

## I Confess (Confiteor)

After the Introductory Rites and Greeting of the People, we then move into the Penitential Act. This is where we express sorrow for sin and prepare ourselves to enter into the mystery of the Mass. And again, you know these words, they are very familiar, but what I want to do is I want to read them to you. Ask why do we say them? Where do they come from in Scripture, and where do they come from in Sacred Tradition? And how does that help us to enter into the mystery of this part of the Mass?

So here is the first part of the penitential act, which is commonly known as the *Confiteor*, from the Latin word for “I confess”, and it's the first couple of lines of the prayer of the priest and the people at this part of Mass. So the priest will say:

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:

And then we all say together:

*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.*

And then after this, actually the absolution by the priest will follow where he says:

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

And then we all say “Amen.” Okay, so let's pause there. Here we have the well known words of the Confiteor and you can see this is a very Catholic part of the Mass because we're getting into sin and guilt, right? It's very Catholic of us before we start the liturgy, we are going to remind ourselves not only that we're sinners, but that we're great at it, right? I love that we say not only “I have sinned”, but “I have greatly sinned.” And notice also, we don't just talk about sins of commission, things I've done, we also talk about sins of omission, things I've failed to do. And I have to confess that, no pun intended, but I have to confess that you know, when I was younger, I put a lot more focus on sins of commission, like things I've done. As I get older and I think back on my life, I have in some ways a much deeper regret for my sins of omission, things I should have done but failed to do. So it's very beautiful that the Church makes sure that we're balanced in our approach to sin at the beginning of the Mass here. It's important too that this penitential rite is ordered toward the forgiveness of venial sins, not the forgiveness of mortal sin. This is important, so you'll notice in the missal it says that the absolution by the priest follows, and he says:

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

But that absolution is not ordered toward the absolution of mortal sins. When a person has committed a grave violation of the commandments, a grave sin, committed a mortal sin, that needs to be taken care of and absolved in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. But what people sometimes forget is that the Mass itself has a penitential rite because it is ordered toward the absolution and the forgiveness of venial sins. So what we're supposed to be doing in this part of the Mass is bringing the venial sins that we've committed right, which we all have, and confessing them before we enter into the presence of God in order to be absolved of them, before we begin the Liturgy of the Eucharist, before we enter into the Eucharist, and especially if we're going to receive Holy Communion. It's fitting not

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

only that we be absolved of mortal sin, which is what the Sacrament of Reconciliation is primarily ordered toward, not exclusively, but primarily, but that we also be absolved of venial sins, which is what the penitential rite at the beginning of Mass is ordered toward. And this is an important point that often gets overlooked, and I just want to highlight that as we continue to talk about these opening rites and the introduction of the Mass.

But there are a few things that we might want to ask. First, why do we begin with the confession of sin? Isn't that what the sacrament is for? Second, why do we strike our breast whenever we are saying "through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault"? I mean, isn't that putting a little too much emphasis on the fact that it's our fault? Why the act of striking our breasts? Why the repetition of our fault? Which, by the way, this is where we get the famous expression "mea culpa", because the Latin of this prayer is *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*: my fault, my fault, my most grievous fault. And then of course we want to ask, what does this passage come from? Is this in the Bible anywhere, and where does it come from in Sacred Tradition? When was this part added to the Roman liturgy, added to the Mass that we celebrate today? So let's look at that together for just a few moments.

So, first of all, when it comes to the biblical roots of the "I confess", the biblical roots of the *confiteor*, the penitential rite, there are two key passages in Scripture that provide the liturgy with the words and the actions of this part of the Mass. The first one is from the famous story of the prodigal son. So I know you all know this story well, but look at a part of it again, just with the liturgy of the penitential rite in mind. So the story in Luke 15:11-20, Jesus says:

"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.

In the Greek, you can also translate this prodigal living. This is where the term prodigal son comes from.

