

The Confiteor

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In the Introductory Rites, the individual people who have come to the church are gathered into the one Body of Christ in order that they might enter into the great prayer of thanks and praise, that is the Eucharist. Part of this first movement of the Mass is the Penitential Act, that part of the Mass which helps prepare us “to celebrate the sacred mysteries.” It happens right after the Sign of the Cross and the priest’s greeting of the people.

The Penitential Act takes one of three forms. The first form is most commonly known as the Confiteor, a Latin word that, when translated into English, gives us the well known beginning of the prayer, “I confess” The Confiteor is a communal statement which acknowledges our brokenness and calls upon the whole Church to pray for one another, asking for God’s mercy and forgiveness.

“I confess to almighty God /and to you, my brothers and sisters” Notice the communal nature of this prayer. This acknowledgement of our individual brokenness is made to God and to the rest of the assembly. Each of us, one to the other, takes a humble stance and, in the face of the great mercy and love of God, admit and acknowledge our human frailty, without pretense or presumption. Beginning with this communal acknowledgement of our common sinfulness, the Confiteor helps to remind us, among other things that God is God, and we are not.

Closely following the Latin text, the English translation continues: “I confess . . . 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” Some may notice the addition of the word “greatly,” in reference to our sinfulness. This might be seen, not so much as an emphasis on our sinfulness, as much as it is on the simple fact that any sin is a threat to our relationship to God and to our brothers and sisters.

The English translation of the Confiteor continues: “through my fault, through my fault, / through my most



grievous fault.” This, too, will sound different from the previous translation, in which our “fault” is mentioned once (“that I have sinned through my own fault”). The English translation of the third edition of The Roman Missal maintains the original poetic repetition found in the Latin text. We see this literary tool in other texts of the Mass. For example, following the Confiteor we enter into the threefold prayer of “Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord have mercy.” In the “Holy, Holy, Holy” and before Holy Communion, at the Fraction Rite, we repeat, three times, the invocation, “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world.”

Striking the Breast: It is not new gesture (it has always been a rubric in the English translations of The Roman Missal), the words above (“through my fault . . .”) are said while the person strikes his/her breast. This is an ancient gesture expressing sorrow and is a sign of our contrition (see Jeremiah 31:19, NAB, “I turn in repentance . . . I strike my breast”).

The remainder of the Confiteor, in the English translation of the third edition of The Roman Missal, remains as we now know it: “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.”

The most important thing for us to remember is that the Penitential Act is a communal recognition of our sinfulness and an act of praise for God’s mercy and forgiveness. Yes, as human beings we are sinful. It is part of our nature—we are broken; we fail; we willfully choose wrong; we sin. Yet, in spite of that, in as much as we are broken in our human-ness, thankfully—our God is a God who wants nothing more than to make us whole! And this is where our hope takes us as together, in one voice; as one body, we confess in the Confiteor.

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