

PRAYING THE MASS

A Guide to the New English Translation of the Mass

PRAYING THE MASS

The Prayers of the People

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INTRODUCTION

What is “praying the Mass”?

THE MASS, OR AS it is called in the Eastern Rites, the “Divine Liturgy,”¹ is the greatest prayer that can be prayed, because it is the prayer of Jesus Christ to God the Father. Christ is the Head of his Church – his Mystical Body, the People of God – so the faithful who participate in the Mass are also praying that same prayer, each to his own degree. Because the priest by virtue of his ordination into the ministerial priesthood acts *in persona Christi* (“in the person of Christ”), there are certain parts of the Mass which are prayed by him alone; but because all the faithful share in the baptismal priesthood, we are called to participate in the Mass in our own way.

This participation is not hindered by death: during the Mass, the saints and angels in Heaven are present in a mystical way, because the Mass is a foretaste of the true heavenly liturgy. The souls of the faithful departed still being purified benefit from the offering of Mass as well. The Mass is truly the action of the whole Church joined with Christ.

Every Mass is offered for four reasons (or “ends”): first, to give glory to God; second, to thank Him for all He has bestowed; third, to

¹ The word “liturgy” comes from the Greek *leitourgos*, meaning “public work” or “work on behalf of the people.” In calling worship the *Divine* Liturgy, the Eastern tradition emphasizes the origin and direction of worship while affirming our necessary (human) participation in it.

attain expiation for our sins by means of repentance and the offering of the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ (the Eucharist) to the Father; and fourth, to present our needs before God in prayers of petition. In order for the Mass to be what it is meant to be, it is necessary that the faithful cooperate with and take part in the Mass through *individual participation* in it.

Actual Participation

The Second Vatican Council, following in the footsteps of Pope St. Pius X, Pope Pius XI, and Pope Pius XII, impressed upon the Church the need for a renewed commitment to participation in the Church's liturgy. This was made clear in 1963 in the *first* document promulgated by the Council, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL), which praised the liturgy as “the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed” as well as “the font from which all her power flows.” (CSL 10) Because participation in the liturgy is “the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit,” (CSL 14) each Catholic must strive to participate in the liturgy to the best of his or her ability. Vatican II characterized this participation as “*plenam, consciam, atque actuosam*” (CSL 14), that is, “full, conscious, and actual” (or “... active”).²

This language can be found in an instruction on sacred music in the liturgy from Pope St. Pius X in 1903, *Tra la sollecitudine* (TLS). Pope Pius wrote that the faithful acquire “the true Christian spirit [...] from its foremost and indispensable font, which is the active participation in the [liturgy].” At the time, he was concerned primarily with the restoration of Gregorian chant “so that the faithful may again take a more active part” (TLS 3) in the Church's liturgy.

In his 1947 encyclical on the liturgy *Mediator Dei* (MD), Pope Pius XII wrote about the manner in which the faithful participate in the Mass.³ He praised those who worked to make the faithful more familiar with the *Roman Missal* (the book out of which the priest prays the Mass,

² The translation of *actiosa* as “active” can lead to a misunderstanding of the word. Pope Benedict XVI, in his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, linked *actiosa* to *authentica*, that is, “actual” and “authentic” participation.

³ Pope Pius XII outlined the four “ends” of Mass (listed at the beginning of the Introduction) in paragraphs 71-74 of *Mediator Dei*.

up until recently called the *Sacramentary*) so that their participation in the Mass would be more fruitful; he also wrote favorably of the “dialogue Mass” which encouraged the faithful to speak (or chant) the responses of the Mass. (MD 105) He promoted several pious practices (e.g. praying the Rosary, visiting the Blessed Sacrament) aimed at deepening the spiritual life of the faithful and preventing their participation in the liturgy from falling into “empty ritualism.” (MD 175) Pope Pius XII directly connected the participation of the faithful in the liturgy with the common priesthood shared by all who are baptized into Christ. (cf. MD 88)