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.<sup>2</sup> (Luke 15:11-20)

So notice there the italics. “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.*” So the first part of the *Confiteor* is drawing on the language of this Scripture, when we say “I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned.” So at this part of the Mass, we take the words of the prodigal son on our own lips, and we actually accentuate them. It's not just I have sinned, but I have greatly sinned. We're like the prodigal son coming home to the Father with words of penitence to begin that act of rising up and going home. So that's the first scriptural root. The second scriptural root is even more clear, and it's tied not just to the words of the *Confiteor*, but to the action of beating our breasts. And this is from the famous parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Now again, I know you probably know this parable well and you're very familiar with it, but look at it and the light it sheds on this part of the Mass and why we draw on it in this part of the Mass. Jesus told a parable in Luke 18:9 and following:

“*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

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.' *But the tax collector, standing far off...*

Notice this. So this is proof he's Catholic. He's at the back of the church. He's not coming close to the sanctuary. He's standing far away from the presence of God.

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

Alright, so pause there. Notice what the Church is doing here. Not only does it take the words of the prodigal son and put them on our lips when we say "I have greatly sinned", but it also takes the action of the tax collector from his prayer in the Temple. So in this story, notice, the Pharisee and the tax collector aren't just anywhere. They're in the Holy Place. They're in the sacred sanctuary. They're in the dwelling place of God, the Temple, where the Jews would go to pray and to offer sacrifice, so that by placing the actions and words of the tax collector on our lips, what is the Church revealing to us about this moment in the Mass? We are like the tax collector entering into the presence of God. We are like the tax collector entering into the Temple to pray and just as the tax collector beats his breast and humbles himself as a sinner in the presence of God, so too we in the confiteor, humble ourselves as we enter into the Temple, as we enter into worship, as we enter into the place of prayer and cry out to God in the penitential act, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" I have come to you, Father. I've sinned through my fault, my fault, my most grievous fault. Therefore, I ask you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God. In other words, the Church has us take the words and actions of this prodigal son and the tax collector as our own so that we can begin the liturgy in humility and penitence, because we are entering into the presence of a holy God and we are all sinners in need of repentance.

So that's the scriptural roots of the penitential rite, the I confess. But where does this come from in Sacred Tradition? In order to answer that question, we want to look not just at the words of the prayer of the confiteor, but also the action of

beating the breast. Although the sign of the cross, according to the Roman tradition and some of the Church Fathers, goes back to the time of St. Peter and the time of the Apostles, the action of beating the breast and the words of the confiteor are actually going to come later into the Mass..

Let's begin with the act of beating the breast. When it comes to the act of beating the breast in penitence, one of the earliest references we can find to this is actually from the 5th century AD in the writings of St. Augustine. It's a fascinating episode because Augustine tells us that he was doing the reading from the Gospel at one of the liturgies in North Africa in the early Church, in the early 5th century, and he got to the passage in the Gospel where Jesus says, in our English translations, he says:

I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes...

But in the Latin he actually says:

I confess, Father, that you've hidden these things from the wise and revealed them to babes...

And when he said the words, I confess, confiteor in Latin, the people all beat their breasts because they heard the word to confess. And so Augustine kind of reproves them for it and explains to them what it means. And this is what he says:

[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>3</sup>

So this is from one of Augustine's sermons, *Sermon 67*. What this shows us is that by the 5th century AD, there was already a custom of when you would say the

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

word “I confess”, you would beat your breast, you would hit the chest, in imitation of the tax collector and as a kind of outward gesture of penance or humility before God. As he says, :”reprov[ing] hidden sin by a visible gesture.” So through this visible sign of beating the breast, we manifest the invisible mystery of the fact that we're sinners. Because we can't see each other's sin, right? Well you might see someone committing a sin, but when we gather as a Church, we don't know where the adulterers are, where the the slanderers are, who's born false witness. All that stuff is hidden from us. But we manifest to everyone publicly that we're sinners when we bow our heads and beat our breasts. So it's very fascinating that Augustine says that that custom of beating the breast goes all the way back to his day. It's already a practice in not just the Roman church, but churches in communion with Rome, like the churches of North Africa, which is where Augustine was Bishop in Carthage.

