

The New Translation of the Holy Mass: The Confiteor

by Brian W. MacMichael

Last week, we began looking at the Introductory Rites in the Order of Mass by focusing on the change in the greeting from “And also with you” to “And with your spirit.”

Now, we will turn to the Penitential Act, which immediately follows the greeting dialogue. The major changes occur in the first form of the Penitential Act, which is the commonly used formula called the Confiteor. “*Confiteor*” is Latin for “I confess,” and comes from the first line of the prayer. Here is the full text of the newly translated Confiteor:

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.

Most of this text remains the same as the version we presently use. However, the two key modifications are highlighted in bold. The first replaces our current wording of “I have sinned through my own fault” with “I have greatly sinned.” This is another instance of the new text reflecting the Latin wording, which includes the adverb “*nimis*,” meaning “very much.”

The second set of changes occurs about halfway through the Confiteor, and is more significant. The words removed from the first section, “through my own fault,” are being returned to their proper place here, but with the expression’s full content. “Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault” is a direct translation of the Latin phrase “*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*.” As a well-known line from the old Latin Mass, “*mea culpa*” has even become a familiar part of our secular parlance, by which one admits having made a mistake.

Some might wonder, why this seemingly heavier emphasis on sin in the revised English Confiteor? Looking beyond simple fidelity to the Latin, language that calls to mind our fallen human nature is actually very important in the sacred liturgy. It is good to acknowledge our sinfulness at particular times, just as we should do at sacramental Confession. This Penitential Act is akin to the Act of Contrition, whereby an individual pledges remorse for not loving God and neighbor as he or she ought.

Unlike Reconciliation, we are not sacramentally absolved of our sins at this point during the holy Mass. Nevertheless, it is an appropriate way to “prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries,” as the priest says at the beginning of the Penitential Act. We must strive to approach the altar of God with humble dispositions, and should receive the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ free from grave sin, and in a worthy fashion, as St. Paul exhorts us in 1 Cor. 11:23-29.

There is an element of the Confiteor that is often neglected, and that is the fact that the faithful are supposed to “strike their breast” while saying, “through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.” This prescribed “striking” is a symbolic tapping of the chest with a clenched fist over one’s heart, signifying remorse. This is part of the beauty of our Catholic liturgy – sacramental words are complemented by sacramental actions.

The striking of the breast is supposed to be done even now, within the current translation of the Confiteor. Hopefully, it will become more natural with the new translation, especially since a threefold striking was the universal practice during the “*mea culpa...*” of the old Latin Mass, and remains ingrained in the memories of many.

The Confiteor ends with the individual asking for the prayers of the Saints and the rest of the congregation, led by the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose sinlessness by the grace of God is the perfect model for our own Christian lives.

The conclusion of the entire Act of Penitence remains the same, with the Confiteor always being followed by the invocation, “Lord, have mercy...Christ, have mercy...Lord, have mercy.” This supplication may also be said in the original tongue: “*Kyrie, eleison...Christe, eleison...Kyrie, eleison.*” The *Kyrie* is actually not Latin, but Greek, which is a still more ancient liturgical language.

Please consider saving the new English text of the Confiteor from this article, for use as a regular prayer of contrition with your family (perhaps after a traditional nightly personal examination of conscience), so that we will be ready to enter into it wholeheartedly at Mass next Advent.