book, “A Biblical Walk-Through the Mass: Understanding What We Say and Do in the Liturgy,” Edward Sri traces the biblical origins of the words in the Confiteor. He writes,

*The first word of this prayer in Latin, meaning “**I confess**”—stands in a long line of biblical tradition of confessing one's sins. Sometimes, this was done in a formal public ceremony of repentance (Neh 9:2). Other times, it was spontaneous response of an individual (Ps 32:5; 38:18). Confessing one's sins was encouraged in the wisdom books of the Bible (Prv 28:13; Sir 4:26), and the Old Testament law even required people to confess certain sins (Lv 5:5; Nm 5:7). Some individuals in the Old Testament, in an act of national repentance, confess the sins of all of Israel (Dn 9:20; Neh 1:6).*

The New Testament follows the tradition of the Old Testament when it comes to confessing sins. Sri writes, the evangelist “*John teaches us that we should confess our sins with confidence that the Lord will forgive us: 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness'*” (1 John 1:9). Hence, we confess our sins to almighty God, but also “*to you my brothers and sisters.*” Why do we confess our sins to our brothers and sisters? The Letter of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid Pg. 17

<sup>5</sup> Roman Missal 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition Catholic Book Publishing Pg. 367

James “*exhorts us also to confess our sins to one another, asking each other for prayer is that we may be freed from our sins: ‘Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed’*” (Jas 5:16).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, confessing your sins to one another “*highlights the social effects of sin. Our sins affect our relationship with God and our relationship with each other.*”<sup>7</sup>

The next phrase of the Confiteor “***In my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do,***” “*Challenges us to consider seriously four areas in which we may have fallen into sin.*”<sup>8</sup> Dr. Edward Sri writes concerning “***in my thoughts,***” that “*St. Paul exhorts us to guard our thoughts, keeping them focused on what is good; ‘Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worth praise, think of these things’*” (Phil 4:8). Another phrase from St. Paul teaches us that we “*should put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God’s way in righteousness and holiness of truth*” (Eph 4:23). St. Paul also reminds the Romans to “*not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect*” (Rom. 12:2). Therefore, confessing the sins that are in our thoughts supports True Disciples of Jesus in both guarding our hearts, and renewing our minds.

“***In my words,***” or our sins of the tongue, can be most dangerous to ourselves and especially to others. “The Letter of James warns us that the

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<sup>6</sup> A Biblical Walk through the Mass: Understanding What We Do and Say in the Liturgy Pg. 32

<sup>7</sup> Ibid Pg. 33

<sup>8</sup> Ibid Pg. 34

tongue is a fire. The spoken word can be used to bless and to curse, and when it is used for evil it causes great turmoil.”<sup>9</sup> The Letter of James reads,

*In the same way the tongue is a small member and yet has great pretensions. Consider how small a fire can set a huge forest ablaze. The tongue is also a fire. It exists among our members as a world of malice, defiling the whole body and setting the entire course of our lives on fire, itself set on fire by Gehenna. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing* (Jas 3:5-10).

In addition, think about the effects of gossip. How we can destroy the reputation of others and ourselves when we gossip. Edward Sri reminds us when warning the Corinthians, St. Paul hopes that when he comes to visit them, he writes, “For



*not such as I wish, and that there may be rivalry, gossip, conceit, and*

*I fear that when I come I may find you that you may find me not as you wish; jealousy, fury, selfishness, slander, disorder”* (2 Cor 12:20). Again,

Jesus concerning insult, says, “*But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment,<sup>o</sup> and whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ will be liable to fiery Gehenna”* (Matt 5:22).

Finally, concerning lying and boasting Saint Paul writes, “Stop lying to one another, since you have taken off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed, for knowledge, in the image of its creator,” (Col 3:9-10) and, “Your boasting is not appropriate. Do you not know

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid Pg. 33

that a little yeast leavens all the dough?” (I Cor 5:6). *“These and other sins are to be confessed in the Confictor.”*<sup>10</sup>

**“In what I have done.”** *“This area encompasses what most people commonly think about sin—actions that directly hurt other people or our relationship with God. Along these lines the Ten Commandments are often used as the basis for the examination of conscience.”*<sup>11</sup> True Disciples of Jesus know what they have done and trust in the love and mercy of God, knowing that they are washed clean in the blood of the Lamb of God, and this will help us to convert our actions.

