

The Penitential Rite & The Kyrie

The Mass In Slow Motion is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. You are also invited to learn more by attending Sunday School classes for adults which take place in the school cafeteria each Sunday from 9:45 am. to 10:45 am.

This series will follow the Mass in order.

The Penitential Rite in general—Let us recall that we have just acknowledged and celebrated the presence of Christ among us. First we welcomed him as he walked the aisle of our Church, represented by the Priest Celebrant. The altar, another sign and symbol of Christ was then revered. Coming to the chair, a symbol of a share in the teaching and governing authority of Christ, the priest then announced the presence of Christ among us in the liturgical greeting. Now, in the Bible, whenever there was a direct experience of God, there was almost always an experience of unworthiness, and even a falling to the ground! Isaiah lamented his sinfulness and needed to be reassured by the angel (Is 6:5). Ezekiel fell to his face before God (Ez. 2:1). Daniel experienced anguish and terror (Dan 7:15). Job was silenced before God and repented (42:6); John the Apostle fell to his face before the glorified and ascended Jesus (Rev 1:17). Further, the Book of Hebrews says that we must strive for the holiness without which none shall see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). Thus, it makes sense that acknowledging the presence of the Lord and longing to see him more clearly, we ought to repent of our sins and seek the Lord's mercy. How can we, who enter the presence of the Holy, not see more clearly our sins and desire to be free of them?



Thus, The priest invites the congregation to take part in the penitential rite, which the entire community carries out through a communal confession, and which the priest's absolution brings to an end. He uses these or similar words, "Let us acknowledge our sins that we may worthily celebrate these sacred mysteries." The priest and people recall their sins and repent of them in silence. The penitential rite may take a number of different forms.

- **A Confiteor** (I confess) recited by the priest and people together followed by the absolution
- **A rarely used Miserere** consisting of the following formula:
 - Lord, we have sinned against you. Lord Have Mercy;
 - Lord have Mercy;
 - Lord show us your mercy and love;
 - And grant us your salvation.
- **A Kyrie Litany**—There are numerous forms for this given in the sacramentary which are not themselves seen as an exhaustive list since, once again, the directive indicates that "the priest (or some other suitable minister) makes the following or other invocations. Here is one sample:
 - You raise the dead to life in the Spirit. Lord have mercy.
 - You bring pardon and peace to the sinner. Christ have mercy.
 - You bring light to those in darkness. Lord have mercy.

History of the Penitential Rite. It is a rather surprising fact to many that, strictly speaking, there is no history to the penitential rite within the Mass prior to Vatican II. The inclusion of the penitential rite as a communal gesture is an innovation in the new order of the Mass. Now this may surprise older Catholics who surely will remember the “I confess...” prayer as part of the prayers at the foot of the altar. True there was a confiteor in the Old Latin Mass, but this was a private devotional gesture between the priest and the servers done at the foot of the altar, which was actually prior to the actual beginning of Mass. The priest did it at the foot of the altar because, technically, he had not gone up the altar steps to begin Mass yet. Thus the introduction of this element into the Mass itself and as a communal gesture is new. Some have suggested a historical precedent may be found in Protestantism. Communal confession of sins was first introduced into Protestant communion services of the 16th century. Others however, see its roots in the Eastern liturgies wherein a penitential act at the beginning of Mass is almost universal and very ancient in origin. The form of this practice varied however and was sometimes linked to the incensing at the beginning of Mass.

Even as early as the Didache (written ca 90-100 AD) a confession of sins is prescribed before the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist:

“On the Lord’s Day gather together, break bread and give thanks after confessing your transgressions so that your sacrifice may be pure. Let no one who has a quarrel with his neighbor join you until he is reconciled, lest your sacrifice be defiled. For this is that which was proclaimed by the Lord, ‘In every place and time let there be offered to me a clean Sacrifice.’”

The current penitential rite contains two parts that can be done in different combinations as we saw above. However, the Confiteor (I confess) and the Kyrie (Lord have mercy) have very different histories and will be explained separately.

