



THE INTRODUCTORY RITES

The opening prayers of the Mass are all about getting ready—we are preparing our hearts for a most profound encounter with God. We are getting ready to hear God speak to us through the Scriptures in the Liturgy of the Word. And we are getting ready to receive Jesus in Holy Communion in the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

We can't just step out of our busy lives, walk into a church, and immediately expect to be able to hear God's Word attentively and receive the Eucharist reverently. We need some time of transition, some time to prepare our souls for this profound encounter with the Living God.

That's why we have the prayers known as the Introductory Rites. In the opening Sign of the Cross, we invoke God's holy presence. We then prepare our souls by sorrowfully acknowledging our sins in the "I Confess" prayer and entrusting ourselves to his mercy in the *Kyrie*. And then in the *Gloria* we joyfully sing God's praises, thanking him for who he is as our loving Father and for all he has done for us.

Awe. Wonder. Reverence. Humility. Contrition. Trust. Praise. Gratitude. Charity. These are some of the dispositions we need as we approach God in the Liturgy. Let us take a look now at how each of the prayers in the Introductory Rites plays its unique role in cultivating these holy dispositions as we begin to celebrate the sacred mysteries of the Mass.

2. The Sign of the Cross

Priest: In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.

The Sign of the Cross is not simply a way to *begin* praying. It is itself a powerful prayer that can pour out tremendous blessings on our lives.

Whenever we make the Sign of the Cross—whether at Mass or in our private devotions—we enter a sacred tradition that goes back to the early centuries of Christianity, when this ritual was understood to be a source of divine power and protection. In making this sign, we invoke God’s presence and invite him to bless us, assist us, and guard us from all harm. It is not surprising that the early Christians made the Sign of the Cross quite often in their daily lives, desiring to tap into the power that lay within it.

The theologian Tertullian (c. AD 160–225), for example, described the common practice of believers who marked themselves with the Sign of the Cross throughout the day:

In all our travels and movements, in all our coming in and going out, in putting on our shoes, at the bath, at the table, in lighting our candles, in lying down, in sitting down, whatever employment occupies us, we mark our foreheads with the sign of the cross.¹¹

Other early Christians saw the Sign of the Cross as demarcating God's faithful people, helping souls fight temptation, protecting them from all evil, and even bringing terror to the devils. In the fourth century, for example, St. John Chrysostom exhorted God's people to turn constantly to the power of Christ found in the Sign of the Cross:

Never leave your house without making the sign of the cross. It will be to you a staff, a weapon, an impregnable fortress. Neither man nor demon will dare to attack you, seeing you covered with such powerful armor. Let this sign teach you that you are a soldier, ready to combat against the demons, and ready to fight for the crown of justice. Are you ignorant of what the cross has done? It has vanquished death, destroyed sin, emptied hell, dethroned Satan, and restored the universe. Would you, then, doubt its power?¹²

What did these early Christians see that we so often miss? Why did they so eagerly make the Sign of the Cross at the crucial turns in their daily lives, while we sometimes perform this ritual merely out of routine and sometimes even take it for granted? To answer these questions, let us explore the biblical roots of the Sign of the Cross. The more we understand the meaning of this prayer, the more we will want to tap the spiritual power God has in store for us each time we sign ourselves and say, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," especially at the start of every Mass.

The Sign of Ezekiel

There are two principal aspects of the Sign of the Cross: the actual tracing of the Cross over our bodies, and the words we recite while doing this.

The act of tracing the Sign of the Cross over our bodies is a ritual with deep roots in Sacred Scripture. Some Church Fathers saw this ancient Christian practice as being prefigured in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, where a mysterious mark on the forehead was used as

a two-fold sign: a sign of *divine protection* and a mark *distinguishing the faithful from the wicked*. Ezekiel had a vision of many leaders in Jerusalem worshipping the sun and other idols in the Temple of the Lord and filling the land with violence (see Ezekiel 8). Because of their infidelity to God's covenant, the city would be punished and the people taken into exile.

Not everyone in Jerusalem, however, went along with these wicked ways. There were some faithful people who sighed and groaned over the abominations in Jerusalem and chose to remain loyal to God. These righteous ones would receive a mysterious mark on their foreheads: the Hebrew letter *tahv*—which at that time had the shape of an X or a cross. This spiritual mark set them apart from the rest of the corrupt culture and served as a sign of divine protection (see Ezekiel 9:4-6). Like the blood on the doorposts that protected Israelite families from God's punishment on Egypt at Passover, this mark on the foreheads in Ezekiel 9 protected the faithful ones in Jerusalem when judgment fell on the city.

The New Testament saints are sealed with a similar mark. Drawing on imagery from Ezekiel, the book of Revelation depicts the saints in heaven as having a seal upon their foreheads (see Revelation 7:3). As in Ezekiel's time, this seal separates the faithful people of God from the wicked and protects them from the coming judgment (see Revelation 9:4).

It is not surprising that Christians have seen in the mark from Ezekiel a prefiguring of the Sign of the Cross. Just as the faithful people in Ezekiel's time were protected by a cross-like mark on their foreheads, so Christians are guarded by the Cross of Christ traced over their bodies. And this signing has tremendous significance. From a biblical perspective, every time we trace the Sign of the Cross over our bodies, we are expressing our desire to be set apart from the corrupt ways of the world in our own day. As in Ezekiel's time, there are many today among God's people who do not want to go along

with the empty ways of living prevalent in the world. In our own age, characterized by greed, selfishness, loneliness, troubled marriages, and dysfunctional family life, making the Sign of the Cross can express a firm commitment to live according to Christ's standards, not the world's. While the secular world holds up money, pleasure, power, and having fun as the essential marks of a good life, Christians pursue a higher path to true happiness, which is found only in the sacrificial love of Christ on Calvary—the love symbolized by the Sign of the Cross.

When we sign ourselves with the Cross, we are also invoking God's protection for our lives. In the Sign of the Cross, we ask the Lord to guard us from all harm and evil. Many Christians throughout the centuries have turned to the Sign of the Cross for strength to fight against temptation. Others have done so to seek God's help in the midst of suffering and great trials. Many parents trace the Sign of the Cross on their children's foreheads, asking the Lord to bless and protect them.