Avoiding “empty ritualism” is as important for the laity as it is for the clergy. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy made it clear that the faithful need to be properly disposed to be receptive to the liturgy, and that priests cannot expect this spiritual disposition to be brought about only by following the liturgical rubrics:

But in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects, it is *necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions*, that their minds should be attuned to their voices, and that they should cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain. Pastors of souls must therefore realize that, when the liturgy is celebrated, something *more is required than the mere observation of the laws governing valid and licit celebration*; it is their duty *also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware* of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects. (CSL 11)

The Council was not downplaying the importance of observing liturgical laws, but was emphasizing that *in addition to* this obedience there must be a personal spiritual awareness that cannot simply be manufactured or mandated, but must be developed and nurtured, starting in baptism and continuing for the whole life of each Catholic.

This link between baptism and participation in the liturgy was repeated before, during, and after Vatican II. The 1958 instruction *De Musica Sacra* (DMS), the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, and the 1967 instruction *Musicam Sacram* (MS) all affirm that the laity “participate actively in the liturgy by virtue of their baptismal character” (DMS 93b) and that such participation is “their right and duty by reason of their baptism.” (CSL 14; cf. MS 15) *Actual* participation, then, is only possible through baptism.

Internal and External Participation

The 1958 instruction gave praise to those faithful who used a personal missal which enabled them to better understand and more closely follow the prayers of the Mass. These personal missals helped the faithful unite *internal* participation with *external* participation. (cf. DMS 29) The internal aspect of participation “consists in paying devout attention,” of achieving the proper interior disposition. This participation is more complete when it is joined to external acts (e.g. postures, gestures, “and especially responses, prayers, and singing”). The highest degree of participation is *sacramental* participation, achieved when the Catholic is properly disposed receive Holy Communion. (cf. DMS 22)

The distinction between interior and exterior participation was reiterated in the 1967 instruction:

This participation (a) should be above all internal, in the sense that by it *the faithful join their mind to what they pronounce or hear*, and cooperate with heavenly grace; (b) it must be, on the other hand, external also, that is, such as *to show the internal participation by gestures and bodily attitudes*, by the acclamations, responses and singing. The faithful should also be taught to *unite themselves interiorly to what the ministers or choir sing*, so that by listening to them they may raise their minds to God. (MS 15)

Because participation “should be above all internal,” simply saying the responses and making the gestures (examples of *external* participation) without joining the mind to the actions is *not* “actual participation,” since external participation must be a manifestation of internal participation.

Another component of internal participation is attentively *listening* to the prayers or chants, because a person need not be “doing something” (speaking or singing or moving) to be *active*. We live in a day and age which regards silence and stillness as merely the lull between one noise or action and the next. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (later elected as Pope Benedict XVI), in his 2000 book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, wrote that “active participation”

was very quickly misunderstood to mean something external, entailing a need for general activity, as if as many people as possible, as often as possible, should be visibly engaged in action. However, the word “participation” refers to a principal action in which everyone has a “part.” And so if we want to discover the kind of doing that active participation involves, we need, first of

all, to determine what this central *actio* is in which all the members of the community are supposed to participate. (p. 171)

Liturgical Catechesis

At Vatican II, the Church recognized that this *authentic* participation in the liturgy does not come about without teaching the faithful about the liturgy and aiding them to cultivate the dispositions necessary for internal participation, which leads to external participation. The necessity of liturgical catechesis – not only for the laity, but also for the clergy – was made clear in the same paragraph which identified participation as vital to the life of every Christian:

[P]astors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it, by means of the *necessary instruction*, in all their pastoral work. Yet it would be futile to entertain any hopes of realizing this unless the pastors themselves, in the first place, become thoroughly imbued with the spirit and power of the liturgy, and undertake to give instruction about it. A *prime need*, therefore, is that attention be directed, first of all, to the *liturgical instruction of the clergy*. (CSL 14)

