

Lord, Have Mercy (*Kyrie Eleison*)

The Roman Missal

The Priest:

You were sent to heal the contrite of heart: *Lord, have mercy.* Or: *Kyrie, eleison.*

The people reply: *Lord, have mercy.* Or: *Kyrie, eleison.*

The Priest: You came to call sinners: *Christ, have mercy.* Or: *Christe, eleison.*

The people: *Christ, have mercy.* Or: *Christe, eleison.*

The Priest: You are seated at the right hand of the Father to intercede for us: *Lord, have mercy.* Or: *Kyrie, eleison.*

The people: *Lord, have mercy.* Or: *Kyrie, eleison.*

The absolution by the Priest follows: May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive

us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.

The people reply: Amen.¹

Scripture

The Old Testament

1. “Lord, have mercy on me” (Greek *kyrie eleēson me*) (Psalm 40:5 LXX)
2. “Lord, have mercy on us (Greek *kyrie eleēson hēmas*); we wait for you” (Isa 33:2 LXX)

The Blind Men on the Road from Jericho

As they went out of Jericho... behold, *two blind men sitting by the roadside, when they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out, “Have mercy on us (Greek *eleēson hēmas*), Son of David!”* The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent; but they cried out the more, *“Lord, have mercy on us (Greek *eleēson ... kyrie*), Son of David!”* And Jesus stopped and called them, saying, “What do you want me to do for you?” They said to him, *“Lord (Greek *kyrie*), let our eyes be opened.”* And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they received their sight and followed him. (Matthew 20:29-34)

Tradition

The *Kyrie* in the Greek Liturgy of St. Clement (4th Century)

Clementine Liturgy (4th Century): After each *diaconal intention* the people will respond *Kyrie eleison* [“Lord, have mercy”] as we have already said, and first the children.²

¹ *Roman Missal*, Order of Mass, nos. 6-7.

² *Apostolic Constitutions* 8.6.9. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 2:249, who identifies this document as “the oldest complete text of the Mass, the so-called Clementine Liturgy.”

Pope St. Gregory Defends the Use of the *Kyrie* to the Roman Mass (6th Century)

St. Gregory the Great (6th Century): A person coming here from Sicily has told me that some friends of his... *moved by zeal for the holy Roman Church, were complaining about my arrangements, saying, "How does he manage to restrain the church of Constantinople, if he follows its customs in every way?"* When I asked him: "Which of its customs do we follow?" He replied: "Because you have had... *that the 'Kyrie eleison' should be said...*" I replied to him that we had followed no other church in any of these matters... *As for 'Kyrie eleison', we have neither said it, nor do we say it as it is said by the Greeks, for among the Greeks they all say it in unison, but among us it is said by the clerics, and the congregation replies, and 'Christe eleison' is said just as often, but this is never said among the Greeks. And in daily masses, we do not say other things usually said, but we say only 'Kyrie eleison' and 'Christe eleison', so that we are occupied a little longer in these prayers for pardon....* How, then, have we followed the customs of the Greeks? For we have either *renewed our ancient customs or have established new and useful ones...* For considering what they say about the church of Constantinople, who could doubt that it is subject to the apostolic see.... *And yet, if this or another church has some good feature, I myself am prepared to imitate even my inferiors in what is good.*³

Amalar of Metz and the Medieval Addition of "Tropes" (9th Century)

Amalar: Let the cantor say: "*Kyrie eleison*: Lord Father, have mercy; *Christe eleison*: You who have redeemed us with your blood, have mercy. And again: "*Kyrie eleison*: Lord Holy Spirit, have mercy."⁴

Medieval Roman Mass (9th Century)

Amalar of Metz:

Let the cantor say:

"Kyrie eleison:

Lord Father, have mercy

Christe eleison:

You who have redeemed us
with your blood, have mercy.

And again: "*Kyrie eleison:*

The Missal of St. Pius V (1570; cf. 1962)

Then, joining his hands, he says
alternately with the minister:

Kyrie eleison

Kyrie eleison

Kyrie eleison

Christe eleison

Christe eleison

Christe eleison

Kyrie eleison

Kyrie eleison

³ Gregory the Great, *Letters* 9.26 (October 598 AD). In John R. C. Martyn, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* (3 vols.; Medieval Sources in Translation 40; Toronto, Ont.: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2004), 2:561-563.

⁴ Amalar, *On the Liturgy*, 3.6.2. In Amalar of Metz, *On the Liturgy*, 2:53.

Lord Holy Spirit, have mercy.⁵

*Kyrie eleison.*⁶

Mystery

The *Kyrie* and Our Spiritual Blindness (5th Century)

St. Augustine: Those two blind men sitting by the road cried out as the Lord passed by that he should take pity on them... The Lord was passing by, and they were crying out; the Lord stood still, and they were healed. The Lord “Jesus,” you see, “stopped still, and called them and said, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ They said, ‘That our eyes may be opened’” (Mt 20:32-33). The Lord did it for their faith, he restored their eyesight. If we have already understood the invalid inside us, the deaf person inside, the dead corpse inside, *let us look there too for the blind person inside. The eyes of the mind are closed; Jesus passes by, to get us to cry out... Who are the ones who cry out to Christ, to have their inner blindness dispelled as Christ passes by, that is, as he administers temporal sacraments to us, by which we are reminded to lay hold of eternal realities?*⁷

The *Kyrie* and the Trinity

St. Thomas Aquinas: We pray for mercy, saying: “*Kyrie eleison*,” thrice for *the Person of the Father*, and “*Christe eleison*,” thrice for *the Person of the Son*, and “*Kyrie eleison*,” thrice for *the Person of the Holy Spirit*...⁸

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Why was Pope Gregory the Great criticized regarding the *Kyrie Eleison*? What was his response to accusations of changing the Liturgy?

2. What is the mystical meaning of the *Kyrie Eleison*? Why is it in Greek instead of Latin? Where does it come from in the Bible?

⁵ Amalar, *On the Liturgy*, 3.6.2. In Amalar of Metz, *On the Liturgy*, 2:53.

⁶ *Missal Romanum* (1570), no. 1402.

⁷ Augustine, *Sermon* 88.9, 11. In Saint Augustine, *Sermons III (51-94)* (trans. Edmund Hill, O.P.; The Works of Saint Augustine III/3; Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1991), 424-25, 426-27.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 83, art. 4. In Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5:2512 (adapted).

For Further Reading

1. Joseph Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*. 2 vols.; trans. Francis A. Brunner, C.S.S.R.; repr.; Notre Dame, Ind.: Christian Classics, 2012 [orig. 1951]. 1:333-346.
2. Lawrence J. Johnson, ed. *Worship in the Early Church: An Anthology of Historical Sources*. 4 volumes. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2009.

[A stunning translation and collection of ancient Christian descriptions of and writings about the Liturgy in the first six or seven centuries of the early church. Invaluable resource.]