Do you struggle with temptation to anger or lust? Make the Sign of the Cross. Do you struggle with anxiety, discouragement, and lack of trust? Make the Sign of the Cross. Do you want your children to be set apart to follow God's ways and protected from evil and sin in this world? Trace the Sign of the Cross over them.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem noted these two dimensions of the Sign of the Cross, the setting apart and the protective aspects, calling the ritual both "a badge of the faithful" and "a terror to the devils" who seek to harm us:

Let the cross, as our seal, be boldly made with our fingers upon our brow and on all occasions; over the bread we eat, over the cups we drink; in our comings and in our goings; before sleep; on lying down and rising up; when we are on our way, and when we are still. It is a powerful safeguard ... for it is a grace from God, a badge of the faithful, and a

terror to the devils. ... For when they see the Cross, they are reminded of the Crucified; they fear him who has “smashed the heads of the dragons.”¹³

We have seen how the ritual of signing ourselves with the Cross has foundations in the Bible. Now let us consider the words we recite, words that also have deep roots in Scripture.

The Power of God’s Name

While signing ourselves, we call on God’s name, saying, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” In Scripture, to call on the name of the Lord is to invoke his presence, often in the context of worship, prayer, and sacrifice. It is an ancient practice found among the earliest followers of the Lord. Adam’s son Seth and his descendants are described as calling on the name of the Lord (see Genesis 4:26). The great patriarch Abraham calls on the name of the Lord when he is erecting altars to God and consecrating the land promised to him (see Genesis 12:8; 13:4; 21:33). His son Isaac calls on the Lord’s name when he builds an altar at Beersheba (see Genesis 26:25).

In Scripture, a name is not merely a conventional way of referring to a particular person. A name mysteriously represents the essence of a person and carries the power of that person. Therefore, to call upon God’s name is to invoke his presence and his power. This is why the ancient Israelites frequently call on the name of the Lord, not only to praise him (see Psalm 148:13) and thank him (Psalms 80:18; 105:1) but also to seek his help in their lives (Psalms 54:1; 124:8). Similarly, whenever we call on God’s name, we invoke his divine presence and ask his assistance with the various struggles we face each day. Like the psalmist, we recognize that “our help is in the *name* of the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 124:8, emphasis added).

So if you ever want God's help in your life, make the Sign of the Cross. It's a quick and powerful prayer you can pull out anytime, anywhere—at work, at home, in the car, in the gym. Whenever you call on his name like this, you invoke his holy presence and call on him to assist you and strengthen you.

This is especially the case when we make the Sign of the Cross at Mass. At the start of the Liturgy, we invite God into our lives in a profound way. We solemnly call on his name, invoking his divine presence and power. It is as if we are consecrating the next hour or so of our lives to the Lord and saying that everything we do in the Mass, we do in his name. All that we do—our thoughts, desires, prayers, and actions—we do not on our own but “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Moreover, like the Israelites of old who invoked the divine name as they worshipped the Lord, we reverently call on God's name, asking for his help as we prepare to enter into the sacred mysteries of the Mass.

In the New Testament, Jesus' name is revealed to be on a par with the holiness and power of God's name. St. Paul describes it as “the name which is above every name” (Philippians 2:9). He says this name has power to bring all things into subjection to Christ: “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11). Other New Testament books make this point, too. In Jesus' name, the sick can be healed (see Mark 16:17-18; Acts 3:6), sinners can find mercy (Luke 24:47; Acts 10:43), and demons can be expelled (Luke 10:17). Jesus himself teaches that he responds to all who call on his name: “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it” (John 14:13; see also 15:16; 16:23, 26-27). Moreover, his followers who gather in his name will receive the blessing of his presence among them: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). This is what we do at the start of every Mass: we gather in the name of God's Son. We invoke his presence among us as we confidently bring our needs and petitions before him.

Making the Sign of the Cross Carefully

Yet in making the Sign of the Cross we do not focus on the Son alone. We call upon the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, echoing Jesus' Great Commission to the apostles: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). These were the words spoken when we were baptized, when our souls were first filled with the divine life of the Holy Trinity. By repeating these words at the start of every Mass, we acknowledge the profound fact that we are approaching almighty God in the Liturgy, not because of our own merit but by virtue of the supernatural life God graciously bestowed on us at our baptism. We come not merely in our own name but in the name of the Triune God who dwells within us. We also are praying that this divine life within us might grow—that we may live in ever greater harmony with God and that all we do, we may do in his name.

This is why we should make every Sign of the Cross with careful attention and reverence. Given all that this ritual means, we should avoid signing ourselves in a hurried, sloppy way. In closing, consider Romano Guardini's reflection on the importance of making a good Sign of the Cross:

When we cross ourselves, let it be with a real sign of the cross. Instead of a small, cramped gesture that gives no notion of its meaning, let us make a large unhurried sign, from forehead to breast, from shoulder to shoulder, consciously feeling how it includes the whole of us, our thoughts, our attitudes, our body and soul, every part of us at once, how it consecrates and sanctifies us. ... Make a large cross, taking time, thinking what you do. Let it take in your whole being—body, soul, mind, will, thoughts, feelings, your doing and not-doing—and by signing it with the cross strengthen and consecrate the whole in the strength of Christ, in the name of the triune God.¹⁴

3. Greeting:

“The Lord Be with You”

Priest: The Lord be with you.

People: And with your spirit.

From a biblical perspective, “The Lord be with you” is no ordinary greeting. This is not at all like an exchange in which the priest says, “Good morning,” and the people respond, “And good morning to you, too, Father!” If we truly understood the scriptural background to these words, we would approach the Liturgy with more fear and trembling.

On a basic level, these words convey the reality of Jesus’ presence with the community of believers assembled in his name, for Jesus says that “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). This liturgical greeting also expresses the profound reality of God’s life dwelling within our souls by virtue of our baptism. With these words, the priest is praying that the divine life we received may continue to grow within us.

