

Kyrie Eleison

One of the most significant parts of the Introductory Rites of the Mass is the Lord, Have Mercy, sometimes called the *Kyrie, Eleison*. In this part of the Mass, this is part of the Penitential Rite of the Mass, at the beginning of Mass, and it is a very crucial part. So most of us are going to be familiar with it. I know you've heard this a bunch of times if you've been to Mass, but let's look at the Lord, have mercy, the Kyrie, eleison again. And I want to ask ourselves, where's this from in the Bible? Where's it from in tradition? And what is the mystery of what we're saying and doing in this part of the Mass?

If you look at the Roman Missal, the addition of it issued in 2000 by Pope St. John Paul II, there are a few different forms of the Lord, have mercy that can be said. One of the most common ones, however, is this, when the priest will say:

Brethren, let us acknowledge our sins,
and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries¹

And then a brief pause of silence is going to follow, and then the priest or a Deacon or another minister is going to say:

You were sent to heal the contrite of heart. Lord, have mercy.

and then the people reply:

Lord, have mercy.

You came to call sinners. Christ, have mercy.

and the people reply:

Christ, have mercy.

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

You are seated at the right hand of the Father to intercede for us. Lord, have mercy.

and the people reply:

Lord, have mercy.

And then of course the absolution by the priest will follow:

May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen

Now that longer form is a very commonly practiced form, but you can also do a shorter form of the Lord, have mercy, which is just basically the recitation of the three phrases and the response from the people. So the priest can say “Lord, have mercy”, the people reply “Lord, have mercy,” “Christ have mercy”, “Christ have mercy”. “Lord of mercy”, “Lord have mercy”. And notice, and this point is significant, that in the Roman Missal this can be done either in the vernacular, but it can also be done in the sacred language of Greek. Sometimes people will say, “oh, don't do the *Kyrie, Eleison* in Latin”, and I always chuckle if I hear that because *Kyrie, eleison* is not Latin, *Christe, Eleison* is not Latin. *Kyrie, eleison* and *Christe, eleison* are ancient Greek, and we'll talk about why that's the case in just a minute. So in the Roman Missal itself. The *Roman Missal*, Order of Mass 6, we have the Greek terms: *Kyrie eleison, Christe, eleison. Kyrie, eleison.*

Okay, so the question is, where does this come from in Scripture? Where does it come from in tradition? And what is the mystery being revealed to us? Well, the scriptural roots of the *Kyrie Eleison* are pretty pretty easy to discover, if you know Greek especially. So first, the very basic words of this invocation actually come from the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. So a couple hundred years before the time of Christ, the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek, according to tradition, at the behest of King Ptolemy of Egypt, he brought 70 elders to Egypt, and the 70 Jewish elders translated it from Hebrew into Greek. And that's why it went on to be called the 70 or the Septuagint. If you look in that ancient Greek translation of the book of Psalms, you will on

more than one occasion find the expression, "Lord, have mercy" in Greek. For example, in Psalm 40 in the Septuagint, you will find the words "Lord, have mercy on me." In Greek, *kyrie eleēson me*. So, Lord have mercy on me as an individual. Other times you'll find it in the plural, like in Isaiah 33:2, "Lord, have mercy on us." *Kyrie eleēson hēmas*. So this is just an ancient Jewish prayer for mercy, for God to show his mercy, to have compassion on us, and to forgive us for our sins. So the basic elements of that prayer comes from the Old Testament. It's the Jewish roots of the *Kyrie eleison*. But when it comes to the Mass, especially the threefold *Kyrie eleison*, a strong case can be made that the principal source, the principal scriptural source for the Lord, have mercy is actually the famous story of the blind men on the road to Jericho. So, I know you know this story, again, if you've been to Mass regularly, you're familiar with it. But look at it with the liturgy in mind, especially with the triple recitation of it in mind, and with the use of Greek. So let's look at Matthew 20. It says this:

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.² (Matthew 20:29-34)

So notice here, on the level of the history, on the level of what's taking place here, you have these two blind men on the side of the road beside Jericho. They hear that Christ is passing by on the road, on the way out of the city. And so they cry out: "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David"... "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David." And Jesus turns to them and says, "What do you want me to do for you?" And their request says, "let our eyes be opened." In other words, let us be able to

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

see. And Jesus meets their requests, He restores their sight, He heals their blindness, and they get up and they begin to follow him. In other words, they take up the posture of disciples.

