

## I Confess (*Confiteor*)

### The Roman Missal

Brethren (brothers and sisters), let us acknowledge our sins, and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries...

A brief pause for silence follows. Then all recite together the formula of general confession:

*I confess* (Latin *confiteor*) 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, [And, *striking their breast*, they say:] *through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault;* (Latin *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*) 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 absolution by the Priest follows:

May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.<sup>1</sup>

## Scripture

### The Prodigal Son

And he said, “There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.’ And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.*” ’ And he arose and came to his father. (Luke 15:11-20)

### The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

“*Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.* The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.’ *But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’* I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for

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<sup>1</sup> *Roman Missal*, Order of Mass, no. 4.

everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14)

## Tradition

### Ordinal of Innocent III (13<sup>th</sup> cent.)<sup>2</sup>

I confess to almighty God,  
Father and Son and Holy Spirit,  
to blessed Mary ever Virgin,  
and to all the saints,

and to you, brethren,  
that I have sinned exceedingly  
in thought, in word, and in deed,  
by my fault.  
by my most grievous fault.  
Therefore I beseech  
the most blessed Virgin Mary

and all the saints,  
and you, brethren,  
to pray for me.

### Missal of St. Pius V (1570; cf. 1962)<sup>3</sup>

I confess to almighty God,  
to blessed Mary ever Virgin,  
to blessed Michael the archangel,  
to blessed John the Baptist  
to the holy Apostles Peter and Paul...  
to all the saints,

and to you, brethren,  
that I have sinned exceedingly  
in thought, in word, and in deed,  
by my fault, by my fault,  
by my most grievous fault.  
Therefore I beseech  
blessed Mary ever Virgin  
blessed Michael the archangel,  
blessed John the Baptist,  
the holy apostles Peter and Paul...  
all the saints,  
and you, brethren,  
to pray for me to the Lord our God.

## Mystery

### The Mystery of Beating One’s Breast (5<sup>th</sup> Century)

St. Augustine: [A]s soon as the words “I confess” (Latin *confiteor*) were said by the reader, *there followed the sound of you striking your breast upon hearing the Lord saying*, “Father, I confess to you” (Latin *confiteor tibi*) [Matt 11:25]. You beat your breast at the word “confess” (Latin *confiteor*). Now what does it mean to “beat the breast” other than to show what lies hidden in the heart and to reprove hidden sin by a visible gesture?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Stephen J. P. Van Dijk and Joan Hazelden Walker, *The Ordinal of the Papal Court From Innocent III to Boniface VIII and Related Documents* (Fribourg: Fribourg University Press, 1975), 498.

<sup>3</sup> In James Monti, *A Sense of the Sacred: Roman Catholic Worship in the Middle Ages* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 2012), 32-33.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Sermon 67.1*. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 3:60.

### **The Mystery of the Tax Collector (13<sup>th</sup> Century)**

Innocent III: *By beating our breast when we confess* (Latin *confitemur*) our sins, according to the example of the tax collector who beat his breast, saying: “Lord, be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13), we shall go down to our house justified.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Mystery of the Prodigal Son (17<sup>th</sup> Century)**

St. Robert Bellarmine: Therefore, we confess to God, the saints, and the Church present, because we have offended them all when we sin, *just as the Prodigal Son says* in Luke 12:51, “I have sinned against heaven and against you.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. How has the *Confiteor* prayer changed over the centuries? How did the prayer originate?

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2. Why should we pray the *Confiteor* to prepare to celebrate the mystery of the Mass (see CCC 1385)? What effect does the worthy reception of Communion have on venial sins (see CCC 1394)?

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### **For Further Reading**

1. Joseph Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*. 2 vols.; trans. Francis A. Brunner, C.S.S.R.; repr.; Notre Dame, Ind.: Christian Classics, 2012 [orig. 1951]. 1:298-311.
2. James Monti. *A Sense of the Sacred: Roman Catholic Worship in the Middle Ages* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 2012. [An excellent window into the medieval world of Catholic worship. Very readable and beautifully bound.]

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<sup>5</sup> Innocent III, *The Sacred Mystery of the Altar* 2.13; in *Patrologia Latina* 217, col. 806 (Author’s translation). See Monti, *A Sense of the Sacred*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Bellarmine, *Controversies VI, On the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*, 16. In St. Robert Bellarmine, S.J., *On the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass* (trans. Ryan Grant; Post Falls, Idaho: Mediatrix Press, 2020), 246.