

Learn Your Faith...A Weekly Educational Column.

Kyrie Eleison

We were recently asked why the “Kyrie Eleison” (Lord have mercy) is the only part of the Mass which was never translated from Greek into Latin. The Mass was said in Greek during the first centuries of the Church’s history in Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, i.e. all the major centers of Christianity. Greek was used in these cities not as a special “liturgical language” (as Latin came to be used much later), but because Greek was the language of commerce and education at the time, much as English is in the world’s major centers today. Latin became the language of Christians in Rome around the middle of the third century, but the Kyrie seems not to have become a part of the Mass until the sixth century. Thus, our question is not why the Kyrie was never translated from the original Greek into Latin along with the rest of the Mass, but why it entered the Latin Mass in Greek and remained in Greek.

The phrase Kyrie Eleison has its roots in soil much older than Christianity. It was used in pagan worship of the sun, and it is found in the Old Testament as well. By the fourth century the Kyrie was being used in several of the Eastern Catholic rites such as the Coptic, the Ethiopian, and the West Syrian. These rites were not celebrated in Greek, but they assimilated the Kyrie in Greek as the Roman rite would a century or so later.

In the earliest forms of the Mass the cry Kyrie Eleison was used as the response to what we now call the intercessory prayers, or the “Prayers of the Faithful”, to which we usually respond “Lord, hear our prayer”. These prayers, now offered after the Creed, had their original place at the beginning of the Mass where we now sing or say the Kyrie. Around the year 500 Pope Gelasius undertook a reform of the Mass, and he composed a litany of intercessory prayers which was to be sung by the deacon, and to which the sung response of the people was Kyrie Eleison. In the current structure of our “Prayers of the Faithful” we see a pattern based on that of Gelasius including petitions for the whole Church, the priests and ministers, the faithful departed, and those who were preparing to enter the Church.

Why the Kyrie was never translated is somewhat uncertain. Perhaps, like the Alleluia, (Hebrew for “Praise the Lord”), and the Amen (Greek for “truly, indeed”) it was so common a response that a translation would have sounded strange to the ears of those who had repeated it so often. (Imagine how it would sound to end our prayers with “indeed” in place of “Amen”.) Furthermore, the fact that the Kyrie was sung means that musical settings of it became fixed and familiar, and once fixed and familiar, they are changed only with great difficulty. In the modern form of the Mass we recognize the remnants of this long history of the Kyrie in the second and third forms of the penitential rite in which the deacon says, for example, “You came to heal the contrite”, and the people respond, “Lord have mercy”.

(Sources: Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, vol. II, p. 333-346.)