A few paragraphs later, the Constitution repeats the call to pastors to promote, “with zeal and patience ... the liturgical instruction of the faithful, and also their active participation in the liturgy both internally and externally.” (CSL 19)

The contemporary Catechism defines the aim of liturgical catechesis as the initiation of people into the mystery of Christ “by proceeding from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the thing signified, from the ‘sacraments’ to the ‘mysteries.’” (*Catechism* 1075) This form of catechesis is called *mystagogy*. Pope John Paul II wrote about this catechesis in his 2004 Apostolic Letter *Mane Nobiscum Domine* (MND) with which he inaugurated a “Year of the Eucharist”:

Pastors should be committed to that “mystagogical” catechesis so dear to the Fathers of the Church, by which the faithful are helped to *understand the meaning* of the liturgy’s words and actions, to *pass from its signs to the mystery* which they contain, and to *enter into that mystery* in every aspect of their lives. (MND 17)

Pope Benedict XVI, in his Apostolic Exhortation following the 2005 Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist *Sacramentum Caritatis* (SC), addressed the need for *mystagogical* catechesis:

[T]he Synod of Bishops asked that the faithful be helped to make their interior dispositions correspond to their gestures and words.

Otherwise, however carefully planned and executed our liturgies may be, they would risk falling into a certain ritualism. ... The Synod Fathers unanimously indicated [a] mystagogical approach to catechesis, which would lead the faithful to understand more deeply the mysteries being celebrated. (SC 64)

He then outlined three key elements of mystagogical catechesis, echoing the three steps described earlier by his predecessor:

- 1) **interpreting** the liturgical rites in the light of salvation history
- 2) **explaining** the signs and symbols used in the rites
- 3) **relating** the rites to all the dimensions of Christian life.

The New Translation: A Sacral Vernacular

In 2001, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued *Liturgiam Authenticam* (LA), a fifth instruction on the proper implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. It set forth the regulations by which translations of the Latin texts were to be made, after remarking that liturgical translations in certain places were in need of improvement:

The omissions or errors which affect certain existing vernacular translations [...] have impeded the progress of the inculturation that actually should have taken place. Consequently, the Church has been prevented from laying the foundation for a fuller, healthier and more authentic renewal. (LA 6)

The third typical edition of the *Roman Missal* was promulgated in Latin in 2002. This edition is substantially identical to the first edition published in 1970 and the second edition published in 1975. For the past several decades, Mass celebrated in English in the United States of America has used a 1973 translation of the 1970 Latin text. In late 2008, a new English translation of a portion of the 2002 edition of the *Roman Missal* was approved by the Holy See. This portion, known as the “ordinary” or the “Order of Mass,” makes up the unchanging structure of the Mass. This new translation is the universal English translation, to be used, for example, in the United States of America, in England and Wales, and in South Africa.

The Church calls for a way of using the vernacular that sets it apart (consecrates it) for use in the liturgy and in prayer, “a kind of language which is easily understandable, yet which at the same times preserves [the] dignity, beauty, and doctrinal precision” of the prayers of the

Church. (LA 25) This is described as “the development of a *sacral vernacular*, characterized by a vocabulary, syntax and grammar that are proper to divine worship.” (LA 47) This language involves, at times, a sacred vocabulary (e.g. “chalice” instead of “cup”), the coining of new words, the use of transliteration (e.g. *consubstantialis* being translated as “consubstantial” rather than “one in being”), and a variety of expression which corresponds to the Latin (e.g. not always starting a prayer with “Almighty God,” and not using the same English word “love” for both *caritas* and *dilectio*). Another notable feature is that since many of the liturgical texts are meant to be spoken aloud, they differ in style from texts meant to be read silently: some examples of this include “recurring patterns of syntax and style, a solemn or exalted tone, alliteration or assonance, concrete and vivid images, repetition, parallelism and contrast, a certain rhythm, and at times, the lyric of poetic compositions.” (LA 59)