But the greeting “The Lord be with you” also recalls the words spoken to a whole roster of heroes in the Bible who were called by God to daunting missions—missions that stretched each individual beyond his “comfort zone” and forced him to rely on God as never before. The

future of God's people was dependent on how well these individuals answered the call and played their parts. Think of Isaac (see Genesis 26:3, 24) and Jacob (Genesis 28:13-15); Moses (Exodus 3:12) and Joshua (Joshua 1:5, 9); King David (2 Samuel 7:3), the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:6-8), and the Blessed Virgin Mary (Luke 1:28). All of them heard this message at pivotal moments in their lives. On several occasions when God calls someone in this way, either he or his angel addresses the person with the assurance that "the Lord is with you."

Take Joshua, for example. After Moses dies, God calls Joshua to the daunting task of leading the Israelites into the Promised Land, where many large armies resist their entry. Yet God tells Joshua to be of good courage and to be confident that he will succeed, because "I will be with you":

No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and of good courage; for you shall cause this people to inherit the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. ... Be strong and of good courage; be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:5-6, 9)

God calls Gideon in a similar way. The book of Judges tells how God sends an angel to Gideon to call him to rescue the people from the Midianites, who have taken over the land of Israel. The angel greets Gideon with the words "The LORD is with you" (Judges 6:12). Even though Gideon has no prior military experience, is from a weak clan, and is the least in his own family, God promises Gideon that he will lead Israel to victory over the Midianites—not because of Gideon's own strength or expertise but because of God's presence with him: "I will be with you, and you shall smite the Midianites as one man" (Judges 6:16).

The best example of this theme is found in God's call of Moses at

the burning bush. In this famous scene, the Lord summons Moses to a very difficult mission: Go back to Egypt (the nation where people were trying to kill him; see Exodus 2:15), confront the wicked pharaoh who was enslaving the Hebrews, and convince him to let the people go. Overwhelmed by what is being asked of him, Moses does not feel equal to the task. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11). Moses then does all he can to get out of this God-given responsibility: He tells the Lord that people will ask him who this God is (see Exodus 3:13), that the people will not believe him and will doubt that the Lord really appeared to him (4:1), and that he is not eloquent enough to be such a leader (4:10).

Mission Impossible?

How does the Lord respond to Moses' feelings of inadequacy? Notice that God does not send Moses to get an MBA to help him develop better leadership skills. Nor does God send Moses to a Toastmaster's conference to get training in public speaking. And he certainly does not tell Moses, "Don't be so hard on yourself. You're actually a lot better than you think. You've got this!" No. God knows Moses has a lot of weaknesses. But God will make up for whatever Moses is lacking. So he gives Moses the one thing he needs the most: the assurance of his presence with Moses in this challenging mission. He tells Moses, "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12; 4:12). Moses will fulfill his mission, not because of his own effort, talent, and skill but because of God's help, which will enable him to accomplish so much more than he ever could have done on his own. As St. Paul would say, God's power will be made manifest through Moses' weakness (see 2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Do you ever feel stretched or overwhelmed with the demands of life? Do you ever feel like Moses—inadequate for the mission God has entrusted to you? If so, the words at the beginning of the Liturgy, "The Lord be with you," can both inspire and encourage you.

On the one hand, from a scriptural perspective, the words “the Lord be with you” remind us of the high calling we each have. As God’s children, we each have a particular mission to fulfill in the Father’s plan. When we hear these words, we should realize that we are standing in the footsteps of Joshua, Moses, Gideon, and many others who received a special calling from the Lord. We may not be called to defend God’s people from pagan oppressors or to confront wicked dictators like Pharaoh, but each of us has a role that no one else can play—in our marriages, our families, our work, our friendships, our parishes, and our communities.

On the other hand, these words also assure us that we have access to a higher power that can support us through the trials and challenges of life and help us be faithful in whatever task God has entrusted to us. If we feel uncertain or inadequate in parenting our children, in sharing our faith with others, or in a certain area of virtue, the Liturgy reminds us that the Lord is with us to assist us. If we are facing a struggling marriage, a challenging situation at work, a battle with serious illness, or the loss of a loved one, God is with us in these trials. If we are experiencing sorrow, discouragement, or darkness in our spiritual lives, the Mass reminds us that the Lord is truly with us, even though we may not sense his presence. When we rely on ourselves, we will be overwhelmed by the responsibilities, trials, and sufferings of our lives. But if we learn to rely more on God, remembering that “the Lord is with you,” we can face these challenges with confidence and peace.

But most of all, this greeting in the context of the Mass points to the awesome realities in which we are about to participate—the mysteries of God’s Word being spoken to us in the Liturgy of the Word and the mysteries of Christ’s death and resurrection and of communion with Christ’s Body and Blood which we encounter in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. We are not worthy of so great an honor to encounter God in his Word and in the Most Blessed Sacrament, but the priest’s greeting reminds us at the start of Mass that the Lord

is with us. Just like Moses, Joshua, Gideon, and many others, we can confidently trust in the Lord's help. We can trust that God's strength will make up for whatever in us is lacking.

Apostolic Greeting

Other ritual options for the opening greeting come from the words St. Paul used in his letters. For example, the priest may say, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"—words derived from the initial greetings in Paul's epistles (see Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2).

This line in particular underscores the fact that our faith comes to us from the apostles, to whom Christ entrusted his mission and authority, and who later passed that authority on to their successors. The bishops today are the direct successors of the apostles and share their apostolic mission with their priests. When we hear the salutation, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," we become aware of our fellowship with the saints who, throughout the Church's history, ever since the time of St. Paul, have been greeted with these words.

"And with Your Spirit"

Finally, let us consider our response to this greeting: "And with your spirit." This reflects language used by St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians (see Galatians 6:18) and brings out an important theological point. We don't want to get the impression that our response is merely intended to express a basic reciprocity: "May God be with you, too, Father!" There is much more going on in our exchange with the priest at this moment in the Mass. By saying "And with your spirit," we are acknowledging the Holy Spirit's unique activity through the priest during the Sacred Liturgy by virtue of his ordination.¹⁵ As Jeremy Driscoll explains,

The people are addressing the “spirit” of the priest; that is, that deepest interior part of his being where he has been ordained precisely to lead the people in this sacred action. They are saying in effect, “Be the priest for us now,” aware that there is only one priest, Christ himself, and that this one who represents him now must be finely tuned to perform his sacred duties well.¹⁶

One modern saint once emphasized why such prayers for priests are important, especially in the context of the Mass:

I ask all Christians to pray earnestly for us priests that we learn to perform the holy sacrifice in a holy way. I ask you to show a deep love for the Holy Mass. In this way you will encourage us priests to celebrate it respectfully, with divine and human dignity: to keep clean the vestments and other things used for worship, to act devoutly, to avoid rushing.¹⁷

So let us enter into this beautiful prayer in the Liturgy and let us pray for our priests, that they approach the sacred mysteries with the reverence and devotion worthy of God.

