

## Notes on the Sacred Prayers of the Mass

Notes on the Mass provided with the generous assistance of Rev. Msgr. Joseph G. Celano

### MASS

The worship of God in the Roman Catholic Eucharistic Liturgy (the Mass) is the source and summit of the Christian life where the sacrifice of Christ is offered and received in communion. The worship itself is particularly formulated, with some prayers (Propers) being variable and some prayers (Ordinary) included in each Mass. During the early centuries, these liturgical texts and the language in which they were prayed varied from place to place. However, they were eventually codified and translated into Latin as a way of universalizing the Church's worship. Although vernacular Mass settings have been composed since the liturgical reforms of the Vatican II (mid-20<sup>th</sup> c.), for centuries the Latin prayers of the Ordinary have been, and continue to be, set to music. Due to what might be seen as musical excess, some of the Mass settings by major composers were intended only for concert use and not for liturgical use, but still provide artistic and spiritual transcendence.

The five prayers of the ordinary become the movements of the musical Mass setting: *Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei*.

### KYRIE

(Introduced into Roman Eucharistic Liturgy around the 6th century, but modified in 16th c. and again in 20th c.)

Mercy defines God's relationship to humankind. From the rich Hebrew word *hesed*, used by the Torah and the prophets to describe God's loving-kindness and fidelity, to the innumerable references to God's merciful love in the Christian Scriptures, mercy is the heart of God. The prayer "Lord, have mercy" is a specific scriptural reference to several verses in the New Testament. (For example, Matthew 15:22, where the Canaanite woman cries out to Jesus, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David."). The Greek phrase, *Kyrie eleison* (Lord have mercy), has long been one of the most repeated phrases in the prayer of the Eastern Church.

Borrowed from the Eastern Churches (4th-5th c.) and retained in the original Greek, the *Kyrie* originally appeared as an elaborate litany. It began, not as a penitential litany, but as a litany of praise with a penitential response. In this form, it probably appeared in the Roman liturgy (which was already being prayed in Latin) around the 6th century. By the Middle Ages, it became a lengthy but beautiful litany with multiple invocations, as seen in this example from the Sarum Missal (late 15th c.):

*Lord, King and Father unbegotten, True Essence of the Godhead, have mercy on us.*

*Lord, Fount of light and Creator of all things, have mercy on us.*

*Lord, Thou who hast signed us with the seal of Thine image, have mercy on us.*

*Christ, True God and True Man, have mercy on us.*

*Christ, Rising Sun, through whom are all things, have mercy on us.*

*Christ, Perfection of Wisdom, have mercy on us.*

*Lord, vivifying Spirit and power of life, have mercy on us.*

*Lord, Breath of the Father and the Son, in Whom are all things, have mercy on us.*

*Lord, Purger of sin and Almoner of grace, we beseech Thee abandon us not because of our Sins, O Consoler of the sorrowing soul, have mercy on us.*

At the time of Council of Trent (16th c.), when the church was seeking to unify various liturgies, the *Kyrie* was simplified to three invocations for mercy to each of the three persons of the Holy Trinity: three invocations to the Father, three to the Son, and three to the Holy Spirit. The Roman rite also utilized the variant: *Christe eleison* (Christ have mercy) for the second set of invocations. (This is the typical form of the *Kyrie* for most classically composed Mass settings.) In 1963 the *Kyrie* was further simplified to one invocation directed to each of the three persons of the Trinity.

## **GLORIA**

(Included in Roman Eucharistic Liturgy in 5th century, but used earlier in Morning Prayer.)

The *Gloria* is an ancient hymn of praise to the Trinity, also known as the Greater Doxology. Its opening line is from Luke 2:14, where the angels announce the birth of Christ to the shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to people of goodwill."

The *Gloria* is an example of a private psalm, a hymn composed by individuals in the style of the biblical Psalms of David. These were popular in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Originally composed in Greek around that time, its Latin translation is attributed to Saint Hilary of Poitiers who likely learned it in the East and introduced it to the West in the early 4th century, where it was first used in Morning Prayer and later added to the Eucharistic Liturgy.