The new translation is more faithful to the Latin and the majority of the parts of the Mass spoken or chanted by the congregation has remained the same. But the possibility of questions or confusion over the new texts is still there, especially concerning the *choice* of words. Just because a text is in a language you can *read* does not mean you can necessarily *understand* it. This is as true in the older translation as it is in the newer translation. This is why the instruction also emphasized the need for catechesis to accompany the introduction of new translations:

[I]f more significant changes are necessary for the purpose of bringing the text into conformity with the norms contained in this Instruction, it will be preferable to make such changes at one time, rather than prolonging them over the course of several editions. In such case, *a suitable period of catechesis* should accompany the publication of the new text. (LA 74)

It is to be hoped that this new effort will provide stability in the life of the Church, so as to lay a firm foundation for supporting the liturgical life of God’s people and *bringing about a solid renewal of catechesis*. (LA 133)

English and Latin

Praying the Mass includes the Latin words of the Mass along with the new English translation. How come?

There has been a misconception in the Church for a couple of decades that using Latin in the liturgy is a sign of “rolling back” or

“cancelling” the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. But this is misleading for at least two important reasons. First, Latin is the language of the Roman (Latin) Rite of the Catholic Church, and the Second Vatican Council did not change that. In fact, a year before the Council began, Bl. Pope John XXIII (who convoked the Council) wrote an Apostolic Constitution (*Veterum Sapientia*, “Wisdom of the Ancient World”) praising the Latin language as universal, immutable, and non-vernacular, mandating its study, and affirming its retention in the Church.

Second, there has been a liturgical renewal brewing in the past several years, and part of that renewal has included the rediscovery of Latin and Gregorian chant even in the Ordinary Form of the Mass (the liturgy as revised following Vatican II). The Council, while permitting and welcoming the inclusion of the vernacular in the liturgy, also called for the retention of Latin and Gregorian chant:

Particular law remaining in force, *the use of the Latin language is to be preserved* in the Latin rites. (CSL 36.1)

[S]teps should be taken so that the faithful may also be able to *say or to sing together in Latin* those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them. (CSL 54)

The Church acknowledges *Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy*: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services. (CSL 116)

These points have been reiterated by the Church over the years, but they have not always been heard and relayed. By providing the Latin and the English texts, this book will help you understand not only the words you say in English, but also the Latin you *might* say if you are ever at a Mass which incorporates Latin responses or chants.

Praying the Mass

What *is* “praying the Mass”? The Mass is made up of several prayers which take the form of responses, chants, and orations of varying length, but the Mass is *one* coherent, constant prayer. Rather than thinking that you are praying *at* Mass (and then, only when you are *saying* something), you should come to realize that everything you sing and say and do and see and hear and smell *is* one great prayer, the greatest prayer.

Praying the Mass was written to provide that mystical catechesis which Pope Benedict recognizes is needed in the Church today (and

which has been in need since Vatican II, and even before then). This book is not intended to be a personal missal for use *during* Mass, because it does not contain the whole Rite of the Mass. Rather, it is a catechetical guide to the Mass. Its scope is intended to be universal – whether you are a bishop, priest, deacon, religious brother or sister, or lay Catholic, this book is meant to assist you in making the transition to the new English translation of the Mass. It is designed to help answer the questions “Why are we saying *this*?”, “What does it *mean*?”, and “What does it mean to *me*?”

Hopefully, this catechesis will give you a greater understanding of the words in English and Latin, postures, and gestures which make up the prayer of the Mass. You will learn the Scriptural origins⁴ for the various “movements” in this great symphony of prayer. Each chapter begins with a verse from the Old Testament and a verse from the New Testament related to the part of the Mass being examined. Each chapter offers spiritual reflections to show you the parts of the Mass in a new light, to help you internalize these parts and make them your own. And each chapter ends with questions to lead you into further contemplation by **interpreting**, **explaining**, and **relating** the rites. The inexhaustible treasure trove of spiritual riches contained in the Mass will be opened more readily to you, and you can grow in holiness as the Church’s liturgy takes on new meaning in your life and you begin to understand, to use the language of Cardinal Ratzinger, what is the *actio* in which we are called to participate.

