

The Power of the *Kyrie*: “Lord Have Mercy”

In the introductory rites, we also recite the *Kyrie eleison* (Greek for “Lord, have mercy”). Why do we ask for God’s mercy three times at the beginning of Mass? First, we must consider how calling on God for His mercy is an ancient biblical practice. Some psalms cry out for God’s mercy in times of suffering (e.g., Ps. 119:77; 123:3). Other psalms ask for God in His mercy to forgive peoples’ sins. For example, after King David has committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband, he eventually humbly admits his guilt. He confesses his horrible actions, repents, and asks God’s forgiveness by pouring his heart out to the Lord, saying, “*Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!*” (Ps. 51:1–2).

In the New Testament, people continue to call on God’s mercy in the person of Jesus Christ. For example, in the Gospels, two blind men confidently approach Jesus begging for healing in their lives, saying, “Have mercy on us, Son of David” (Mt. 9:27; 20:30, 31). Others come to Jesus and ask for His mercy upon their loved ones who are suffering, saying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon” (Mt. 15:22), or “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly” (Mt. 17:15). In each case, when someone calls on His mercy, Jesus responds quickly and performs miraculous deeds in people’s lives.

At the *Kyrie* in the Mass, we stand in this biblical tradition of calling on God’s mercy for our own lives and the lives of others. In reciting the liturgical responses, “Lord have mercy ... Christ have mercy ... Lord have mercy,” we become like David, repenting of our sins and asking for God’s forgiveness. We become like the blind men begging for Christ to heal our own weaknesses and lack of spiritual vision. We become like the fathers in the Gospel, pleading for Jesus to act in the lives of those we love. In saying *Kyrie eleison* (“Lord, have mercy”) at Mass, we humbly entrust our entire lives—all our weaknesses, sins, fears and sufferings—and the lives of those we love, to the merciful heart of Christ. As Catholic author Thomas Howard expressed, this cry for God’s mercy sums up all the pleas of a fallen world. He says,

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 sick-bed, and indeed from all the 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. And beyond the liturgy: When we hear the groaning of creation, when we see an animal suffering, or some child or hear an ambulance pass, we say “*Kyrie eleison!*” as the liturgy has taught us. We are priests, remember, through our Baptism; and one of the tasks of the priest is to intercede for others who don’t or can’t pray for themselves.

This mystical entrusting of all humanity and indeed, all creation, to the infinite mercy of Christ is what we enter into each time we recite the *Kyrie* in the Mass.¹

¹ Sri, E. P. (2004). A Biblical Walk through the Mass. In Scott Hahn and Regis J. Flaherty (Eds.), *Catholic for a Reason III: Scripture and the Mystery of the Mass* (pp. 7–8). Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing.