

THE PENITENTIAL RITE

I was watching an old Cops and Robbers film on TV when a specific action reminded me of the mass. The police had surrounded a building where the robbers had taken shelter, and the chief of police shouted:

OPEN UP IN THE NAME OF THE LAW.

He reminded the villains that he and his men were the police and that what they were doing was within the law of the land.

The last six words he used made me think of the religious rite celebrated at the beginning of every mass Catholics attend. We call it the INTRODUCTORY RITE, which contains the PENITENTIAL ACT. The more I thought about it, the more I realized its absolute wonder.

It's a mixture of rites and associated prayers so wonderfully organised and written that they are truly awe-inspiring.

Watch as the priest and servers arrive at the Sanctuary. The servers then sit, and the priest kisses the altar, showing reverence for the relics of saints therein and respect for the altar upon which THE HOLY SACRIFICE OF THE MASS will be offered.

He then starts the mass by inviting us to bless ourselves by making the Sign of the Cross and saying a small prayer:

**“IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER,
and of the Son
and of The Holy Spirit.”**

It was those first six words again that were used in the film, yet this is how the mass is started all over the world. Have you ever stopped to think about what you've just done and said when you bless yourself, right at the very start of the mass, you've reminded yourself that:

- There are three persons in one God.
- Jesus died for us on the cross
- Because of that tiny prayer,
what you are about to do is all
in the name of the Blessed Trinity.

How wonderfully profound is this at the start of the mass, yet how many of us just give it lip service?

We then enter the Penitential Act. Being Penitent means being truly sorry for any wrongdoing we've committed.

As far as God is concerned, this means having offended him, sinning, and losing his favour.

**BEFORE WE DO ANYTHING RELATING TO GOD:
WE SHOULD ALWAYS BE PENITENT
ENDEAVOURING TO BECOME HIS FRIEND.**

The Penitential Act is a highly effective way of doing this. Whoever conceived this must have been cloaked in the Holy Spirit because it's a very simple yet wonderful way of showing how penitent we are.

It starts with that special little prayer we all say, beginning with the words "I CONFESS."

Ask yourself, how many of us confess to having done anything wrong? When we do, is it to God and many others and aloud? I think the answer to this question is never. In the Penitential Act, there's no hesitation in doing this; everyone at mass stands and says these two words and the rest of the prayer out loud.

- To whom do we confess?
To God and to all present at mass.
- What do we confess?
We confess to having sinned in thought, word, and deed, but it doesn't stop there.
- It goes on to say that the sinning is not only my fault, but my most grievous fault.
- It ends by asking Our Lady and all the saints to intervene with God on our behalf.

The priest then asks God and Jesus Christ to:

- Have mercy on us.
- Forgive us our sins.
- Bring us to everlasting life.

What a magnificent way of asking God to free us of our sins. The 'I **Confess**' is a simple prayer, but so powerful. Anyone going through this prayer and being earnest about what they're saying must be truly sorry.

Now we say the Act of Penitence:

'Lord have mercy'

'Christ have mercy'

'Lord have mercy'.

We all follow this by saying The **Gloria**, another special prayer, a way of saying:

**THANK YOU,
AND GLORIFYING GOD.**

Many prayers used in the mass come from the Bible. The Penitential Act's 'The Gloria' starts with a special event: the birth of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem, God wanted the world to know, but who did he select to tell the good news? It wasn't to kings, dictators, presidents or any high-ranking people; it was to the lowest-ranked people in Israel: shepherds. He sent an angel to them to announce the birth of Christ, and they heard the hosts of heaven joyfully praising God and singing (Luke 2:9 -15):

***“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace
to people of good will.”***

We cannot imagine how wonderful it must have been to hear about the birth of Christ while all around the heavenly hosts could be heard glorifying God. Yet these words are used to start THE GLORIA, then go on to ask for God's forgiveness and glorify God. It is a wonderful prayer.

The priest now performs the final part of this Introductory Rite. We've truly admitted to being sinners, said we're sorry, asked God to forgive us, and then glorified him; the priest opens his arms saying: **“Let us pray”**. then says a short prayer created for that day. It's called:

‘THE COLLECT’.

The Introductory Rite is now complete. How many of us engage in it parrot fashion without realising what a magnificent way it is to show God how penitent we are and ask for his forgiveness before we take part in the two main parts of the mass? How often are we reminded that we know not the day nor the hour of our deaths?

When people recognise that this simple rite at the very start of mass is an incredible way of saying they're sorry for offending God and asking him to forgive them, they don't just go to mass once a week but as regularly as possible.

The mass is an incredible religious service, and right at the start of it, there's this wonderful Introductory Rite with its Penitential Act. It's a fantastic experience that makes one think about the wonders that the mass itself must hold.