Now, why is this significant? Well, before we even get into any of the mystical writers of the Saints about the Mass, you can already see that the biblical roots of the Lord, have mercy, help explain why we say and do what we do at Mass. First and foremost, what they reveal to us is that in the liturgy, during this penitential part of the introductory rites, we are not only the Pharisee, we're not only the tax collector from the "I confess," we're also the blind man on the road to Jericho, and Christ is passing by in the liturgy, Christ is coming into our midst, but the problem is we can't see Him. We are blind to Him. We're blinded above all by our sin. Just as sin darkens our intellect and makes us unable to see the truth, so too it darkens our ability to see Christ, to recognize Him coming into our midst. And so, because we don't want to miss Christ passing by, we take the words of the blind men as our own, not only as our own, but in the Greek itself, we actually use the language that the Gospels were written in, to say *Kyrie, eleison. Christe, eleison. Kyrie, eleison.* Lord have mercy. And not only do we take their words on our lips, guess how many times they said it? They called out to him as Lord three times and so too we say three times: Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

And by means of that prayer for mercy, what we are effectively doing is putting ourselves in the place of the two blind men on the road to Jericho and asking Jesus, "Lord, we want to see you. Open our eyes to your presence." We're about to enter into the sacred mysteries of the Mass. That means there are going to be invisible realities that are hidden from us unless He opens our eyes and helps us to see Him, and to be able to see the meaning and the mystery of the rites and signs and ceremonies. We need to have our sins forgiven and our eyes opened. And how does Jesus respond to this triple petition for mercy? It says:

And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they received their sight and followed him.

Because they can see the path that he's walking on and they can follow behind him, taking up the posture of disciples. Okay, so that's the biblical roots of the Lord,

have mercy. And honestly, you could just stop there and that would be all we need to know about why. This is, at least for me, one of my favorite parts of the Mass, imagining myself in the posture of the blind men on the road to Jericho.

But we do want to ask, well, where is this from in the tradition? When was the *Kyrie Eleison* added to the Mass? Was it always part of the liturgy or did it come into the tradition later? And the answer is, it came later. So in contrast to certain other elements of the Mass, like we saw, the Sign of the Cross was said to be a tradition going back to the Apostles. The *Kyrie Eleison*, the Lord, Have Mercy, makes its first appearance in the Greek-speaking East, perhaps not surprisingly. For example, in the 4th century, we see it attested in a Greek liturgy known as the Clementine Liturgy. It's attributed to St. Clement of Rome, who is actually a successor of St. Peter, although it is in Greek, it's not in Latin. And it's sometimes given the name the Apostolic Constitution. So you'll see different names for this ancient Greek liturgy attributed to St. Clement. But in that liturgy, for example, it says, and I quote:

After each *diaconal intention*...

So the deacon leads this part.

the people will respond *Kyrie eleison* ["Lord, have mercy"] as we have already said, and first the children.³

So it's interesting they actually tended to give the children the first dibs to saying, "Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy." And you'll see some of the writers on the Mass kind of link this with the children who cried out when Jesus entered into Jerusalem. So when Jesus was coming in, it was the children who were the first to recognize them. So in the Mass, they let the kids say, "Lord, have mercy" first. And if you've ever had kids, you know this is very appropriate because they need mercy sometimes as they are growing up. Anyway, that is an aside, but its an interesting point.

³ *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."

So that's in the Greek-speaking East, but apparently, the *Kyrie Eleison*, the Lord, Have Mercy, doesn't migrate over into the Roman liturgy in Latin until sometime in the 6th century. And we know this because one of the popes, Pope St. Gregory the Great, actually has a letter where he describes this and some of the controversy that arose when he brought the *Kyrie Eleison* into the Roman Mass that was in Latin. So here I'm going to be drawing on a collection of sources, extremely valuable. So just real quick, if you're wondering where do I find the letter of St. Gregory the Great about the liturgy, there's a four-volume set called *Worship in the Early Church* that was edited by Lawrence Johnson. This is an invaluable collection of excerpts from the Church Fathers in the first 6-7 centuries of the East and the West that describes the sacraments and the liturgies and the rites of the Church. So this is a wonderful companion because it's an English translation, a contemporary translation of all the various descriptions of the liturgy from the early centuries of the Church. So if you want to get into that in a little more depth, check out *Worship in the Early Church* edited by Lawrence Johnson. So in this letter of Pope St. Gregory the Great that's translated in this collection, we read about the controversy of the Pope adding a new part to the Mass, a new prayer to the Mass, and not just adding something new, but doing it in Greek rather than Latin. In the sixth century, Pope St. Gregory the Great says this:

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...*"

Now, pause here. This is important. So Gregory the Great, when he was a young man, spent a lot of time in Constantinople in the East. So he was actually exposed to the Greek liturgy of Constantinople in addition to what was, by his time, the Latin liturgy of Rome. So one of the things he did was he understood and appreciated the Greek customs, in particular the prayer of *Kyrie eleison*. And evidently, the Sicilians didn't like this. Some of the Sicilians didn't like it, so they said, "Oh, well, look, he's basically infecting the Roman liturgy with these Eastern

elements. He's bringing the customs of Constantinople and putting them into the Roman Mass, and he shouldn't do that." They're complaining about papal changes to the Mass, and so Gregory responds and says this:

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...*

In other words, we don't. It's not identical

... 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.