**“In what I have failed to do.”** The Letter of James reads, *“So for one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, it is a sin”* (Jas 4:17). *“This is the most challenging part...we will also be held accountable on the Day of Judgment for the good we failed to do.”*<sup>12</sup> What examples in your own life can you lay at the feet of Jesus in asking for mercy? Edward Sri uses the example of the *“Rich Young Man...who kept all the commandments, [but], was unwilling to answer the call of Christ. He could not let go of his possessions, give to the poor, and follow Jesus.”*<sup>13</sup>

**“Through my most grievous fault.”** The new translation of the Roman Missal puts emphasis on this phrase. Sri comments writing,

*Instead of simply beginning of this greatly sinned,’ have greatly thing (1 Chr*



*saying ‘I have sinned’ at the prayer, we now say ‘I have [reflecting] David’s words ‘I sinned in that I have done this 21:18). Second, instead of*

*simply saying ‘through my own fault,’ we repeat it three times while striking our breasts in a sign of repentance. This repetition more fully expresses sorrow over our*

<sup>10</sup> Ibid Pg. 33

<sup>11</sup> Ibid Pg. 33

<sup>12</sup> Ibid Pg. 34

<sup>13</sup> Ibid Pg. 34

*sins. Therefore, at Mass, I do not simply offer an apology to God. In the Confiteor, I express a heartfelt contrition and humbly admit I have sinned.”*<sup>14</sup>

All of this prayer helps us to prepare to receive Jesus in the Eucharist.

Moreover, in receiving the Eucharist we are to become who we receive making Christ present to others.

After we confess our sins the priest prays “Lord have mercy,” we respond, “Lord have mercy,” then the priest prays, “Christ have mercy,” again we respond, “Christ have mercy,” and again the priest prays “Lord have mercy,” and we respond, “Lord have mercy.” Sri writes, *“This three-fold plea for God’s mercy fittingly flows after the three-fold admission of one’s sins in the previous prayer the Confiteor.”* He adds, *“As we prepare ourselves to enter the sacred mysteries of the liturgy—to draw near to the Thrice-Holy-God—we do so in union with the Blessed Virgin Mary, all the angels and saints, as we pray the Confiteor.”* Standing in front of the Lord sinful and sorrowful is the ultimate way of asking the Lord to “create in us a clean heart, as David did in Psalm Fifty-One. Sri writes,

*This plea can often be misunderstood if we do not grasp clearly what mercy actually is. John Paul II once noted that Mercy is sometimes mistakenly viewed as establishing “a relationship of any quality” between the one extending mercy and the one receiving it. God is best seen as the almighty king who merely pardons his wayward subjects.”* Sri comments that this is a faulty perspective and adds, *the relationship of mercy is better exemplified by the parable of the prodigal son. In this story, the wayward son, suffering not in his mercy, begins to see the sinfulness of his actions, he humbly repents and returns home to his father. According to John Paul II, the father in the story sees so clearly the good which has been achieved [in his son] thanks to a mysterious*

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid Pg. 35

*radiation of truth and love, that he seems to forget all the evil which the son had committed.*<sup>15</sup>

God sees the good in all his children and desires that we spend our lives in his loving embrace. The Eucharist is a sacrament of unity and reconciliation.

The second option, after the invitation to the “Penitential Act” in the Roman Missal reads,

**Priest:** Have Mercy on us O Lord.

**The people reply:** For we have sinned against you.

**The Priest:** Show us O Lord your mercy.

**The people reply:** And grant us your salvation.

The third option after the invitation to the “Penitential Act” in the Roman Missal Reads:

**The Priest, or Deacon or another minister, then says the following or other invocations with** Kyrie, eleison, (Lord have mercy)

**The Priest:** You were sent to heal the contrite of heart: Lord have mercy.

**The People reply:** Lord have mercy.

**The Priest:** You came to call sinners: Christ have mercy.

**The people reply:** Christ have mercy.

**The Priest:** You are seated at the right hand of the Father to intercede for us: Lord have mercy.

**The People reply:** Lord have mercy

**Absolution:** following all the penitential acts the priest gives absolution: **The priest prays,**

May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.

**The people reply:** Amen

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid Pg. 38

Are our sins forgiven with this absolution or is this different from the absolution in confession? A post from EWTN Q&A is worth a look. Follow this link:

[http://www.ewtn.com/vexperts/showmessage\\_print.asp?number=370660&language=en](http://www.ewtn.com/vexperts/showmessage_print.asp?number=370660&language=en)

Photo Sources:

People preparing to celebrate the sacred mysteries pg. 1

11:<https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CAcQjRxqFQoTCMXfuZuZmMkCFUKWiAodiRIBYA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.catholic-convert.com%2Fblog%2F2015%2F03%2F17%2Fetiquette-at-mass-reasonable-dos-and-donts-for-polite-and-proper-worship%2F&psig=AFQjCNHUt3fWc7WixSXjQtHqH0SNNpextw&ust=144787509933980>

St. Paul writing Pg. 4

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Priests Striking Breasts Page 5:

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