The whole Mass is a prayer of worship and an encounter with the mystery of God. When you do more than just move your lips and your arms, when you *pray* the Mass, then you will be doing more than just “going to Mass,” you will be worshiping God: you will learn how to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind.” (Luke 10:27)

⁴ Much of what is said in the Mass is contained nearly word-for-word in Scripture. The book of Revelation, in addition to containing many liturgical phrases used in the Mass, is also seen as a “blueprint” for the liturgical worship of the Church on earth participating in the eternal worship in Heaven. See the essay “The Mass and the Apocalypse” by Michael Barber, in *Catholic for a Reason III: Scripture and the Mystery of the Mass* (pp. 109-121), as well as Scott Hahn’s excellent book, *The Lamb’s Supper*.

*“Hear, O Lord, and have mercy,
for we have sinned before you.”*
(Baruch 3:2)

*“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!’”*
(Luke 18:13)

4

Penitential Act

WHEN JESUS ENTERED Jerusalem during the week of his Crucifixion (on the day we commemorate as Palm Sunday), he went into the Temple area and “caused a scene.” He drove out the money-changers, men who “helped” Jews on pilgrimage by trading their foreign currency for the coinage used in the Temple... at a lousy exchange rate. After chastising these dishonest bankers, Jesus turned his attention to the blind and the lame, whom he healed. We commemorate – and enter into – his cleansing of the Temple and his healing of the infirm at every Mass. It is called the Penitential Act.

The purpose of the Penitential Act, in the words of the Missal itself, is to “prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries.” To do this in honesty and sincerity before God, we must examine ourselves and admit our sin and our sinfulness, asking the Lord for His mercy. Jesus tells us to be reconciled with one another before we present our offerings and ourselves at the altar. (cf. Matt. 5:23-24) In the words of the Catechism, “the first movement of the prayer of petition is *asking forgiveness*. ... It is a prerequisite for righteous and pure prayer.” (*Catechism* 2631) This is true both in the liturgy and in our personal prayer.

After the priest invites us into this act, there is a brief pause for silent reflection and examination. Make proper use of this silence by calling to mind your sins – the ways you have failed to live out the Gospel in your daily life – and repenting of them. There has been a loss of the sense of sin in our world, with dangerous effects: so long as we're healthy, wealthy, and wise (in the eyes of the world) we think we're "all right." On the contrary, Fr. Thomas Kocik wrote in *Loving and Living the Mass* that Jesus might say in our contemporary language, "it is better to enter heaven with a guilt complex than to enter Gehenna brimming with self-confidence." (p. 43)

So how is this anything similar to the wild-but-tender side of Christ that we see in Matthew 21:12-14? "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?" (1 Cor. 6:19) "We are the temple of the living God." (2 Cor. 6:16) We are temples, but we are marred by the stain of sin, as guilty as the money-changers though our sins might be completely different. We are temples, but we are plagued with sickness, as in need of Christ's healing touch as were the blind and the lame. In the Penitential Act, Jesus Christ comes to us to cleanse us and to heal us of our sins.¹

There are three forms that the Penitential Act can take.

Form A, "I confess..."

Form A, known as the *Confiteor* (the first word of the prayer in Latin) is a penitential prayer in two parts. The first part of this prayer is an act of confession of personal sin to God, in the midst of the whole assembly.

**Confíteor Deo omnipoténti et vobis, fratres,
quia peccávi nimis cogitatióne, verbo, ópere et omissióne:**

I confess to almighty God	<i>Ps. 51:5-6; Luke 15:18; 1 John 1:9</i>
and to you, my brothers and sisters,	<i>Jas. 5:16</i>
that I have greatly sinned	<i>2 Sam. 24:10</i>
in my thoughts and in my words,	<i>Wis. 1:3; Jas. 3:8-10</i>
in what I have done and in what I have failed to do,	<i>Rom. 7:15-20; Jas. 2:17</i>

¹ The Penitential Rite *does not* take the place of confession of mortal sins, which can only normally be absolved through the sacrament of Reconciliation.