Now that's the action. So at least by the 5th century, the act of beating the breast is something already being practiced when you hear the words, I confess. What about Sacred Tradition? When does the Confiteor enter into the Mass? Well, unlike the Sign of the Cross, which is attributed in the Roman tradition to St. Peter and to the Apostles, it would have been, you know, back in the 1st century AD, the words and actions that we call the Confiteor, the I confess of the penitential rite, they don't come into the Mass until much later. So, for example, if you were at Mass in the 4th century or the 6th century AD in Rome, there would be no praying of the confiteor like we do in the Mass today. Rather, as far as we can tell, it's in the Middle Ages that priests start to use private penitential prayers in order to begin the Mass and prepare themselves for the celebration of the Mass. And these penitential prayers would take various forms, but eventually they would solidify into a kind of streamlined form of some kind of prayer, beginning with the words I confess and then expressing penance in the presence of God. The closest example of this penitential prayer to the form we use today comes from the 13th century in The Ordinal of Innocent III, Pope Innocent III . So Pope Innocent III in the 13th century, we actually have a copies of how the Mass was celebrated at his time. If you look here, I have *The Ordinal of the Papal Court From Innocent III to Boniface VIII and Related Documents*. So if you want to check that out, this will give you an example of a medieval form of the confiteor in the Mass of the Church of Rome. But before I read it, I just want to emphasize, this was prayed not by the

people, but was just a private prayer of the priest at this point. So keep that in mind and this is the words of the Confiteor from Innocent III's time:

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.<sup>4</sup>

Now that's in the 13th century. As I mentioned, there were different forms of it. Some were longer, some were shorter, so that by the time you get to the 16th century in the Council of Trent, when Pope St. Pius V is codifying the Roman liturgy in the wake of the Protestant Reformation and trying to give some unity and uniformity to the Roman rite, the confiteor continues to be part of the private prayers of the priest at the Mass, but it's a longer version of the prayer that is adopted. So here, for example, this is the Roman Missal of 1570. That's a copy of it, that gives you an exact facsimile of the missal that was released after the Council of Trent. And if you look in this missal, you will see that the priest does pray the confiteor, the I confess at the beginning of Mass, but it's a little bit longer version. So here's another example from the tradition and this is the one that will be codified and then said by the priest from the time of the Council Trent, all the way up to the Second Vatican Council, like in the Missal of 1962. And this is what it says:

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

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<sup>4</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.



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.<sup>5</sup>

All right, so notice here just a couple things. First, this is a good example of development in the Roman liturgy. In the first 800 or 900 years there is no private penitential prayer of the priest as part of the Mass like the Confiteor. In the Middle Ages, various forms of this prayer developed, they enter into the Mass. They're codified in the 13th century in one form, but then by the 16th century, a different form is codified, a slightly longer version. So this process of development is something that happens overtime, and it can involve both shorter and longer versions of the prayer. Whichever version you see, however, notice that the basic idea of needing to express penance at the beginning of Mass, before the celebration of the Eucharist, especially for the priest, who was always not just going to celebrate Mass, but actually receive Holy Communion, is an important central element of the introductory rites of the Mass. And in both cases too, you'll notice the language of confessing to God that I have sinned, that echo of the Prodigal Son, is part of the liturgy as well as, you'll see in a minute, the beating of the breast like the tax collector. So the biblical echoes are there, although it gets expressed in different forms over the centuries.

So if you just pause for a second, one question you might have is, how is it that the confiteor originated as a private prayer of the priest and then after Vatican II became a prayer said by all the people? Well, one thing that you should note is that the reason it was expanded to include all the people is because one thing Vatican II wanted the people to do was to increase the frequency of Holy Communion, in order to encourage the faithful to not just assist at the Mass through their prayers, but actually to go to Mass, especially on Sundays, and to receive Holy Communion as the most fitting way of participating in the liturgy. So if the Church was going to encourage the faithful to have more frequent Holy Communion, to participate in Holy Communion more frequently, then it would be fitting that they would prepare for Holy Communion with the recitation of the penitential rite and the I Confess. In other words, in the Middle Ages, when the I Confess arose, it was often only the priest who would receive Holy Communion during the Mass. In fact, that was the

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<sup>5</sup> In James Monti, *A Sense of the Sacred: Roman Catholic Worship in the Middle Ages* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 2012), 32-33.

norm for many centuries and the communion of the faithful was very exceptional. So it was fitting that he alone would say the the penitential prayer, but with the expansion of holy Communion to include the lay faithful, it is more fitting that both the priest and the people say this penitential prayer in order to prepare themselves to receive the Blessed Sacrament.

