



# The Holy See

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POPE FRANCIS **GENERAL AUDIENCE** Paul VI Audience Hall

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*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

Resuming the catecheses on the Eucharistic celebration, let us consider today, in the context of the Introductory Rites, the *Penitential Act*. In its sobriety, it favours the attitude with which we are prepared to worthily celebrate the holy mysteries, that is, by acknowledging our sins before God and our brothers and sisters, acknowledging that we are sinners. In fact the priest's invitation is addressed to the whole community in prayer, because we are all sinners. What can the Lord give to one whose heart is already filled with self-importance, with one's own success? Nothing, because a presumptuous person is incapable of receiving forgiveness, as he is satisfied by his presumed righteousness. Let us consider the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, where only the latter — the tax collector — returns home justified, that is, forgiven (cf. Lk 18:9-14). One who is aware of his own wretchedness and lowers his gaze with humility feels God's merciful gaze set upon him. We know through experience that only one who is able to acknowledge his mistakes and apologize receives the understanding and forgiveness of others.

Quietly listening to the voice of our conscience allows us to recognize that our thoughts are far from divine thoughts, that our words and our actions are often worldly, guided, that is, by choices contradictory to the Gospel. Therefore, at the beginning of Mass, as a community, we perform the Penitential Act through a formula of *general confession*, recited in the *first person singular*. Each one confesses to God and to his brothers and sisters to having "greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do". Yes, even in omissions, that is, in having neglected to do the good I could have done. We often feel that we are good because — we say — "I did no harm to anyone". In reality, it is not enough to refrain from doing harm to our neighbour; we must choose to do good, by seizing opportunities to bear good witness that we are disciples of Jesus. It is good to emphasize that we confess to being sinners *both to God and to our brothers and sisters*: this helps us understand the dimension of sin which, while separating us from God, also divides us from our brothers and sisters, and vice versa. Sin severs: sin severs the relationship with God and it severs the relationship with brothers and sisters, relationships within the family, in society and in the community: sin always severs; it separates; it divides.

The words we say with our mouth are accompanied by the *gesture of striking our breast*, acknowledging that I have sinned through my own fault and not that of others. Indeed, it often happens that, out of fear or shame, we point a finger to blame others. It costs us to admit being at fault, but it does us good to confess it sincerely. Confess your own sins. I remember an anecdote that an elderly missionary used to tell, of a woman who went to confession and started speaking about her husband's failings. Then she moved on to talk about her mother-in-law's failings and then the sins of her neighbours. At a certain point, the confessor said to her: "But, madam, tell me: have you finished? — Very well: you have finished with the sins of others. Now start telling your own". Tell your own sins!

After the confession of sins, we ask the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Angels and Saints to pray to the Lord for us. In this too, the *communion of Saints* is valuable: that is, the intercession of these "companions and life examples" (cf. Preface of 1 November) supports us on the journey toward full communion with God, when sin will be abolished once and for all.

In addition to "I confess", the Penitential Act can be performed with other formulae, for example: "Have mercy upon us, O Lord, / for we have sinned against thee. / Show us thy mercy, O Lord, / and grant us thy salvation" (cf. Ps 123[122]:3; Jer 14:20; Ps 85:8). Especially on Sundays, the blessing and sprinkling of water may be performed as a reminder of Baptism (cf. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 51), which washes away all sins. It is also possible, as part of the Penitential Act, to sing the *Kyrie eleison*: with the ancient Greek expression, we praise the Lord — *Kyrios* — and implore his mercy (*ibid.*, 52).

Sacred Scripture offers us luminous examples of "penitent" figures who, coming back into themselves after having committed sin, find the courage to take off the mask and open themselves to the grace that renews the heart. Let us think of King David and the words attributed to him in the Psalm: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my iniquity" (cf. 51[50]:1-2). Let us consider the prodigal son who returns to the father: "God, be merciful to me a sinner" (Lk 18:13). Let us also think of Saint Peter, of Zacchaeus, of the Samaritan woman. Measuring ourselves with the fragility of the clay of which we are molded is an experience that strengthens us: as it makes us take account of our weakness, it opens our heart to invoke the divine mercy which transforms and converts. And this is what we do in the Penitential Act at the beginning of Mass.

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### Special greetings:

I greet all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, particularly those from Korea, Canada and the United States of America. May each of you, and your families, cherish the joy of this Christmas season, and draw near in prayer to the Prince of Peace who has come to dwell among us. God bless you all!

I address a special thought to *young people*, to *the sick* and to *newlyweds*. In this New Year I invite you to welcome and share God's tenderness each day. Dear *young people*, may you be messengers of Christ's love among your peers; dear sick people, may you find in God's caress support in your suffering; and may you, dear newlyweds, be witnesses to the joy of the Sacrament of Marriage through your faithful and reciprocal love.