

THE PENITENTIAL ACT AT THE BEGINNING OF THE MASS IN THE 'ORDINES ROMANI'

In dealing on the prayers at the foot of the altar, Righetti distinguishes three groups of prayers or apologies, namely, the antiphon and psalm 42, which form the first group; the reciprocal confession between the celebrant and the ministers, accompanied by the general absolution, which form the second group; and the third group of apologies formed of the 'preces'.¹ In this paper, however, we shall be treating on the second group, that is better known as the penitential act. And I have purposely stressed the words 'at the beginning of the mass in the Roman Ordinals', since we find other kinds of penitential acts in other places of the mass,² and, besides, we find them as well in other liturgical sources and contexts other than the 'Ordines', as we shall later hint at. Moreover, I shall be speaking first on the history and evolution of the second group of apologies at the beginning of the mass, then on its theology and function in liturgy.

HISTORY AND EVOLUTION

To begin with, this penitential act is composed of the reciprocal confession of one's sins – the confiteor – with the accompanying absolution – that is, the 'Misereatur' and the 'Indulgentiam' prayers. However, we do not find this structure immediately in the 'Ordines'. So much so, many authors tend to agree that until it finally and definitively found its place in the Roman Ordinals, by the XIII century and then imposed on the Universal Church by the post-Tridentine missal of Pius V, it had undergone an evolutionary phase that can be traced since the 'Ordo Romanus Primus'. Thus, the silent reverence of the celebrant as he bows at the foot of the altar, that is, the action of the celebrant more than any definitive prayer, is considered as the forerunner of the Confi-

¹ Cf. M. RIGHETTI – *Storia Liturgica* (Ancore – 1956) vol. III, nn. 117-118.

² Cf. A. NOCENT – *De Celebratione Eucharistica et de sua Historia Genetica, 'Quaestiones Speciales'* (Atheneum Sancti Anselmi de Urbe, Romae – 1969) pp. 51-56.

teor, even though the latter existed earlier in other liturgical contexts.³ To bring some examples, I shall be quoting from the 'Ordines' themselves:

ORDO ROMANUS I (beginning of VIII cent.): '... pontifex inclinatur ad altare, surgens at orans et faciet crucem in fronte sua et dat pacem uni episcopo ...'⁴

ORDO IV (end of VIII cent.): '... deinde psallit ante altare et stat, inclinatum capite ... et dum dixerit schola ad versum repetendum, surgit pontifex ab oratione et osculatur evangelium qui est super altare ...'⁵

ORDO VI (IX cent.): '... debet pontifex venire in tribunal Ecclesiae et inclinare caput contra altare ...'⁶

ORDO X (middle of X cent.): '... inclinans se Deum pro peccatis suis deprecetur ...'⁷

By the first third of the XI century, the celebrant shared this prayer with the ministers around him and begs also their meditation which was offered to him at once in the form of a response to his confession. It seems likely here that the confiteor and the accompanying prayers, the 'Misereatur' and the 'Indulgentiam', were quite naturally introduced at the beginning of the mass, since that moment expressed a penitential act, which was precisely expressed by the confiteor-misereatur-indulgentiam structure as early as the VIII century but in a different liturgical context, namely, at sacramental confession and as a general confession by way of introducing 'Prime'.⁸ Besides, the mutual asking for pardon

³ Cf. J. JUNGSMANN — *Missarum Sollemnia* (New Revised & Abridged Edition) Burns & Oates, London, 1959 pp. 199-213. Cf., also A. NOCENT, op., cit.

⁴ Cf. M. ANDRIEU — *Les Ordines Romani Du Haut Moyen Age*, II Les Textes (Ordines I-XIII) Louvain — 1948, p. 82.

⁵ *ib.*, p. 159.

⁶ *ib.*, pp. 330-331.

⁷ *ib.*, p. 353.