The poetry of the hymn uses parallel structure often in threefold iterations, different from the typical couplets of biblical psalms. For example, referring to God the Father: "We praise you, we bless you, we adore you..." and then to Christ, 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." And in the last stanza, the prayer offers three divine attributes to each person of the Trinity: "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." In text and in structure, the *Gloria* honors and affirms the Triune God.

## **CREDO**

(Officially accepted into the Roman Eucharistic Liturgy in the early 11th century.)

The New Testament abounds with statements, both simple and profound, confessing the Church's faith in Christ and his saving work. However, the *Credo* (Creed), as we know it today, was first formulated in 325 AD at the First Council of Nicaea in an effort to definitively answer the Christological controversies (which concerned the nature and person of Christ in relation to God the Father) of those early centuries and to attain consensus among Christians by providing a statement of belief. Based on the Gospels and the letters of the New Testament, the Creed is both a summation and an affirmation of the Christian faith.

The Creed was revised in 381 AD at the Second Ecumenical Council held in Constantinople. The most important difference is the addition of "[I believe] in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver-of-Life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke through the prophets. And in one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the remission of sins, and look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Amen." Here the Creed provides a more comprehensive affirmation, expressing the belief in God who is One and Trinity, the Divine Nature of the Son and His redeeming work, the unity of the Church, and the hope of eternal life in and through Christ.

By the 6th century, western churches added that the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father, but from the Father and the Son (in Latin, *filioque*), guarding the unity of the Trinity. However, to the Eastern Churches, saying that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son seemed to threaten the distinctiveness of the person of the Holy Spirit. This eventually was a significant contributor to the East-West Schism in 1052 which remains unresolved.

In addition to a definitive statement of belief, the imagery and poetry of the text is undeniable. Rich theological constructs, also found in John's Gospel, such as the dualisms ("visible and invisible;" "living and the dead"), and the luminous and poetic description of Christ in relation to the father ("God from God, light from light, true God from true God. Begotten, not made...") highlight the Reign of God, in a beautiful way, for the believer.

### **SANCTUS (or Sanctus-Benedictus)**

(Added to Roman Eucharistic Liturgy during first half of 5th century.)

In the liturgy, just prior to the consecration of the Eucharist, worshippers are invited to unite their voices with the "choir of angels in their unending song of praise" by singing the *Sanctus*. Deriving from praise-filled biblical images, the text is scriptural. The first part, from Isaiah 6:3 ("Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."), describes a vision of the throne of God surrounded by six-winged seraphim. The second part of the prayer is taken from the account of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem in Matthew 21:19 ("Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest Heaven.")

In two specific cases here, biblical words are left untranslated. The word "Hosts" comes from the Hebrew "Sabaoth," meaning "armies." (In the Latin rendering, the Hebrew word "Sabaoth" is retained.) The reference to "YHWH Sabaoth" – literally – "Lord of Armies", was originally a Hebrew name for God, evoking the image of the warrior God who marched with the armies of Israel, insuring victory. Eventually it took on a broader meaning, including the God of heaven's armies (the angels). In the liturgy, the reference to God as "Lord of Hosts" is used to unite the worship of the Church on earth to that of heaven.

The word "Hosanna," an obvious cry of joy by those who greeted Jesus on his entry into Jerusalem, is also left untranslated (in both Latin and English). The meaning of the word is "help" or "save." In the liturgical context, "Hosanna" becomes a joyful cry that recognizes the help we ask for from heaven is near – and is about to descend on the altar at the consecration.

### **AGNUS DEI**

(Introduced into the Roman Rite in the late 7th century.)

Originally from a Syrian chant custom, the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God) litany harkens back to the *Kyrie* and its three invocations for mercy. It accompanies the fraction rite of the Mass, where the consecrated bread is broken, and preserves the symmetry of the Mass by reiterating the cry for mercy and peace.

Lamb of God is a title for Jesus that first appears in the Gospel of John 1:29, where John the Baptist sees Jesus and exclaims, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." While there were many forms of sacrifice in Israel, the sacrifice of a lamb refers directly to the Passover. By pointing Jesus out as the Lamb of God, John identifies Jesus with his redemptive mission. Through the sacrifice Jesus offers, a new covenant is established. Jesus himself becomes the new Passover meal in the Eucharist.