4. “I Confess”

I confess to almighty God
and to you, my brothers and sisters,
that I have greatly sinned,
in my thoughts and in my words,
in what I have done and in what I have failed to do,
through my fault, through my fault,
through my most grievous fault;
therefore I ask blessed Mary ever-Virgin,
all the Angels and Saints,
and you, my brothers and sisters,
to pray for me to the Lord our God.

It's not enough to offer God an apology for our sins. If we sin against almighty God and against others, we need to own up to it and acknowledge the seriousness of our actions. Our actions have consequences. We have hurt other people. We have hurt our relationship with God.

Too often, we are tempted to rationalize our sins (“It's not that big a deal ... God doesn't mind”). We make excuses for ourselves (“I don't do this often ... I was just having a hard day”). Or we blame other people (“He's just so frustrating to deal with.” “But she started it!”).

But the Mass won't let me get away with that. At this point in the Liturgy, I am challenged to face the honest truth about myself: "that I have greatly sinned." And I am challenged to take responsibility for my actions. In this prayer, I don't blame other people or make excuses for myself. I accept full responsibility for "what I have done and what I have failed to do." I humbly acknowledge that my sins are my own. I have greatly sinned "through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault."

Coming to terms with the truth about ourselves and expressing our sincere sorrow over our failings is something we should always do in our walk with the Lord. But it is absolutely essential if we know we are about to approach the holy presence of God in the Mass.

Preparing to Encounter God

Throughout the Bible, when God manifests his divine presence to his people, it is usually unexpected. They immediately respond with a holy fear and awe, sometimes even throwing themselves on the ground or covering their faces. They feel completely unworthy to stand in God's holy presence (see Genesis 17:3; 28:17; Exodus 3:6; 19:16). Peter, James, and John respond this way when they suddenly see Jesus' glory revealed in the Transfiguration (see Matthew 17:6), and St. John falls to the ground when he unexpectedly sees the glorified Christ in a heavenly vision (Revelation 1:17).

When people were given advance notice of God's coming among them, however, they took time to prepare carefully for this holy encounter. At Mount Sinai, for example, Israel has three days to get ready to meet the Lord, who then comes to them in thunder, lightning, and cloud and speaks the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments—directly to them. In those days of preparation, they are instructed to consecrate themselves to the Lord and to wash

their garments, a gesture symbolizing their desire to cleanse their hearts from sin (see Exodus 19:9-19).

We too are called to prepare ourselves for a sacred encounter with the Lord every time we go to Mass. Yet our meeting with God is more profound than anyone in ancient Israel ever imagined. For in the sacred Liturgy, we draw near not just to a manifestation of God's presence in the form of a cloud, but to the very Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. And we will receive our divine Lord sacramentally within us in Holy Communion.

We truly are not worthy to participate in all this. Indeed, our sinfulness stands in stark contrast to what we are about to do in the Mass. And so the priest invites us to "prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries" by humbly confessing our sins publicly before almighty God and the congregation. Just as the people of Israel needed to wash their garments before approaching the Lord at Sinai, so we need to cleanse our souls from sin before approaching God in the Mass. Indeed, washing is a biblical image for removal of sin: "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! ... Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:2, 7).

"I Confess"

The prayer known as the *Confiteor*—the first word of this prayer in Latin, meaning "I confess"—stands in a long biblical tradition of confessing one's sins. Sometimes this was done in a formal public ceremony of repentance (see Nehemiah 9:2). Other times, it was the spontaneous response of an individual (see Psalms 32:5; 38:18). Confessing one's sins was encouraged in the wisdom books of the Bible (see Proverbs 28:13; Sirach 4:26), and the Old Testament Law even required people to confess certain sins (Leviticus 5:5; Numbers 5:7). Some individuals in the Old Testament, in an act

of national repentance, confessed the sins of all of Israel (see Deuteronomy 9:20; Nehemiah 1:6).

The practice of confessing one's sins continued in the New Testament, which begins with crowds following John the Baptist and confessing their sins in his baptism of repentance (see Matthew 3:6; Mark 1:5). The New Testament elsewhere exhorts Christ's followers to do the same. John teaches that we should confess our sins with confidence that the Lord will forgive us: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). James exhorts us also to confess our sins to one another, asking each other for prayers that we may be freed from our sins: "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

Since confessing sin was a common practice in ancient Israel and in the New Testament, it is not at all surprising that the early Christians confessed their sins before partaking of the Eucharist. This is seen in one of the earliest non-biblical accounts we have about the Eucharist, an early second-century Christian text called the *Didache* (or "Teaching of the Apostles"): "Assemble on the Lord's Day, and break bread and offer the Eucharist; but first make confession of your faults, so that your sacrifice may be a pure one."¹⁸ This early practice described in the *Didache* reflects St. Paul's exhortation to "let a man examine himself" before partaking of the Eucharist, lest he do so in "an unworthy manner" (1 Corinthians 11:27-28).

An Examination of Conscience

In the *Confiteor*, we confess our sins not only "to almighty God," but also "to you my brothers and sisters." The prayer thus follows the exhortation of James to "confess your sins to one another" (James 5:16), and it highlights the social effects of sin. Our sins affect our relationship with God *and* our relationships with each other.

The *Confiteor* also challenges us to consider seriously four areas in which we may have fallen into sin: "In my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do." Consider how these four points serve as an excellent examination of conscience:

First, *in my thoughts*: St. Paul exhorts us to guard our thoughts, keeping them focused on what is good: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8). Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, gives several warnings about ways we can fall into sin in our thoughts. For example, without ever physically harming someone, we can sin through our anger toward others (see Matthew 5:22). Without ever physically touching someone, we can fall into adultery of the heart through our lustful thoughts (see Matthew 5:27-28). Judging others, being anxious about the future, or falling into deep discouragement are other ways our thoughts can lead us into sin (see Matthew 6:25-34; 7:1). Do you struggle with angry, judgmental, or lustful thoughts? Anxious or discouraging thoughts? Vain, jealous, or greedy thoughts? These we need to confess to the Lord. Avoiding sin is not just about our external actions. It's also about staying on top of our thoughts and the desires in our soul.

