



**Step-by-Step Walk Through the Mass
Do This in Remembrance of Me, Part 8:
Penitential Act
By FR. LUKE SPANNAGEL**



After the priest's greeting and people's response at the beginning of the Mass, we next share in the **Penitential Act**. If you think that sounds like penance, don't worry—it's a good thing! During the entrance rite, we recall that we are in the presence of God. If we are truly sincere in realizing that God (who is all-holy) is in our midst, then we recognize the need for purification. We recognize that when we encounter God, we must draw near with a pure heart. So, we take a brief moment of silence to call to mind our sins and failings, and we ask the Lord to forgive and heal us. After our time of silence, the priest (or deacon) leads the community in praying one of three possible prayers (conveniently known as options A, B, and C—more on them next time).

History of the Penitential Act

Like nearly every part of the Holy Sacrifice, we find descriptions of the Penitential Act in early descriptions of the Mass. One of these, the *Didachē* (pronounced: did-uh-kay), meaning *Teaching of the Apostles*, gives instructions for Christians celebrating the Eucharist: "Assemble on the Lord's Day, and break bread and offer the Eucharist; but first make confession of your faults, so that your sacrifice may be a pure one" (*A Biblical Walk Through the Mass*, p. 32). As Father Guy Oury notes, "For a long time in the past this rite concerned only the celebrant and his ministers. Before going up to the altar they remained in silent prayer, lying face to the floor, as is still done in the liturgy of Good Friday" (*The Mass*, p. 49). So that everyone present could be more actively involved in this important part of the Mass, our current options came into use. Besides, except for some of our little ones, it would be really hard for everyone to lie down on the floor inside the pews!

How to Participate

This honest look inside ourselves during the Penitential Act helps us to be aware of our sin and, most importantly, our need for God to help us overcome sin. In a very practical way, this brief reflection recalls the places in our lives where we know we need Christ more. If you haven't yet thought of an intention to join together with the priest's offering of the Mass, this might be a great time to ask specifically for help in overcoming a particular sin or perhaps further healing from the effects of previous sins. We believe that the Mass is our most powerful prayer together because Jesus himself is truly present and we are joining together with Him in the perfect worship of God the Father. In the Mass we take part in the one perfect sacrifice of the Cross where Christ offered Himself so that our sins could be forgiven. Realizing Jesus will be present on the altar or thinking about how the Mass is a sharing in the Cross, this moment can actually be one of great hope. What a great gift!

During this part of the Mass, as you recall your sins, you might feel unworthy of what we are about to celebrate. Although it may be uncomfortable to think about where we need healing and growth, it is actually a good sign of grace at work in our hearts. We are made out of love for love. We are made for life and communion with God and each other. Of course, sin disrupts and breaks that communion: sin moves us away from where we belong. The reason we feel frustrated or embarrassed or sad when we think of our sins is that we know deep inside that sin is contrary to the life to which God calls us. Hopefully, that discomfort will spur us to seek out the forgiveness of Christ through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Sometimes We Use Water Instead

For a little bonus info: Have you ever noticed during this time that the priest might walk around with Holy Water instead? As the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* says, "From time to time on Sundays, especially in Easter Time, instead of the customary Penitential Act, the blessing and sprinkling of water may take place as a reminder of Baptism" (*GIRM*, no. 51). As people from my parishes could tell you, this is often one of my favorite parts of the Mass! Using an aspergillum (typically a small reservoir with a sponge inside on the end of a handle, sometimes referred to as a sprinkler) or perhaps even an evergreen branch, the priest will dip it into the water and then sprinkle the water over the people. As when we talked about using the Holy Water upon entering the church, this water recalls our baptism and the joy of being freed by Christ from sin. No wonder the priest is often so generous with the Holy Water at this part of the Mass!