⁸ Cf. J. JUNGSMANN, op. cit. Cf., also H. LECLERCQ — *Dictionnaire D'Archéologie Chrétienne et De Liturgie*, 'Confiteor', Letouzey et Ané Edit. (Paris — 1948) v. III, 2, col. 2551-3. Here the author refers us to two footnotes, nn. 2 & 3. The first says that the most ancient indication to the confiteor is found in the prayer preceding sacramental confession with Egbert of York (+735); the second footnote refers us to Chrodegang of Metz (+743) who, in giving a description of

between the celebrant and the ministers, also indicates the VII-VIII century monastic custom (the *Regula Magistri*, VII – ‘laxant mutua delicta’), by which monks confessed their sins before one another and asked pardon not only from God, but also from fellow monks whom they may have offended.⁹ Moreover, the sign of the cross at the ‘*Indulgentiam*’, is derived from the absolution rite in auricular confession, so much so, certain mass Ordinaries even contain the invocation to the celebrant to give a penance which resulted in a *Pater Noster*, *Ave Maria* or some other prayer.¹⁰ By the XII century, this penitential structure at the beginning of the mass, received various embellishments which were quite in line with the Gothic spirit of the day, although it must be noted that this was not accepted everywhere. Thus we first find an invocation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, seemingly because of the influence of St. Bernard, and then to a whole list of Saints which gives the impression that everyone could add as much as one desired. Consequently, the IIIrd Council of Ravenna (1314) decreed that the saints to be mentioned were to be, the Blessed Virgin, John the Baptist, and SS. Peter and Paul. Religious Orders could add their founder-saints.¹¹ Besides, a long list of sins were also named. An *Ordo* of Tours, for example, enumerates as far as 54 grave sins.¹² Beforehand, the *Sacramentary* of Echternach (XI cent.) contains an express exhortation not to exaggerate. And Pope Innocent III (+ 1215) adds later that, since these prayers are a general and open confession, and not a specific and private one, then there was no need to name the sins.¹³

Prime, starts with the confiteor and general absolution. We get also the text: ‘*Confiteor Dno et tibi, frater, quod peccavi in cogitatione et in locutione et in opere: propterea precor te, ora pro me*’. The response: ‘*Misereatur tibi omnipotens Deus, indulgeat tibi peccata tua, liberet te ab omni malo, conservet te in omni bono, et perducat te ad vitam aeternam*’. To which all answer, AMEN.

⁹ Cf. M. RIGHETTI, op. cit.

¹⁰ ib., cf. also A.G. MARTIMORT – *L'Église en prière, 'Les prières du bas de l'autel,'* Desclée & Co., Tournai (Belgium – 1965) 3rd ed., pp. 335-6. Here the author says that the ‘*Indulgentiam*’ constituted the ordinary form of sacramental confession in those days, and furthermore, refers us, in footnote n.2, to the *Pontifical* of Durandus of Mende (XIII) as quoted by M. Andrieu (op. cit., v. III, p. 643) who says that in this same pontifical, these prayers have a quasi-sacramental character, even because of the mentioning of imposing a penitence.

¹¹ Cf. J. JUNGSMANN, and M. RIGHETTI, op. cit.

¹² Cf. *Ordo* of Tours, cited by A. MARTENE in *De ant. eccl. rit.*, I, 536.

¹³ Cf. M. RIGHETTI, op. cit.

However, it is relevant to note that these embellishments which accompanied the penitential act at the beginning of the mass and which often called provincial councils and Popes to exhort against exaggeration, did not normally occur in Rome and in Italy, but in the Northern countries such as France and Germany, even because of the Gothic spirit which flourished more abundantly in these latter countries, especially in the later middle ages. On the contrary, Rome remained more sober and disciplined in its liturgical worship, which may explain in a way the various attempts made by the Popes to exhort against exaggerations. This may also explain why in the missal which was carried all over Europe by the Friar minors, and which had come from Rome, we find a more definitive and disciplined form, which was later universally imposed for universal liturgical usage by the post-Tridentine Missal of Pius V. And besides, a more simpler form, which recalls Chrodegang's formula (cf. *supra*) still remained in usage up to our days in the Dominican and Carthusian rites.

THEOLOGY AND FUNCTION

We have already treated somehow this subject earlier in the paper, since in dealing on the structure and evolution of the penitential act at the beginning of the mass, we have delineated certain of its characteristics which included the theological ones. However, here they will be treated in greater details, putting more emphasis on the element of the 'apologies' of which they form part even if in the process we shall have to turn once again to points that have been already mentioned earlier.