Now, one last point before I forget. One of the things you'll also notice if you look at that chart comparing the two is that people are sometimes puzzled by the question of why after the Second Vatican Council., the Confiteor was shortened. So you'll notice if you compare the one that I just said at the beginning of the Mass today with the Missal of St. Pius V, it's a shorter version that doesn't mention St. Michael the Archangel or John the Baptist, or the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, not just once, but twice in both parts of the Confiteor, as does the Missal of the Council of Trent in the 16th century. And sometimes people say, well, wait, why did we cut those Saints out of the of the liturgy? And the answer is really simple. In the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, one of the things the council fathers called for was the simplification of the rites and the restoration of certain older forms of the liturgy, wherever the Church deemed its suitable. So in this case, it's important to note that in the penitential rite, it's not that the Church has cut out John the Baptist, the apostles Peter and Paul, like there was anything wrong with praying to those Saints, but that she's actually adopted a slightly simpler, slightly shorter version of the penitential prayer, the Confiteor, which is actually older than the one from the Council of Trent. So it's part of the Roman tradition, this simpler version of the Confiteor, and has been adopted by the Church in the post-conciliar form of the Roman Missal.

So one point about that that's important to note is that by using this shorter medieval form of the Confiteor, of the I confess, it reveals to us that the post-conciliar reform of the Mass, the Roman Missal as it celebrated today, sometimes called the Novus Ordo Missae, is not just restoring ancient elements of the Roman rite from the first seven centuries, i's also restoring certain medieval prayers and medieval forms of the liturgy, so that what you have in the Missal of St. Pius the V all the way up to the Second Vatican Council, is a modern, a modern form of the I Confess. The longer version is the more modern version, and the shorter version that we use in the Novus Ordo is actually the more medieval version. So it's not

just drawing on ancient Roman worship, it's also drawing on the Middle Ages, the worship of the medieval church, but this still reflects very much so the Roman tradition. And any form of the confiteor, whether the shorter 13th century one or the longer 16th century one or the shorter 20th-century one, all of them are deeply rooted in scripture, the Prodigal son and tax collector, and in the tradition of the Church.

Alright, with all that said, one last point. We know where the biblical roots of the Confiteor are, we know what the traditional roots of it are, but what's the mystagogy? What does this action reveal about the invisible mystery? Well, basically it shows us that at this point in the Mass, we are the prodigal son, we are the tax collector in the Temple. Listen to the words of Innocent III, again in his treatise on the On the Mass and Saint Robert Bellarmine in his treatise. So in the 13th century, Innocent says this:

*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>6</sup>

Oh, so this is good. So what Pope Innocent is saying there is if we want to leave Mass in a state of grace, if we want to leave Mass justified or made righteous, then we need to begin Mass by beating our breasts like the tax collector in the Temple. What about the Prodigal Son? Well, in the 17th century, another saint wrote a treatise on the Mass. This is Saint Robert Bellarmine, the great Jesuit Doctor of the Church and his Treatise *On the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*. This treatise was devoted...a large part of it was devoted to defending the idea of the Mass as a sacrifice against the objections of Martin Luther and the other Protestants. But he also has a section where he works through the rites and rituals of the Mass and explains their spiritual significance. And in his section on the Confiteor, this is what he says about the prayer of the priest. He says:

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<sup>6</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.

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>7</sup>

In other words, in closing, as both Pope Innocent III and St. Robert Bellarmine reveal to us, when we come to the beginning of Mass, before we start to worship the Holy God, the one triune God, we need to remember that we are like the tax collector in Temple. We are like the Prodigal Son. We have sinned, and we need to repent before we can enter into the worship of the Holy Mass.

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<sup>7</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.