

Roman Missal, 3rd Edition

Looking at the text 2

PENITENTIAL ACT

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:

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,

And, striking their breast, they say:
through my fault, through my fault,
through my most grievous fault;

Then they continue:
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.

The absolution by the Priest follows:
May almighty God have mercy on us,
forgive us our sins,
and bring us to everlasting life.

The people reply:
Amen.



We can see that all three lines are addressed to Jesus. So in this form of the Penitential Act we are speaking directly to the Lord who came to save us. We also notice that the focus is on what Jesus has done for us. In other words, we are not just thinking of where we have gone wrong but also how God puts things right.

If we look more closely at these lines there is even more to be seen.

'You were sent to heal the contrite of heart' — we recall Jesus' mission, say we are sorry and ask for healing.

'You came to call sinners' — we admit we are sinners and that Jesus calls us on this basis to be members of his Church.

'You plead for us at the right hand of the Father' — we think of how Jesus, our great High Priest, intercedes for us.

The Church has drawn from its rich tradition of the Lord have mercy being a litany and developed it into an acclamation of Jesus' care while asking for forgiveness.

Q *In what ways do you think this form of the Lord have mercy is helpful in leading us to say sorry?*

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I Confess

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words cannot hurt them.

This is a saying that we use when someone is unpleasant or critical. We say it to ourselves or aloud as a kind of self-defence. But is it true? Words can be very destructive. They can hurt very deeply and can lead others astray. If that is true for words, what about our thoughts?

There are times when what and how we think can be wrong. Even our thoughts can be sinful. They can affect our behaviour in all kinds of ways. Our attitudes can prompt us to put into word or action all kinds of things we might regret. The 'I Confess' or 'Confiteor' leads us to remember this.

It also reminds us that there are such things as sins of omission. To stand by and do nothing in the presence of great wrong is a sin. If we ignore the desperate pleading and needs of those who are helpless there is sinfulness in our inaction.

As I say sorry it is important to admit wrongdoing *'in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do.'*

We say I confess admitting our own personal responsibility and that we can't blame it on someone else. As I stop and reflect at the beginning of the Penitential Act it is important to confront myself and realise I need to change.

Also we should think of the persons we speak to in this prayer. There is God who accepts us forgives us. There are Mary, the angels and the saints whose prayers we need and there is our neighbour. Inviting us to say this prayer the Church reminds us that our sins affect everybody. In fact, it is often those who are closest to us that we hurt the most. As we say the pray we ask that others will pray for us and we hope that if we have hurt them they will forgive us.

At the end of the prayer the priest says 'the absolution' — *May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.* It is traditionally called an absolution. Does this simple absolution in Mass forgive sins? It does, just as God will forgive us whenever we

make any act of sorrow. But this does not replace the Sacrament of Reconciliation. That Sacrament enables us to not only fully express our sorrow and begin a new life, it is the clearest expression of God's loving mercy guaranteeing forgiveness for even our most serious lapses.

Q *In what ways do you think the 'I confess' is helpful in leading us to say sorry?*

Lord, have mercy

The 'Lord, have mercy' (Kyrie eleison) is a short prayer that seems to finish the Penitential Act. Interestingly it began as something quite different. Nearly fifteen hundred years ago it was part of a Litany used as Mass began. Everyone would be invited to pray for an intention, 'Kyrie eleison' would be sung, all would repeat and they proceeded to the next intention. The litany could be quite long and in a way it was a form of Bidding Prayer occurring at the start of Mass.

Things changed and a shortened form survived without the petitions but with just 3 Kyrie eleisons, 3 Christe eleisons and 3 Kyrie eleisons. Later these three groups of three were seen as being addressed to the Trinity. The Kyrie would only be used as part of a litany in special circumstances and normally it was used in its simplest form surrounded by other prayers.

At the changes of the Second Vatican Council it was decided to reintroduce a Litany with the 'Lord have mercy' and use it as one of the forms of the Penitential Act. Look closely at the words of this penitential litany:

You were sent to heal the contrite of heart.

Lord, have mercy.

You came to call sinners.

Christ, have mercy.

You are seated at the right hand of the Father to intercede for us.

Lord, have mercy.