Penitential Act

Although it is said by all the congregation together, it is a *personal* prayer. The *Confiteor* is one of only two places² in the Mass where we pray in the first-person singular (I) rather than the first-person plural (we). We confess our sins not only to God but to all those present. Talk about accountability! Even though we are not *naming* our sins to those around us, we are admitting our guilt to them. The *Confiteor* is inspired by David's sorrowful plea for mercy, Psalm 51.

We confess that our sins are of thought and word, of omission and commission. Jesus never had an evil thought, he never spoke an evil word (not even when he was chastising the Pharisees for their blindness), he never did anything wrong, and he never *failed* to do the *right thing*. It's a tough act to follow, but with the grace of God – which comes to us especially through frequent sacramental Confession and reception of Holy Communion – we can be built up “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph. 4:13)

The first half of the *Confiteor* ends with an admission of *personal* guilt for our sins. As we say these words, we strike our breast three times in a sign of penitence:

mea culpa, mea culpa, mea máxima culpa.

through my fault, through my fault,
through my most grievous fault;

Sir. 20:2b

The repetition of this admission of guilt adds to its severity. We do not say “The devil made me do it, the devil made me do it, you can *bet* the devil made me do it,” but accuse only ourselves for our sins. We beat upon our breast with a closed fist, like the tax collector who prayed from his heart, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” (Luke 18:13) Cardinal Ratzinger addressed the gravity of these words and this gesture:

We point not at someone else but at ourselves as the guilty party, remains a meaningful gesture of prayer. ... When we say *mea culpa* (through my fault), we turn, so to speak, to ourselves, to our own front door, and thus we are able rightly to ask forgiveness of God, the saints, and the people gathered around us, whom we have wronged. (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 207)

² The other is the “Lord, I am not worthy...” (chapter 11) The first-person singular is also used in the Creed (“I believe...”, chapter 7), but for a different reason.

Rev. Romano Guardini explained that the meaning of this gesture of contrition depends upon it being done properly:

To brush one's clothes with the tips of one's fingers is not to strike the breast. We should beat upon our breasts with our closed fists. ... It is an honest blow, not an elegant gesture. To strike the breast is to beat against the gates of our inner world in order to shatter them. This is its significance. ... "Repent, do penance." It is the voice of God. Striking the breast is the visible sign that we hear that summons. ... Let it wake us up, and make us see, and turn to God. (*Sacred Signs*)

The *Douay Catechism* (from 1649), a question-and-answer catechism on the doctrines of the Church, included a chapter expounding the essence and ceremonies of the Mass. It explains that the reason for striking the heart is "to teach the people to return into the heart" because it "signifies that all sin is from the heart, and ought to be discharged from the heart, with hearty sorrow." (p. 125)

In the second half of the prayer, we invoke the communion of saints as we ask for the prayers of the whole Church:

**Ideo precor beátam Mariám semper Virgínem,
omnes Angelos et Sanctos, et vos, fratres,
oráre pro me ad Dóminum Deum nostrum.**

therefore I ask blessed Mary ever-Virgin,³
all the Angels and Saints,
and you, my brothers and sisters,
to pray for me to the Lord our God.

John 19:26-27; Jas. 5:16
Heb. 12:1; Rev. 5:8; 8:3-4
1 Th. 5:25; 1 John 5:16
1 Sam. 12:23; Bar. 1:13

In Hebrews 11, we are given a tour of God's Hall of Fame, a list of men and women who, by their faith in God, "received divine approval." The list includes Abel, Noah, Abram, Sarah, Joseph, Moses, and Rahab. At the end of the list, we read:

Therefore, since *we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses*, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-2)

³ The *Confiteor* expresses the faith of the Church in the *perpetual virginity* of Mary.

