

The Mass (Part X)

by Fr. Tim Church

THE PENITENTIAL RITE

The penitential rite follows the opening greeting. Here, the gathered community acknowledges before God that they are sinners and asks for God's forgiveness. Its significance cannot be overstated.

One of the serious problems of our age is the disregard for sin, its cause and consequences. Despite the logical error of modern thinking about this, if one has decided that they are going to live in a relationship with God, then sin must be taken seriously. The confession of sin at the very beginning of the Mass provides us with a clear statement that we know this is the first thing that we have to overcome in our spiritual journey.

It is possible, however, that we can approach this part of the liturgy as merely a perfunctory exercise that is easily dismissed. The truth is that many people are late enough for Mass that they miss the penitential rite. Some have asked when their late arrival would prevent them from receiving communion. The Catholic Church teaches that the standard of our involvement is full, active participation in the Mass. (Catechism, #1141) You cannot be doing that if you are not here for a portion of the Mass. Certainly if we consider the nature and importance of the penitential rite, we should consider this necessary if we are to be properly prepared to receive communion. If one is not present for the acknowledgement of our sins, they clearly should come to another Mass in order to fully participate and accomplish their Sunday Duty.

The penitential rite has a long history, stretching even into the Synagogue worship of our Jewish ancestors. The most ancient record of the form of the Mass includes a very matter of fact statement concerning the necessity of confession: "But every Lord's day (Sunday) you must gather, and break bread, and give thanksgiving (Eucharist) after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one that is at variance with his fellow come together with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be profaned." (Didache, Chapter 14, second century)

Our contemporary penitential rite includes variations centered either on the confitior, the Kyrie or the asperges, the sprinkling with holy water. The confitior ("I confess...") was once the private prayers of the priest said in the sacristy. It was eventually said with the server at the foot of the altar and then repeated with the people. The asperges or sprinkling with holy water recalls our baptism, our first act of repentance. It is frequently used during the Easter season but can be used at any Sunday Mass. Perhaps the most common variation is the litany form of the recitation of the Kyrie, the title given to a penitential hymn. The full title is Kyrie eleison, "Lord have mercy." This expression is at the heart of our relationship with God. We cry out for God's mercy, knowing that our sins have led us into darkness. Without God's mercy we are lost.

Since there is obviously a relationship between the penitential rite and the sacrament of reconciliation, the question arises concerning its effectiveness. Could it not simply act as a substitute for going to "confession"? Clearly with regard to mortal sins the answer is no. The petition that the priest says at the end of the penitential rite does not pronounce absolution over the people with the same effect as in the Sacrament of Penance. (General Instruction of the Roman Mission, 51) However, full participation in the Mass does remit guilt for venial sins, those that are not grave or openly rebellious against God and his Church. (Catechism, 1451) The penitential rite

is a statement of our desire for God's forgiveness and is, therefore, integral to both our seeking God's forgiveness in the Mass and the sacrament of reconciliation. As the Mass is our participation in the Death of Christ, given for our salvation, we can see that all the sacraments are related to or flow from it.