The History of the Confiteor (I Confess). The history of this part of the Mass is somewhat convoluted. The remote history may be found in the Western Liturgy in the silent worship which the Pope made when he first came to the altar. Later (by the 7th Century) this silent prayer became more elaborate with the directive being that the celebrant lie prostrate before the altar. Likewise, the nature of the prayer came to be more specified. The celebrant was directed to pour forth prayers for himself and for the sins of the people. The general term for this was the *apologiae* (apology) and may be called the forerunner of the Confiteor. Thus a penitential theme was introduced.

By the 11th Century the Confiteor had developed as a specific dialogue between the Celebrant and those immediately around him. Thus, he not only acknowledges his own sinfulness before God, but also before those who serve him and asks their mediation on his behalf. The actual text of the Confiteor, was taken from those used in sacramental confession. The oldest Confiteor formulas were simple and brief. For example, here is an 11th Century version from Cluny, *“I confess to God and before all His saints and you, Father, that I have sinned in thought word and deed through my fault. I ask you to pray for me.”* So the celebrant confessed before God and the heavenly Church (i.e. the saints) as well as asking intercession from the Church on earth.

In the Gothic period (12th – 16th Centuries) there grew a practice of listing some of the Saints by name. This is evident in the Confiteor used in the old Latin Mass which listed St. Mary, St. Michael, St John the Baptist, Sts. Peter and Paul.



The shorter, simpler version of the Confiteor now used in Mass is closer to the oldest formulas although the angels and the Mother of God are still specifically mentioned in addition to the general phrase “all the saints.” One other difference today from the old Latin Mass is that there is no longer a separate recitation of the Confiteor for priest and the servers. Now the communal aspect of the act is stressed even while the personal aspect is retained. Now all say “I confess” but say it together.

The History of the Kyrie—the Kyrie (Lord have Mercy) is often thought of as a part of the penitential rite but this is not necessarily the case. The general instructions for mass describe it this way:

“After the penitential act the Kyrie Eleison is begun unless it has already been used in the penitential act. It is a song in which the faithful acclaim the Lord and ask for his mercy therefore it is usually to be sung by all, that is by the congregation as well as the schola or cantor.”

Hence, the Kyrie may or may not be a part of the penitential rite. As we shall see in its origins, the Kyrie is historically more a hymn of praise than a penitential act.

The early history may be seen in pagan antiquity. There was the custom of imploring the help of the gods with the phrase “*eleison*” (Mercy!) Likewise, the phrase was used in reference to the emperor. A singer would announce some praise of the emperor and the people would respond with this or another cry of homage.

However, there are also scriptural roots in the Old Testament. For example, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) there are many phrases particularly in the psalms such as, “*eleison me Kyrie.*” (Have mercy on me Lord) (Psalm 6:2). Also in the New Testament there are many places where the phrase is used: *Son of David have mercy on us.* This phrase is indeed quite common in the New Testament.

Nevertheless, Kyrie litanies were not common in the Church until after the Age of Constantine (4th Century) likely due to their connections with paganism. After the persecutions ended and paganism moved to the background it was deemed appropriate to use these forms of courtly honor to honor the Lord.

The entrance of the Kyrie into widespread use in the Church may be described as follows. The practice was first reported in use in Jerusalem wherein the phrase “*Kyrie Eleison*” was sung in response to a series of intercessory prayers sung by a deacon. This practice took place after the Gospel, like it does today. Eventually its use came to be quite universal in the Church. In some areas it was located at the beginning of Mass, while in other areas it had its place after the Gospel. Eventually it came to be generally located at the beginning of mass. The form of the Kyrie was retained as a litany of praise and petition before God and these prayers grew in elaborateness.

In a desire to simplify and shorten the liturgy, Pope Gregory the Great in the early 7th Century removed the prayers and kept only responses *Kyrie eleison* and *Christe eleison*. Gradually the singing of these became more elaborate and tended to be done only by a choir of trained singers. In the old Latin Mass the Kyrie was NOT considered part of the penitential rite which had already taken place at the foot of the Altar.

Today the Kyrie can function as a part of the Penitential Rite when combined with acclamations such as, “You came to call sinners, Lord have mercy” and so forth. Or the Kyrie can serve as a kind of hymn of praise, following the Confiteor (I confess). So, the Kyrie has somewhat of a dual personality. It may serve either as a penitential rite or a hymn of praise.