

What is the meaning and purpose of the “I confess” prayer?

The prayer starting with the words “I confess...” that we pray together is properly called the Confiteor. This prayer or any of the three options is part of the penitential act. If we recall, participating in the Mass is a 4-stage “dangerous mission”. The words “The Lord be with you” remind us we are being sent into some danger. The penitential act follows the first of these greetings at the beginning of Mass. Our first “dangerous mission” is the journey into our own conscience.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, St Paul warns us: “Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” Before we pray the Confiteor, this scripture is reflected in the invitation of the priest when he says: “Brothers and Sisters, let us acknowledge our sins, and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries.”

Following this invitation, there is a brief pause in which we call to mind our sins, a little examination of conscience. If we are aware of serious, mortal sin we must not receive the body and blood of Christ at communion. St Paul makes it clear that the punishment for an unworthy reception of the Eucharist is serious. He says: “If we would examine ourselves first, we would not come under God’s judgment.” If you recognize a mortal sin on your soul, approach the communion rail for a blessing only with your arm across your chest until you are able to go to confession to a priest.

The Confiteor contains 4 beautiful elements. The first is to recognize and acknowledge that we have sinned against God directly or against those in our lives.

The second part reminds us to reflect on the ways in which we may have sinned, “in my thoughts, in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do...”

The third part uses our body to emphasize our prayer and contrition – we may strike our breast or point to our heart, publicly showing others we recognize and take responsibility for our failure in being Christ-like.

Finally, we call upon the entire Church to come to our aid, asking for prayers to strengthen us in our battle against sin. We invoke the heavenly hosts, souls in purgatory and our brothers and sisters who still journey with us here on earth.

Let us learn to carefully and conscientiously prepare for receiving the Most Sacred Body and Blood of Our Lord.