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We learn something very encouraging from this passage: the saints in Heaven are *witnesses* to our lives on earth, witnesses who cheer us on and pray for us, that we might endure the trials of this life and join them in Heaven, having won “the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him.” (Jas. 1:12) The prayers of the saints and angels in Heaven are of great worth to us, because the saints have been perfected and have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14) and the angels rejoice greatly when a sinner repents. (cf. Luke 15:7) See chapter 7 (“**Error! Reference source not found.**”) for more about the communion of saints.

But we don’t only ask the Church Triumphant (in Heaven) for their prayers, we also ask *one another* for prayers. The next time you say these words at Mass, take a moment to look at the people around you: you are asking these people, sinners though they are, to pray to God for you, a sinner.

Form B

In this form, the priest and the congregation speak two prayers for mercy from Scripture. First, the priest says “Have mercy on us, O Lord,” to which we respond:

Quia peccávimus tibi.

For we have sinned against you.

Bar. 3:2

The priest speaks the first half of Baruch 3:2, and we respond with the second half.⁴ This profession of guilt reminds us of our need to live holy lives “worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” (Eph. 4:1) The plea for mercy reminds us of how ready God is to bestow the abundance of His gracious mercy upon us.

Then the priest says “Show us, O Lord, your mercy,” to which we respond:

Et salutare tuum da nobis.

And grant us your salvation.

Ps. 85:7

⁴ This verse from Baruch is the antiphon of the Lenten hymn *Attende Domine* (“Hear us, O Lord”).

Again, the priest begins a verse from the Psalms and we complete it. We do not simply ask the Lord for mercy, but for His salvation. The Lord Jesus did not come to earth simply to forgive our sins, but to “lead us, with our sins forgiven, to *eternal life*,” as the priest says in the prayer at the end of the Penitential Act. Through Jesus Christ, we have not only the forgiveness of our sins, but the hope of eternal salvation.

Form C

The third form of the Penitential Act integrates three invocations to the Lord Jesus Christ with the *Kyrie*. The invocations by the priest, deacon, or cantor can vary, but the responses are always the same and are covered below.

“Lord, have mercy.”

If Form A or Form B of the Penitential Act is used, it is followed by the *Kyrie*.⁵ The acclamations “*Kyrie, eleison*” and “*Christe, eleison*” are Greek for “Lord, have mercy” and “Christ, have mercy.” Even when the Mass is celebrated entirely in Latin, this part of the Mass is never translated from Greek to Latin, in homage to the Greek heritage of Christianity.

Kýrie, eléison.

Christe, eléison.

Kýrie, eléison.

Lord, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Ps. 123:3; Matt. 20:31; Luke 17:13

1 Tim. 1:2; Jude 1:21

These acclamations are said two or three times. The repetition is a sign of their urgency and fervency: we are always in need of God’s mercy, and there is never a reason to delay seeking it. When each acclamation is said three times, it takes on a deep Trinitarian symbolism, addressing the Father as “Lord” three times, the Son as “Christ” three times, and the Holy Spirit as “Lord” three times. (However, Form C of the Penitential Act is addressed directly to Jesus Christ all three times.)

We are not only praying for mercy for *ourselves*. Because we are baptized into the Body of Christ, we share in his priesthood. Part of our

⁵ The *Kyrie* is omitted when Form C is used.

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baptismal priesthood is offering prayers and interceding on behalf of others, especially those who cannot (or *do* not) pray for themselves.

