



Having spent a brief moment calling to mind our sins and acclaiming together God's mercy, the priest then says words that the Roman Missal calls "the **absolution**." Is this a "real" absolution, another version of the absolution we receive in the Sacrament of Reconciliation? The short answer is no, it is not the same. Let's look at it a bit more closely.

### **Not a Sacramental Confession**

In the words of Charles Belmonte: "At the end of [the Penitential Act], the priest takes refuge with his brethren in the mercy of God: *May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life*" (*Understanding the Mass*, p. 56). In the past, some people (including priests) were incorrectly told that this prayer was the equivalent of the absolution prayer the priest says in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This is certainly not the case! To make this clear, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* directly says that this prayer "lacks the efficacy of the Sacrament of Penance" (*GIRM*, no. 51). Elaborating, Belmonte comments, "The Penitential [Act] of the Mass is not a sacramental confession; therefore, it does not bring immediate remission of mortal sins. Forgiveness of mortal sins has to be obtained in the Sacrament of Penance. It is also important to remember that a person who has committed a mortal sin cannot go to Communion unless he goes to Confession beforehand" (*Understanding the Mass*, p. 57).

If we think about the actual words of the prayer, this explanation makes sense. The priest here simply asks the Lord to have mercy on us, forgive us, and bring us to heaven. This is clearly different from the words of sacramental absolution where the priest, in the person of Christ, says the words, "*God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church, may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*" In the Sacrament of Reconciliation (also known as the Sacrament of Penance or Confession), we openly confess our sins and speak them to the priest, whereas in the Mass we review them interiorly. In the Mass, we certainly are acknowledging that we have sins and that we need the Lord's mercy, but we are not directly bringing those sins to God for forgiveness as we do in Reconciliation.

### **Obtaining Pardon**

Even though the words the priest says at Mass are not a sacramental absolution, that does not mean they are not important. As Belmonte says, "the Penitential [Act], if it is said with true contrition, helps to obtain pardon for present venial sins, as well as to stir up new sorrow for past sins that have already been forgiven. In this way, it helps us to purify ourselves and so to take better part in the Holy Mass" (*Understanding the Mass*, p. 57). As we have reviewed previously, the Sacrifice of the Mass is our participation in the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus offered on the Cross for the forgiveness of sins. It is a fitting place for us to recall what a wonderful Savior we have and how powerful the gift of his forgiveness truly is in our hearts. Hopefully, it also helps us resolve to seek out the sacramental grace of Reconciliation whenever we need it!

### **A Necessary Pause**

I don't know about all of you, but sometimes I find that when my days are full, I am often going from one thing to the next without time for reflection. I find that brief moments of quiet in my day are needed so that I can thoroughly review what I have said and done. It is in those moments that I realize times when I have gotten off track and need a reset. Similarly, the Penitential Act of the Mass certainly can be an important opportunity to review how we have lived since our last time at Mass. It is also a great moment to realize that there might be sins that need sacramental forgiveness before we receive Communion.

As I continue to grow in my life as a priest, I am finding the Penitential Act to be one of my favorite parts of the Mass. It is such a great gift to recall where I need God's mercy and to acclaim his great mercy together with God's people. To add to our joy, next in the Mass we sing of God's glory!