Second, *in my words*: The letter of James warns us that the tongue is a fire. The spoken word can be used to bless and to curse, and when it is used for evil it causes great turmoil. "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!" (James 3:5). The Bible mentions many ways our speech can be used for harm—for example, in gossip (see 2 Corinthians 12:20; 1 Timothy 5:13; Romans 1:29), slander (Romans 1:30; 1 Timothy 3:11), insult (Matthew 5:22), lying (Colossians 3:9; Wisdom 1:11; Sirach 7:12-13), and boasting (Psalms 5:5; 75:4; 1 Corinthians 5:6; James 4:16). The *Confiteor* challenges us to examine our consciences for these and other sins of speech that we must confess to God.

Third, *in what I have done*: This area encompasses what most people commonly think of as sin—actions that directly hurt other people or our relationship with God. The Ten Commandments can be used as an examination of conscience in this area.

Fourth, *in what I have failed to do*: This is the most challenging part. Not only are we responsible for the selfish, prideful, and evil actions we have committed, but on the Day of Judgment we will also be held accountable for the good we failed to do! As the letter of James teaches, “Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” (James 4:17).

This part of the *Confiteor* reminds us that the Christian path is not merely a *via negativa*—a “negative path” of avoiding sinful thoughts, words, desires, and actions. Christianity is ultimately about the *imitatio Christi*—the imitation of Christ. It is not enough to avoid breaking the rules. We must learn to love like Jesus. We must put on Christ and his virtues. Paul exhorts the Colossians to put on compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, patience—and most of all—love (see Colossians 3:12-15). Jesus does not want us merely to avoid sin; he wants us to grow in his self-giving love.

This is why the sin of the rich young man is so tragic (see Matthew 19:16-24). He is an impressive Jewish man who keeps all the commandments—no small feat, indeed! However, he is unwilling to answer the call of Christ. He cannot let go of his possessions, give to the poor, and follow Jesus. And this is his downfall. Though he might receive an A+ on the first three levels of the *Confiteor*’s examination of conscience (in his thoughts, words, and actions), he fails to pursue the higher good to which Jesus calls him and therefore remains far from the kingdom of heaven. This part of the *Confiteor* at Mass challenges us to ask whether there is something in our lives—even if it is not bad—that, like the possessions of the rich young man, has a hold on our heart and keeps us from following Christ’s call.

My Most Grievous Fault?

Finally, let us consider the three powerful ways we express deep sorrow for our sins in this prayer. First, near the start of the *Confiteor* we don't just say, "I have sinned." We acknowledge how serious our actions are. We say, "I have *greatly* sinned," echoing King David's repentant words to God: "I have sinned greatly in that I have done this thing" (1 Chronicles 21:8).

Second, we strike our breasts when we say the words "through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault." The action of striking the breast is an ancient biblical expression of deep sorrow and contrition (see Nahum 2:7; Luke 18:13). It is what the multitudes at the Cross did after Jesus died. They left Calvary in mourning, "beating their breasts" (Luke 23:48).

Third, we don't simply admit that we have sinned "through my own fault." We repeat it three times: "through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault."

Why the three-fold repetition? Isn't it enough to admit just once that our sin was our own fault? Why say it three times? Think about different kinds of apologies we make to people. When we are at fault over something small, we might simply say "I'm sorry" to the person we have wronged. But if it is a more serious matter and we feel deep sorrow over our actions, we may apologize several times and in varying ways: "I'm so sorry ... I really regret doing that ... Please forgive me."

This line in the Liturgy helps us recognize that sinning against God is no light matter. We must take responsibility for the wrong we have done and the good we should have done but failed to do. Therefore, at Mass, I do not simply offer an apology to God. In the *Confiteor*, I express heartfelt contrition and humbly admit that I have sinned through my fault, my *own* fault, my most grievous fault.

5. “Lord, Have Mercy”

Priest: Lord, have mercy.

People: Lord, have mercy.

Priest: Christ, have mercy.

People: Christ, have mercy.

Priest: Lord, have mercy.

People: Lord, have mercy.

As we prepare ourselves to enter the sacred mysteries of the Liturgy—where we will encounter almighty God himself—we do so in union with the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the angels and saints whom we just invoked in the *Confiteor*. Now, in fear and awe over both the divine presence drawing near and the angels and saints joining us in the Liturgy, we cannot help but ask for God’s mercy. We realize that God himself is coming very close to us. It is natural to feel a bit uncomfortable, unworthy to be in his holy presence. A natural response is to ask God humbly for mercy. As one theologian explains,

All of us together come into his presence, together with angels and saints; and we ask him to show us his mercy and grant us his salvation. It bears repeating, insistence, even a kind of stammering: “Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.”¹⁹

The True Meaning of Mercy

The Scriptures reveal several moving accounts about people crying out for God's mercy. Psalm 51, for example, stands out for its sincerity and vulnerability. In this psalm, David lays bare his heart before the Lord as he comes to terms with the truth of his sinful deeds. He admits his wrongdoing and begs,

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your merciful love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my
transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned,
and done that which is evil in your sight.
(Psalm 51:1-4)

But what does it mean to ask for God's mercy? This plea can be easily misunderstood if we do not grasp clearly what mercy actually is. St. John Paul II once noted that mercy is sometimes mistakenly viewed as establishing "a relationship of inequality" between the one extending mercy and the one receiving it. God is thus seen as the almighty King who merely pardons his wayward subjects.

Not a Children's Game

From this faulty perspective, the plea "Lord have mercy" in the Liturgy might be interpreted as being like the cry for mercy in a children's game called by the same name, "Mercy." In this tournament of strength, two kids interlock hands and push with all their might until

the weaker one's wrist is twisted in pain and he begs his opponent to stop by crying out "Mercy!"