So pause there. What he's saying is the Greeks just say *Kyrie, eleison. Kyrie, eleison*. They don't say *Christe, eleison*. But in Rome we're doing it *Kyrie, eleison. Christe, eleison. Kyrie, eleison*. And it's not just the cleric saying it, but the people and the clerics alternate with one another, whereas they all just say it in union in the East. So there's some differences, there's some variety, in other words. His defense is I'm not modeling what we do exactly based on the East. However, he continues. He says:

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....

In other words, sometimes they'll interject certain sentences into the *Kyrie Eleison*, and at other times, like daily Masses, they are just going to say *Kyrie, eleison. Christe, eleison. Kyrie, eleison*. Sound familiar? Anyway, keeps going.

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....

To Rome, in other words. Some people were basically saying you're subjecting yourself to Constantinople by adopting an Eastern custom, where you're supposed to be the Supreme Pontiff, and he's saying no, Constantinople is clearly subject to us, but I'm adopting customs that are either ancient that need to be restored or new ones if they're useful. So he says:

*And yet, if this or another church has some good feature, I myself am prepared to imitate even my inferiors in what is good.*⁴

Now, this is a fascinating window into liturgical debates in the 6th century AD, and the early 7th century as well, because what it shows is that the idea of the Mass developing and changing and of elements from the East influencing the West and vice versa, have always been points of contention. But that the way Gregory settles this debate, or the way he responds to the criticisms of the pontiff, of the papacy, for introducing this change, is to both highlight the differences, that there is still variety among the liturgy, but at the end of the day to point out that as the Roman Pontiff, as the Apostolic See of St. Peter, it's within his authority either to restore an ancient custom that's fallen away or to imitate the customs of the Greek East if they are good, if they are useful. And obviously, He's implying that he sees the pronunciation and the praying of Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy, Lord, have mercy in Greek at the beginning of the Roman Mass as a good custom, as a useful custom, as a fitting way to begin the sacred liturgy of the Roman Rite.

So this is just a fascinating window into liturgical debates that many people aren't familiar with if you haven't worked through, you know, these four volumes on liturgy in the early Church or read the letters of Pope St. Gregory the Great. But this one is particularly important because in the Roman tradition, Gregory is often and rightly held up as one of the most influential figures in the development of the Roman liturgy. You'll see, for example, one of the oldest editions of the Mass, of how to say the Mass, called a Sacramentary, is called the Gregorian Sacramentary. And then of course, we'll get into this in another video at a different time. The

⁴ 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.

song, the music used in the Roman Rite is often called Gregorian Chant because, according to tradition, it traces its roots and even some of the compositions back to St. Gregory himself and to the chant, the schola, the choir of cantors that he established in Rome to beautify and glorify God in the Roman liturgy. But here we see an example of liturgical change. And it's important for us, as we're studying the Mass, not just in Scripture, but in tradition, to recognize that Gregory, in the 6th century already, asserts his authority as Pope, as pontiff of the Roman See, to both change the liturgy, restore ancient elements, or add new ones if he, as the official Magisterium of the Church, sees fit to do so.

Okay, one last thing about the tradition that I would highlight, and it's this. you'll notice that in the Roman Missal we have two forms, at least two forms of the *Kyrie Eleison*. You get the longer form which has these interjections:

You were sent to heal the contrite of heart. Lord, have mercy.

You came to call sinners. Christ, have mercy.

You are seated at the right hand of the Father to intercede for us. Lord, have mercy.