To start with, the penitential act at the beginning of the mass, belong to the 'apologies', since we find in it the chief elements of this liturgical 'genre'. For the apologies were private prayers said in a low voice by the priest without the need of letting the people hear what he was saying. They consisted mainly of his acknowledgement of personal guilt and unworthiness to approach the altar of sacrifice. Thus he felt the need to gain absolution from his faults before starting the mass. And although we also find such prayers at other parts of the mass, yet their place at the beginning of the mass is perhaps the most convenient. Obviously then, we get in them an antithesis between the majesty of God, on one hand, and the miserable and wretched state of the sinner

– in our case the officiating priest and later on those who shared with him these prayers, on the other, the terrible judge that is, God, and the wretched sinner, without the mediating love and mercy of Christ.¹⁴ The 'confiteor' in fact tries to invoke this pardon from the majesty of God, which is why in its structure it has close connotations with the sacrament of Penance, from which it is derived. We have already treated this theme earlier (Cf. footnotes 8-10); however, it may be interesting to add that it was customary in the monastery of Cluny for the priest to put the stole after the recitation of the confiteor and during the 'misereatur', that is before the 'indulgentiam', where he made the sign of the cross as an indication of penance and reconciliation. Besides, though in most occasions the community was left out from making this act with the priest and with the ministers around him, when these were later left to share in his confession, yet there was also the custom in Normandy for the celebrant to turn to the people at the 'indulgentiam', thus including them in the absolution, and *then* signals the choir to start the 'introit'.¹⁵

But once this medieval period was imbued with a deep sense of guilt, and once as it were God the Father and Christ were united and man felt that a deep chasm separated him from his God, since the rôle of Christ as a Mediator was thus neglected, then there was felt the concomitant need of seeking other mediators, for which reason there sprang the cult for the saints. Yet still, this had a fundamental theological meaning behind it and especially at the confiteor, where many Saints were introduced, since it was the expression of the priest's, and indirectly of the faithful whom he represented, sinfulness and unworthiness before God's majesty, composed of two absolution formularies that head for remission of sins not in view of the Sacrament of Confession's 'ex opere operato', but of a sacramental one – 'ex opere operantis Ecclesiae'. It includes then, an invocation of both the Church Militant and of the Church Triumphant,¹⁶ and as we have already stressed earlier, it was always recognized officially as a general and open confession of one's sins with the exclusion of grave ones.¹⁷

¹⁴Cf. F. CABROL – *Dictionnaire D'Archéologie Chrétienne et De Liturgie, 'Apologies,'* Letouzey et Ané Edit. (Paris – 1907) v.1, 2, col. 2591ff.

¹⁵Cf. J. JUNGSMANN, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

¹⁶Cf. CALLEWAERT – *Confiteor in the Mass*, p. 191, as quoted by M. Righetti, *op. cit.*

From the above considerations concerning the history, evolution, theology, and liturgical function of the penitential act at the beginning of the mass in the 'Ordines Romani', we have seen then, that this same act has undergone a progressive process of growth which did not lack spontaneity. And although the Church has continually tried to check its exuberance in its mode of expression that often led to exaggerations, yet it could not completely confine it as the private and secret introductory prayer of the celebrant and the ministers by a way of disposing themselves better for the Eucharistic Celebration. For the various attempts and instances in its development to include the faithful, whether directly or, as often the case, indirectly, is a clear indication that this same Sacrifice is to be shared with the community who has precisely gathered in the Church for worship. Consequently, the survival of the penitential act at the beginning of the mass, is a sign of its authentic function in the liturgy.

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¹⁷ Perhaps it is relevant to refer here to P. RADO — *Enchiridion Liturgicum, De formula liturgica absolutionis* (Herder-Rome) 1961, v. II, pp. 850-852, where he says that the recital of the confiteor or other formulas similar to it, precede the actual confession and are equivalent to a general confession. Besides, he adds that the 'Misereatur' and the 'Indulgentiam', together with the 'Passio D.N.J. Ch.', may be omitted 'ex justa causa', which implies that the formulas that are contained in the penitential act at the beginning of the mass, are not essential to sacramental confession, even though they form part of its structure. (cf. footnotes 12 & 13).