Biblical mercy is not like that. The relationship of mercy is better exemplified by the parable of the Prodigal Son. In this story, the wayward son, suffering in his misery, begins to see the sinfulness of his actions. He humbly repents and returns home to his father. According to St. John Paul II, the father in the story "sees so clearly the good which has been achieved [in his son] thanks to a mysterious radiation of truth and love, that he seems to forget all the evil which the son had committed."²⁰ In this case, the father does not merely pardon his son for his offenses. Rather, he sees the good taking place in his son—his change of heart, his sorrow for his sins, and his noble desire to get his life back on track. And the father rejoices in seeing this good in his son and eagerly welcomes him back.

This reminds me of a time when I was watching two of my children playing in a different room, unaware of my presence. My daughter was four and her younger brother was two at the time. He was playing with his favorite toy in his lap when, suddenly, the older one walked up to him and snatched the toy out of his hands, triumphantly ready to walk away with it.

My son predictably had a look of horror on his face and was about to wail. I was ready to march into the room to issue discipline for this injustice when his sister did something incredible: She put the toy back in his hands and gave him a big hug, saying, "I'm so sorry! Here you are."

I couldn't believe my eyes! A second earlier, I was about to correct my daughter. But now I saw that she already felt bad about what she had done and wanted to set things right. She clearly did not like the fact that she hurt her brother's feelings. She asked for his forgiveness and gave him back his toy. So instead of punishing her, I just wanted to hug her! I saw more than her mistake (she took his toy). Even more, I

saw her heart (she loves her brother, felt bad about hurting him, and sincerely apologized—all on her own initiative!).

Our Heavenly Father views us in a similar way whenever we sin and sincerely repent. He sees not just the legal fact of our sins. He also sees our contrite heart. As the psalmist once said, “A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17). Indeed, a sincerely sorrowful heart is irresistible to God. This is the proper context for understanding mercy. Real mercy is not about a higher power like a judge randomly pardoning criminals in the land. It is about God’s *love* for us, even in the face of our sins. God does not merely want to pardon you like a judge. He wants to forgive you like a friend. He wants to heal you like a physician. He wants to be reunited with you as your beloved.

“Lord, Have Mercy”

While the *Kyrie* is primarily an expression of repentance, it also can be seen as a powerful prayer of petition—a prayer crying out for God’s help in our lives.²¹ Already in the fourth century, for example, the prayer “Lord, have mercy” (*Kyrie eleison* in Greek) was the response of Greek Christians to petitions recited in the Liturgy.²² This reflects the New Testament use of the expression. In the Gospels, many people approach Jesus asking for his mercy in the sense of pleading for healing and help in their lives. For example, two blind men come to Jesus saying, “Have mercy on us, Son of David” (Matthew 9:27; see also 20:30-31). The blind beggar Bartimaeus does the same (see Mark 10:46-48; Luke 18:38-39). Similarly, ten lepers call out to Christ, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us,” and Jesus cures them of their leprosy (Luke 17:13).

Along these lines, we can entrust to the Lord our own sufferings in the *Kyrie*, confident in the Lord who comforts and heals. This includes not just our faults but also our physical ailments, our personal trials, and even our own *spiritual* weaknesses. Do you ever feel like the

lonely, the sick, and the suffering in the Gospels who desperately need God's help? Then come to Jesus at Mass. Bring him whatever burdens or worries overwhelm you, and experience his power supporting you. *Lord, have mercy!*

In times of darkness and uncertainty, come to Jesus at Mass as the blind men came to him two thousand years ago. Ask the Lord to guide you, to help you see, to show you what you should do. *Lord, have mercy!*

When you feel paralyzed by your weakness, unable to change, or unable to overcome your faults and sins, let Jesus meet you in the Mass as he met the paralyzed man, and trust that he can make you rise and walk again. *Lord, have mercy!*

When you feel like you need a new start in life, come to Jesus in the Mass, like the many in the Gospels who entrusted their cares to him and found comfort and strength as they too cried out, "Lord, have mercy!"

Mercy for Others

The Gospels also tell of people coming to Jesus requesting mercy not just for themselves but also for those they love. A mother cries out to Jesus to help her daughter, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon" (Matthew 15:22). A father desperately turns to Jesus on behalf of his son's troubles, saying, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly" (Matthew 17:15).

We, too, can entrust to the Lord those we love every time we pray the *Kyrie* at Mass. Like the mother and father in the Bible, we can say "Have mercy on my friend who just lost his job." "Have mercy on my neighbor who was just diagnosed with cancer." "Have mercy on my son who left the Church." "Have mercy on my daughter who is lonely, unhappy, and lost in life." Thomas Howard offers this beautiful reflection on the power of the *Kyrie*:

In the *Kyrie* ... we may hear the fathomless cry of the whole race of man ascending to heaven from the depths. *Kyrie!* goes up from all widows, and all dispossessed and brutalized children, and from all the maimed, and the prisoners and exiles, and from every sickbed, and indeed from all wounded beasts and, we could believe, from all rivers and seas stained with man's filth and landscapes scarred by his plunder. In the liturgy, somehow, we stand before the Lord *in behalf of* his whole groaning creation.²³

Why Greek?

Many saints have reflected on the significance of the three-fold petition for God's mercy in the Liturgy. Some have viewed this as an invocation of Jesus as our brother, our Redeemer, and our God, while others have seen it as a reference to the Trinity, in the sense that we are asking each of the Divine Persons for mercy (Lord = Father; Christ = Son; Lord = Holy Spirit).

Traditionally, this prayer has been recited in Greek (*Kyrie eleison*). St. Thomas Aquinas noted that Greek was just one of three languages used in the Liturgy; Hebrew (e.g., "Alleluia," "Amen") and Latin (the common liturgical language of the Western Church in his day) were used as well. For Aquinas, these three liturgical languages reflect the three languages used on the sign on Christ's cross (see John 19:19-20). St. Albert the Great offered a different explanation for why the invocation for God's mercy is made in Greek rather than in the Latin used elsewhere in the Liturgy:

The faith came to us Latins from the Greeks; Peter and Paul came to the Latins from the Greeks and from them came salvation for us. And so that we may be mindful that this grace came to us from the Greeks, we preserve even now the very words and syllables with which the divine mercy was first invoked by the people. For we owe this reverence to the fathers, that the traditions which they instituted should be followed also by us.²⁴

Now, having confessed our sins in the *Confiteor* and having entrusted ourselves to God's loving mercy in the *Kyrie*, we are ready to burst out in joyful praise and thanksgiving for all God has done for us in the next amazing prayer of the Liturgy, the *Gloria*.