Those interjections are really ancient. They're called tropes and they are basically, you know, the Deacon or minister will interject them as a way of adding to the movement and deepening the content of the Lord, have mercy. And I would highlight that it's not just Gregory who is a witness to this in the tradition—show and tell here with my books, sorry—called Amalar of Metz. Amalar of Metz lived in the region we now call France (Gaul) in the 9th century AD. He was a major liturgical expert of his day, and he wrote one of the most famous medieval treatises *On the Liturgy* in the 9th century, a long treatise *On the Liturgy* and the meaning and mysteries of the rites of Mass. He also was a key figure and very influential at the time of Charlemagne, who instituted a number of liturgical reforms in order to give unity to the liturgy in the Holy Roman Empire. So he was a fascinating historical figure, Amalar of Metz. For our purposes, his treatise *On the Liturgy* is significant because it actually shows us that in the Middle Ages, the threefold Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy, along with these tropes, was

part of the Roman tradition. It was part of not just Roman tradition but the Gallican tradition, which was the liturgy of the churches in Gaul in France. So here's a description of the Mass in the 9th century. And this is what Amalar says about the *Kyrie Eleison*:

Let the cantor say: "*Kyrie eleison*:"

Notice it keeps the Greek.

Lord Father, have mercy

Christe eleison:

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

And again: "*Kyrie eleison*:"

Lord Holy Spirit, have mercy⁵

So notice two things there. First, the *Kyrie Eleison* is troped. It has these interjections. Second, it is threefold in its form. And then third, notice it's also Trinitarian in its content. So the first Lord, have mercy is to the Father. The second is to Christ, the Son. And then the third is to the Holy Spirit. So the tropes here have a Trinitarian dimension to them and make this threefold plea for mercy into a kind of Trinitarian prayer at the beginning of Mass. It's very beautiful and very meaningful as showing once again that the Mass isn't just a mystery of the cross, it's the mystery of the Trinity. Now, overtime this is going to develop so that when you get to the 16th century, that's the 9th century, when you get to the 16th century, and actually even before that in the 13th century, in the later Middle Ages, in the early modern period, in the Roman liturgy you're going to find much more common, the development of a ninefold *Kyrie*. So you would actually say the first petition three times, Lord, have mercy, the second petition three times, Christ, have mercy, and then the third petition also three times. So here's an example, once again, from the 16th century *Missale Romanum* of Saint Pius V and the Council of Trent,

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

sometimes called the Tridentine Missal or the Tridentine Mass. This is what it says, you can compare the two:

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

*Kyrie eleison*⁶

So notice the development here and a significant change. First, you have the ninefold repetition here. But then, second, no longer is the *Kyrie eleison* between the clergy and the people, as it was at the time of St. Gregory Great, at the time of the ancient Church. But now it's just the priest and the server saying it to one another, and the people are not saying the *Kyrie Eleison* according to the Missal of Pius V. So this is one of the things you're going to see overtime in the Roman liturgy, that sometimes parts of the Mass that originally belong to the people will then be restricted just to the priest and the server, and then at other times, things that were just restricted to the priest, like the *Confiteor*, are going to be expanded to include the people. And the Church is going to regulate this in the Magisterium, through the authority of the Roman Pontiff, those kinds of changes and adaptations of the liturgy overtime.

But in this case it's worth noting that the *Kyrie Eleison* between the priest and the minister is going to stay that way, officially in the Missal, all the way up to the Missal of 1962 of Pope John XXIII, until that will be changed, it'll be one of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. It's going to restore the threefold *Kyrie*, the medieval *Kyrie* with the tropes and the ancient threefold *Kyrie* that we see reflected in some of earlier liturgies in the Missal of the post-conciliar period, after the

⁶ *Missal Romanum* (1570), no. 1402.

Second Vatican Council, in the Roman Missal as we have it today, where you can either do the simple form, just the three, or you can use the tropes in the recitation of the *Kyrie Eleison*. Whatever form it takes, however, all of those forms are rooted ultimately in the threefold petition of the blind man on the road to Jericho to Jesus, asking him for mercy and to open their eyes.

With regard to that mystical meaning, you can once again, don't take my word for it, but look at the Saints and Doctors of the Church. I'll pick two of the greatest. So already in the 5th century, Augustine gives a beautiful interpretation to the words of the blind man, and he links it with the liturgy. After recounting the story of Jesus and the blind man on the road to Jericho, Augustine says this:

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

So notice, Augustine recognizes, once again, that in the Sacraments we're the blind man asking Christ to open our eyes. And it's not just Christ, but, as St. Thomas Aquinas says in his treatise on the Mass in the *Summa Theologica*, it's every person, all three persons of the Holy Trinity. Thomas gives a beautiful interpretation of the *Kyrie Eleison*, which by his point is a ninefold *Kyrie*, when he says:

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.

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

So notice that even though Thomas has a ninefold *Kyrie*, he recognizes the three parts of this petition as revealing the fact that we are addressing the three persons of the Holy Trinity.

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