

“FOUR-FOR-FOUR”
CATECHESIS ON THE *ROMAN MISSAL*

Introductory Rites: Penitential Act (November 20–21, 2010)

As we mentioned last week, there are four parts of the Mass, which go back to Scripture and to the early Church:

1. Introductory Rites
2. Liturgy of the Word
3. Liturgy of the Eucharist
4. Concluding Rites

The first four of our catecheses are dealing with the Introductory Rites.

You’ll remember that the purpose of the **Introductory Rites** is to gather the Church for the celebration of Mass.

There are six Introductory Rites:

1. Entrance Chant (opening song)
2. Sign of the Cross
3. Greeting
- 4. Penitential Act**
5. Gloria
6. Collect (opening prayer)

Today we’re going to focus on the Penitential Act.

The purpose of the **Penitential Act** is to ask God to forgive our sins, so that we may offer the Sacrifice of the Mass worthily.

Because the Eucharist is not only a sacrament that we *receive*; it is also a Sacrifice that we *offer*.

The priest introduces the Penitential Act in the following words (which can no longer be modified):

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

This calls to mind the Lord's instruction:

“Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar,
and there recall that your brother has anything against you,
leave your gift there at the altar,
go first and be reconciled with your brother,
and then come and offer your gift” (Mt 5:23).

There are three options for the Penitential Act that follows:

1. *Confiteor* (the prayer that begins “I confess”),
followed by the invocation “Lord, have mercy” / *Kyrie eléison*.
2. A set of three tropes that feature the acclamation “Lord, have mercy” /
Kyrie eléison.
3. The seldom-used prayer that begins “Have mercy on us, O Lord.”

Today we're going to focus on the new translation of the *Confiteor*,
which features two major changes:

1. “Greatly sinned” (versus “sinned”)
2. “Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault”
(no longer, “through my own fault”).

The new translation is not suggesting that we've somehow begun to sin more!

Rather, the revised text does a better job of recognizing our lowliness before God,
and provides a more eloquent expression of our contrition.

Particularly with respect to the second change,
the new translation is a more faithful rendering of the Latin text:
Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.

Maxima in Latin is different from the English word “maximum,”
which suggests quantity or something numerical.

Maxima is translated more accurately as “grievous,”
which means “characterized by severe pain, suffering, or sorrow.”

Think of the strong words of the Act of Contrition: “I *detest* all my sins.”

We are asked to strike our breast during the *Confiteor*.

This is something that we're supposed to be doing now,
but for whatever reason it hasn't caught on in the English-speaking world.

It would be good for us to start doing this in preparation for the new missal.

In the current translation, we strike our breast at the words, "through my own fault."

In the new translation, we will strike our breast at the words
"through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault."

After the *Confiteor* (or the other forms of the Penitential Act),
the priest pronounces a prayer of absolution:

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

The Church is clear that this is not the same thing as the Sacrament of Penance.

Neither in the current missal nor in the new does the text say that the people should make the Sign of the Cross during the prayer of absolution, as is sometimes done.

Normally, when the missal expects a gesture, it indicates what it is
(such as striking the breast).

Sometimes an extra gesture on our part, such as making the Sign of the Cross
after receiving Holy Communion, is a good and pious thing to do.

But here it would be advisable not to make the Sign of the Cross,
in order to distinguish the Penitential Act from the Sacrament of Penance.