6. The *Gloria* and Collect

Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to people of good will.

We praise you,
we bless you,
we adore you,
we glorify you,
we give you thanks for your great glory,
Lord God, heavenly King,
O God, almighty Father ...

The next prayer, known as the *Gloria*, is typically sung. But this song comes from no ordinary hymnbook. The opening line of the *Gloria* is taken from the words sung by the angels over the fields of Bethlehem, announcing to the shepherds the good news of Christ's birth: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased" (Luke 2:14).

It is fitting that we sing these joyous words at the beginning of the Sunday Liturgy (except in the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent), for there is a sense in which every Mass makes present the mystery of Christmas once again. As God was made manifest to the world in

the baby Jesus some two thousand years ago, so he is made present sacramentally upon our altars at the consecration in every Mass. We thus prepare ourselves to welcome Jesus by repeating the same words of praise that the angels used to herald Christ's coming in Bethlehem.

A Biblical Mosaic

The rest of the *Gloria* continues to be saturated with words from Sacred Scripture. In fact, one could describe this prayer, which goes back to early Christianity, as a mosaic of biblical titles for God and common biblical expressions of praise. Any Christian in tune with the Scriptures will hear echoes from the Bible at every step of this prayer. Indeed, the Christian who prays the *Gloria* joins the great men and women throughout salvation history—and even the angels and saints in heaven—in their praise of God for who he is and for his magnificent work of salvation.

The prayer follows a Trinitarian pattern, moving from the Father to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. It begins with praise of the Father, who is addressed as “God, almighty Father” and “heavenly King”—two common biblical titles for God. He is often called “God Almighty” (Genesis 17:1; Exodus 6:3) or “Lord Almighty” (Baruch 3:1; 2 Corinthians 6:18) or just simply “the Almighty” (Psalms 68:14; 91:1). In the book of Revelation, the angels and saints in heaven praise him over and over again as the “Lord God Almighty” (Revelation 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 19:6).

Similarly, the *Gloria* praises God as the heavenly King, which also points to God's omnipotence and his providential care for our lives. Throughout Scripture, God is described as King (see Psalms 98:6; 99:4; Isaiah 43:15), and as the King of Israel (Isaiah 44:6), the King of glory (Psalm 24:7-10), and even the great King above all gods (Psalm 95:3). Addressing God as heavenly King in the *Gloria*, we recognize him as the King of Kings and express our acceptance of his reign in our lives, surrendering ourselves completely to him.

A Father First

By addressing the Lord as “almighty” and “heavenly King” in the *Gloria*, we praise him for his omnipotent reign over heaven and earth. Yet as the *Catechism* explains, God’s power must always be seen in the context of his loving fatherhood—which is exactly what we do in the *Gloria*. We address him as “Lord God, heavenly King, O God, almighty *Father*.” We do not stop with a mere mention of God’s power and kingship. We go on to praise him ultimately as our heavenly Father. If God were merely an all-powerful king, we might get the impression that he is a distant deity who arbitrarily wields his authority to do whatever he wants. But God has what the *Catechism* calls a “fatherly omnipotence” (CCC 270). God is a good father who wants what is best for his children. So his power is in perfect harmony with his loving heart, which always seeks what is good for us and provides for all our needs.²⁵

When we recognize just how good our God is—when we see him not just as an all-powerful deity but as our loving Father who freely chooses to share his goodness with us—we cannot help but give him great thanks and praise. Like lovers who tell each other over and over in varying ways “I love you,” we express our love for God, saying, “We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we give you thanks for your great glory.” Most interesting is this line in which we praise God for his glory. This is an expression of pure praise—loving God not just for what he does for us but for who he *is*, for his glorious goodness and love.

A Story in Three Acts

The next part of the *Gloria* tells a story, in a sense—the story of Jesus Christ. Like a three-act play, the *Gloria* sums up the story of Christ’s saving work. It moves from (1) his coming as a child to (2) his redeeming death on the Cross and to (3) his triumphant resurrection and ascension into heaven.

Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son,
Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,
you take away the sins of the world,
 have mercy on us;
you take away the sins of the world,
 receive our prayer;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father,
 have mercy on us.

The “first act” of the *Gloria* is all about the Incarnation—the mystery of the divine Son of God taking on human flesh and becoming a child. We can see this in two titles we give to Jesus in this prayer: “Son of the Father” and the “Only Begotten Son.” These two titles recall various New Testament texts that point to Jesus as the divine Son of God (see, for example, John 5:17-18; 10:30-38; 2 Corinthians 1:19; Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 1:1-2). But most particularly, these titles echo a dramatic line in the prologue of the fourth Gospel that focuses our attention on the Incarnation—the mystery in which the Son of God became man.

John begins his Gospel with a beautiful, poetic reflection on who Jesus really is. Jesus is not just a religious teacher, prophet, or messenger from God. Jesus *is* God himself, the Creator of the universe and the one who will come to save us from our sins. The opening lines of John’s Gospel identify Jesus as the eternal Word who is God, who was with the Father in the beginning and through whom all things were made (see John 1:1-4). At the climax of this reflection, John astonishingly announces that this divine, eternal Word did the most unthinkable thing: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). In other words, John’s Gospel shockingly announces that the God of the universe actually became one of us, taking on human flesh, assuming human nature!

Think about what this means, coming from St. John. John was a disciple, an eyewitness to Christ's life, and the one closest to Jesus (see John 13:23 and 19:26-27). Many years after Jesus' death and resurrection, St. John writes his Gospel and astonishingly announces that this Jesus, his best friend—the one he came to see with his own eyes, hear with his own ears, and touch with his own hands (see 1 John 1:1-5)—is the Eternal Word, the one through whom all things were created, the divine Son of God! St. John goes on to say of Jesus that “we have beheld his glory, glory as of the *only-begotten Son from the Father*” (John 1:14, emphasis added)—which are the very words we echo every time we pray the *Gloria*.

