Any practical spirituality must begin with an acknowledgment of our weakness and imperfection in the face of a perfect and all-powerful God. As such, a confession is seen at the beginning of the Mass. After the invocation of the Trinity in the Sign of the Cross and the greeting, the first corporate act of prayer is one of penitence: a confession of our sinfulness. (As an aside: any brief commentary or introduction regarding the Mass of the day should always be made after the greeting, i.e. “The Lord be with you,” not before the Sign of the Cross.) In this article, we will examine the history and structure of the Penitential Act as set out in the Roman Missal, Third Typical Edition. In the next article, we will examine the proper execution of the different options, as well as their biblical foundations.

The Penitential Act, as found presently in the Missal, is something of an innovative structural change in the Mass of Paul VI rooted in the Roman tradition from which it comes. It is a reformulation of two separated parts of the Mass of Pius V where, now, options are given. A stable part of the modern Roman Rite is litany responses: Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison. This element of the Mass is ancient, exhibited clearly in its use of the Greek, and historically extends to even pre-Christian traditions. The response of the people to a litany of prayers became distilled and integrated as the ninefold repetition within the Mass. At different points of history in the Roman Rite, tropes or invocations to this response were also composed, and it is from these tropes that the names for the eighteen traditional Gregorian Mass ordinaries in the Kyriale are derived.

What is now more variable in the modern Penitential Act comes from this history of using tropes with the Kyrie as well as drawing inspiration from the so-called “prayers at the foot of the altar” of the 1570 Missale Romanum. The Confiteor (I Confess) prayer, which may have developed from a medieval monastic tradition of individual confession immediately before Mass, and the antiphonal response of Psalm 85, “Show us, O Lord, your mercy, and grant us your salvation,” are both included as options in the Mass of Paul VI.

A hermeneutical key to understanding this reformulation is the optional quality which the Penitential Act is given. The presider must select an option and carry it out as prescribed. The three options for the Penitential Act do not invite total innovation or omission. To be disciplined in the proper execution of an option makes for good ars celebrandi regarding the Penitential Act.
EASTER VIGIL IN THE HOLY NIGHT
See the Missal and the Ordo for pertinent instructions and suggestions. It is advised to prepare the rite written in full before the celebration of the Mass. Consider preparing a binder with all the pertinent texts for the entirety of the celebration. If catechumens and candidates will be received into the Church at the Easter Vigil, cf. RCIA #566ff. If only catechumens will receive the sacraments of initiation, cf. RCIA #218ff.

SEQUENCE
The Sequence, Victimae Paschali Laudes (Christians to the Paschal Victim) may not be omitted.

RENEWAL OF BAPTISMAL PROMISES
In place of the Creed, the Renewal of Baptismal Promises may be said as in the Easter Vigil, #55.

GLORIA AND CREED
At every Mass, the Gloria and Creed are said.

SPRINKLING RITE
It is appropriate during the Easter Season to celebrate the Sprinkling Rite on Sundays in place of the Penitential Act. Cf. Appendix II.

INDULGENCE
The opportunity to receive a plenary indulgence should be announced and the appropriate prayers should be led after Mass or at another time.

The Penitential Act is said in every Mass, except when it is explicitly omitted, when it is replaced by the Sprinkling Rite at a Sunday Mass, or when the Mass is combined with Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer according to the norms given in the General Instruction for the Liturgy of the Hours. It is explicitly omitted per the rubrics, for example, at the Masses for the Presentation of the Lord, Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord, the Easter Vigil in the Holy Night, and in certain Ritual Masses such as the Conferral of Baptism and of Matrimony.

All three options have an invitation and an “absolution.” In the Third Typical Edition, these are not variable and may not be substituted by “similar words.” The priest “invites the faithful” into this gateway to prayer with the words “Brethren (brothers and sisters), let us acknowledge our sins....” This is followed by “a brief pause,” enough time to allow for a substantive examination of conscience. Then, an option is executed. Following, the priest prays the “absolution,” (so-called not because it functions equally to sacramental absolution in the Rite of Penance, but from the key word the prayer was known by in its Tridentine-counterpart, “absolutionem”) “May Almighty God have mercy on us....”

With the history and structure of the Penitential Act examined, we can investigate the execution of the various options in the next article along with their biblical roots.

Zachary M. Boazman

RESOURCES FROM OUR OFFICE
Beyond Reading
Advanced Training for Proclaimers of the Word of God
Douglas Leal

Assemblies recognize the difference between a lector who simply reads and one who truly proclaims the Word of God. They perk up and take special notice when they sense that the lector has worked to get inside the text, to express the meaning authentically, and to draw them into the story. Douglas Leal has spent decades as a lector, lector trainer, actor, and director. He knows how to coach lectors beyond reading so they can become proclaimers of the Word. The conversational, spirited style of the book recreates the sense of a live training session with the author. In a magazine format, with running text surrounded by boxes that focus on a particular subjects and techniques, a tool from the actor’s toolbox, or an encouraging story from the world of acting, the book presents a wealth of wisdom and practical instruction that can carry a lector far beyond basic training. Chapter by chapter, Leal guides lectors to

- Understand their role as sacred storytellers
- Learn how to study the text closely: understand its style; notice its literary devices; consider its context in the Bible, the liturgical year, and the lectionary; use Scripture resources to arrive at its meaning; practice the text; and pray it
- Work with their voice: articulation, tempo, rhythm, pauses, volume, and inflection
- Develop comfort with nonverbal skills: eye contact, posture, and facial expression
- Choose an intention appropriate to the text and responsive to the needs of the community
- Understanding and expressing the true emotional content of the text
- Staying focused on the text, cultivating authenticity and humility, and seeking feedback
- Overcoming nervousness, mistakes, colds, and other unexpected problems
- Developing a plan for practice and preparation