Sprinkling with Holy Water

On Sundays, especially during the Easter season, the Penitential Rite can be replaced by the sprinkling of the congregation with Holy Water as a reminder of our Baptism. As this is being done, an appropriate chant is sung which calls to mind the purifying power which God has given to the waters of Baptism. The traditional chant used during the Easter season is the *Vidi aquam* (cf. Ezek. 47:1-2); outside of the Easter Season, the chant *Asperges Me* (cf. Psalm 51:7) is used. Yet another chant comes from the words of God proclaimed through the prophet Ezekiel:

“I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” (Ezek. 36:25-26)

When we are sprinkled with the Holy Water, we make the Sign of the Cross again. The Cross and water are two signs explicitly connected to one another by Jesus Christ at his Crucifixion: after he had breathed his last, a soldier pierced his side with a lance, and water and blood flowed forth from his side. (cf. John 19:34; 1 John 5:6) Just as Eve was fashioned from the side of Adam as he slept (cf. Gen. 2:21-22), so too the Church was born out of the side of Christ as he hung in the sleep of death on the Cross. The “living water” (John 4:10) which came from the side of Christ is a sign of Baptism, as the blood is a sign of the Eucharist.

We know that we are unworthy before God and that we cannot earn the gift of salvation; it is only through His grace that we are saved. However, once we have been brought into this new life of grace and mercy, we are compelled to change our ways and to live in a way that glorifies Jesus for his great sacrifice for us.

I liken it to a young boy who receives a gift from his father one day, the father’s favorite suit jacket. Of course, it doesn’t fit the boy: his arms are too short, his shoulders aren’t broad enough, and the jacket

reaches the ground when he tries it on. The boy didn't do anything to deserve or earn this jacket, but the father was moved with love for the boy to give it to him anyway. The jacket is a sort of "goal" for the boy, something to strive for. Over the years, if he keeps himself healthy and avoids abusing his body, he will finally fit into that jacket his father gave him: he will *grow into* the gift he was given, it will not have been given to him in vain, he will be "worthy" of it.

St. Paul made it clear to the churches he wrote to that they, like that young boy, must live worthily of the gift they had received, lest they end up receiving it in vain:

Working together with him, then, we entreat you *not to accept the grace of God in vain*. (2 Cor. 6:1)

I ... beg you to *lead a life worthy of the calling* to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph. 4:1-3)

Only *let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ*, ... stand[ing] firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel. (Phil. 1:27)

Be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ *I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain*. (Phil. 2:15-16)

We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, *to lead a life worthy of the Lord*, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (Col. 1:9-10)

We exhorted each one of you ... *to walk in a manner worthy of God*, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. (1 Th. 2:11-12)

The Penitential Act is the first of many moments at Mass when we recall that we are sinners who need the grace of God in order to live worthily of the Gospel of Christ. We know we are not blameless and innocent, but we desperately desire to walk in a manner worthy of God, and so we must repent and implore the Lord's mercy. Try doing an examination of conscience on your way to Mass to be better prepared for the Penitential Act.

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Our spiritual worship of God requires our temples be cleared of all profane influences. Having sought the Lord's forgiveness, we can enter into the prayer of the Mass as the Church, acting as *one whole body*, and with our *bodies made whole*.

Questions for Reflection

- 1) **Interpret:** In his ministry, John the Baptist cried out "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matt. 3:2) Jesus took up this same cry and added these important words: "Believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:15) Why is repentance necessary as a first step to accepting the Gospel of Jesus Christ?
- 2) **Interpret:** In the parable of the Prodigal Son (cf. Luke 15:11-32), Jesus describes the lengths to which God goes to reconcile us to Himself again. Meditate on verse 20: "He arose and came to his father. But *while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him* and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." How does this parable change the way you look at the Penitential Act?
- 3) **Explain:** What does the gesture of striking the breast mean to you?
- 4) **Explain:** Read Psalm 51. What symbolism do you see in being sprinkled with holy water?
- 5) **Relate:** In the *Confiteor*, we ask our brothers and sisters to pray for us. When is the last time *you* prayed for *them*?
- 6) **Relate:** How is God's mercy related to the mission He entrusted to the Church to spread the Gospel throughout the whole world? How does receiving God's mercy help *you* fulfill this mission?