Thus, when we praise Jesus as the “only begotten Son” in the *Gloria*, we recognize him not merely as a teacher, messenger, or prophet sent from God. We use the beautiful theological language of John's Gospel and enter into John's awe and wonder over the mystery of Christ. We join St. John in praising Jesus as the divine Son, the eternal Word who was made flesh and dwelt among us.

The Lamb and the King

The “second act” of the *Gloria* moves the story of Jesus forward to the Cross. We praise Jesus as the Lamb of God, which recalls a dramatic theme in the book of Revelation: the Lamb's triumph over sin and the devil (see Revelation 5:6-14; 12:11; 17:14). Jesus is the Lamb who conquers the devil by offering his life for our sins. As a result of his victory on the Cross, the angels and saints in heaven worship him (see Revelation 5:8, 12-13; 7:9-10; 14:1-3). In addressing Jesus by this title in the *Gloria*, we join that heavenly worship of the Lamb revealed in the book of Revelation.

In this part of the *Gloria* we also address Jesus, saying, “Lamb of God ... you take away the sins of the world.” In this line, we repeat the prophetic words of John the Baptist when he first saw Jesus passing by (see John 1:29).²⁶ These words reveal Jesus as the new

Passover lamb, who offers up his life on the Cross for our sins. Just as the lamb was sacrificed on that first Passover night in Egypt to spare Israel from death, so Jesus, the new Passover lamb, is sacrificed on Calvary to save all humanity from the curse of death caused by sin.

Finally, the “third act” of the *Gloria* focuses on Jesus’ ascension to the Father and his reign over heaven and earth. We praise Jesus for the unique position of authority he now possesses in heaven: “You are seated at the right hand of the Father.” This line recalls Mark’s account of Jesus ascending into heaven, where he “sat down at the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19). In the Bible, the right hand is the position of authority (see Psalm 110:1; Hebrews 1:13). In the *Gloria*, we bear witness to Christ’s reign over heaven and earth and his kingdom, which will have no end (Daniel 7:14). And we humbly ask him to “receive our prayer” and “have mercy on us.”

In summary, notice how the whole mission of Jesus is summed up in this section of the *Gloria*. We move from the Son’s incarnation to his victory on the Cross and his enthronement in heaven. We move from praising Jesus as the “Only Begotten Son” of the Father, who became flesh and dwelt among us, to worshipping him as the “Lamb of God” whose sacrifice takes away the sin of the world, and to praising him in his triumph over sin and death as he is “seated at the right hand of the Father.” Indeed, the entire mystery of Christ can be summed up in the *Gloria*.

From Kyrie to Gloria!

Pius Parsch, a liturgical theologian of the mid-twentieth century, called the *Gloria* “the joyful response to the pleading of the *Kyrie*.”²⁷ In the *Kyrie*, we express our need for salvation and God’s mercy. In the *Gloria*, we joyfully express our gratitude for having received salvation from Christ. In this sense, the *Kyrie* allows us to enter the mystery of Advent as we express our longing for a savior, while the

Gloria expresses the joy of Christmas as we thank God for sending us his Son to redeem us.

We come to the Mass conscious of two things: that we stand greatly in need of redemption, and that we have actually been saved. When I think of the first, I recognize my own insignificance; when I realize the second truth, I perceive my strength; in the first I see my weakness and utter poverty, in the other I see my power and greatness. Let us put into the prayerful *Kyrie* our yearning for salvation. In the joyful *Gloria* let us sing out confidently of our redemption, celebrating thus in every Mass both Advent and Christmas.²⁸

St. Albert the Great made a similar point about the *Gloria* as a response to the *Kyrie*: “It is as if [God] were saying, ‘I will certainly answer your cries and I will send to you in the Sacrament the one whom I sent into the world to your fathers, that you may partake of him, and be drawn out from your evils and be filled with every good.’”²⁹

A Countercultural Prayer

In response to the narrative of Christ’s saving mission, the *Gloria* now praises Jesus with three biblical titles: *the Holy One*, *the Lord*, and *the Most High*.

For you alone are the Holy One,
 you alone are the Lord,
 you alone are the Most High,
 Jesus Christ,
 with the Holy Spirit,
 in the glory of God the Father.
 Amen.

Calling Jesus “the Most High” recalls a biblical title for God as the supreme being over all other “gods” (Genesis 14:18; Psalm 7:17).

Similarly, the Old Testament commonly calls God “the Holy One of Israel,” expressing, on one hand, God’s nature as holy—completely other—and on the other hand, Israel’s unique, intimate relationship with this completely separate, all-holy God (Psalm 71:22; Proverbs 9:10; Isaiah 1:4; Hosea 11:9-11). The New Testament reveals Jesus as the Holy One. Jesus refers to himself with this divine title in Revelation 3:7, and an angel gives him this title in Revelation 16:5. When many disciples leave Jesus over his teaching on the Eucharist, Peter remains faithful to Christ and acknowledges him as “the Holy One” (John 6:69). Even the demons recognize Jesus as “the Holy One” (Mark 1:24, Luke 4:34).

Perhaps most remarkable is the line “you alone are the Lord.” “Lord” (*Kyrios*) in the Bible is a title for God. But in the ancient Roman world, “Lord” was the title given to the emperor. Thus, while calling Jesus “Lord” associated him with God (1 Corinthians 8:6; Philippians 2:11), it was also extremely counter-imperial. The New Testament proclaims that *Jesus*—not Caesar—is Lord! Someone in the ancient Roman world who said that Jesus alone was the Lord would have been seen as an enemy of the Roman Empire. Many early Christians, in fact, died for this belief, refusing to worship the emperor or the Roman gods. This line from the *Gloria* today challenges us to be loyal to Jesus Christ and his commandments above anything else in this world, whether it be a job, possessions, financial security, prestige, or family. “You alone are the Lord.”

The *Gloria* concludes with mention of the Third Person of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is praised “with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father.” Thus, the hymn succinctly culminates with homage to the Holy Trinity.

After the *Gloria*, the priest invites the people to pray a prayer known as the Collect. This prayer gathers the intentions of the people participating in the Mass and concludes the Introductory Rites.