

## The Prayer of the Penitent and Absolution by the Priest

Last week, we talked about what sins to confess, the counsel of the priest, and the assignment of penance. If this is the hardest part of confession, the next part would probably be the second: the prayer of the penitent. Most often this is the Act of Contrition that we memorized in our religious education. However, just as “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned...” is not mandatory, neither are the specific words of the Act of Contrition.

The rubric (rules for celebrating the Sacrament) only specify that the penitent should express his or her contrition in “these or similar words” before quoting the Act of Contrition. However, it also lists other recommended texts. Some extra ones are included here for your reference:

- Lord Jesus, who chose to be called the friend of sinners, through the mystery of your Death and Resurrection, free me from my sins. May your peace grow strong in me, that I may bear the fruits of charity, justice and truth.
- Have mercy on me, O God, according to your merciful love; turn your face from my sins and blot out all my guilt; create a pure heart in me, O God, renew an upright spirit deep within me.
- Remember, LORD, the compassion and mercy you showed long ago. Do not recall my sins and failings. In your mercy remember me, Lord, because of your goodness. (Psalm 25:6-7)
- Wash me, O LORD, from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. I acknowledge my offense; my sin is before me always. (Psalm 51:4-5)
- Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Of course, it is also possible to make up your own on the spot. It should be a simple prayer that expresses contrition. The late Msgr. Bill Beibel, who was the priest at the Cathedral for many years, put it best: “Just tell Jesus you’re sorry!” We get so worried about the exact words sometimes that we forget the prayer has a purpose. It really is that simple (as you can see by the last recommended one)!

All of this is not to say that we don’t need to memorize the Act of Contrition anymore. It is still a beautiful prayer to have in our treasury of prayers. It is also available in both of our confessionals for your reference. But don’t be afraid to simply make it personal and “Just tell Jesus you’re sorry!”

After the penitent makes his or her prayer of contrition, the priest then offers the prayer of absolution. Apart from Eucharistic Prayer at Mass, it is perhaps the most moving and meaningful prayer to hear: it is the moment that we are totally forgiven from our sins! Here are the words again for you to reflect on:

God, the Father of mercies, through the Death and Resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and poured out the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God grant 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.**”

The penitent then responds “Amen.”

The priest will extend at least his right hand over the penitent, or even both hands. Again, this is a common gesture in the Church. It happens right before the priest says “This is my body” at Mass; it happens when he blesses the holy water at a Baptism; it even happens right before anointing someone with the oil during the Anointing of the Sick. It is a very Sacramental gesture: it is the calling of the Holy Spirit during the liturgical action!

It is even more profound when we remember that although we hear the priest say these words, it may be his voice, but it is Christ speaking through the priest. The Sacrament is specifically Christ offering forgiveness; it is *divine* forgiveness.

Finally, remember that it is this prayer (and specifically the capitalized part) which accomplishes the ‘Sacramental effect’: as soon as you hear these words, your sins are forgiven. It is not after you finish your penance, nor is it delayed until you are told “Go in peace!” As soon as the words are spoken, your sins are erased and you begin a new life in Christ. How great a gift we receive!

And again, the penitent responds to this prayer “Amen.” We use it every day, but often forget what it means. It is Hebrew (yes, you speak *Hebrew* every day!) for “I believe.” It is a statement of faith: I believe my sins are forgiven. I believe that Christ has healed me. I believe that I have been set free! Such a powerful statement; please don’t forget to say it!