

“Lord, have mercy”

The Penitential Act, Welcoming the Third Edition of the Roman Missal

The Penitential Act immediately follows the greeting dialogue. Important 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.

Most of this text remains the same as the version we presently use. However, there are two key modifications. The first replaces our current wording of “I have sinned through my own fault” with “I have greatly sinned.” The new text reflects the Latin wording by incorporating the adverb “*nimis*,” which means “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. The great Apostle of Christ, St. Paul, spoke of his complete and continual reliance on God’s grace in vivid terms well after his conversion: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I am the foremost” (1 Tim 1:15).

It is good to acknowledge our sinfulness at particular times, just as we should do at sacramental Confession. 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 Corinthians 11:23-29.

During the *Confiteor*, the faithful should “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. This action also recalls the penitent tax collector in Luke, chapter 18, who “beat his breast and prayed, ‘O God, be merciful to me a sinner.’”

The *Confiteor* ends with the individual asking for the prayers of the rest of the assembly and the Saints, led by the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose sinlessness and humility are the perfect model for our own Christian lives.