



# The Meaning of the Mass: Part Eight

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## THE ACT OF PENANCE

During the Middle Ages, different devotional practices and prayers slowly became normal preparation rites for the priest preparing to celebrate Mass. Some of these were done in the sacristy as the priest vested for Mass, and others were prayed during the procession to the altar. Over time, in different places, these practices started to become an actual part of the celebration. There was no uniformity in the content of the prayers and actions, but rather, a similar theological sense to them. There was a clear penitential nature to what was said and done by the priest, and this was seen in the use of the Confiteor in many places. In the Missal of Pius V, promulgated in 1570, these devotional practices were arranged as the Prayers at the Foot of the Altar. They were prayed as the priest entered the sanctuary and approached the altar. These prayers were not retained in this manner after the liturgy was reformed, as called for by the Second Vatican Council. This part of the celebration was simplified and became an action *not* of the priest alone, but rather, of the whole assembly. The prayers at the foot of the altar were transformed into the Penitential Rite.

The theology of this element is somewhat self-explanatory. As we enter into the Mass, we humble ourselves before God. The faithful are called to make a critical self-examination of their lives, and see how they, in the previous week, may not have lived out the Gospel. We pause then to implore God's mercy, and seek to place ourselves once again in harmony with what we are about to celebrate—our salvation. This is intended to help us open our hearts and minds to hear how God is speaking to us, and to be open to the grace that He desires to share with us through the celebration of the Eucharist.

## THE KYRIE ELEISON

*Kyrie Eleison* is Greek and was first used in the Eastern Churches, probably starting in the fourth century. This litany entered the Roman liturgy possibly in the fifth century, and the use of the Greek words was retained. However, depending on the usage of the litany, the words could be translated into Latin. The litany did not always occupy the same location in the liturgy throughout the history of the Mass. At times, the use of this litany had petitions attached to each acclamation, for: the Church, the clergy, the people, and so forth. By the sixth century Pope Gregory the Great speaks of two methods for use of the *Kyrie*: a simple repetition of the phrase *Kyrie*, or connected with text. The use of a threefold *Kyrie* became normal form in the Roman liturgy by the sixth century. When the length of the litany was longer than three, the threefold nature of the *Kyrie/Christe/Kyrie* was maintained, by having the litany always in multiples of three. As mentioned in the eighth-century document *Ordo Romanus Primus*, the length of the *Kyrie* was determined by the presider, who motioned for it to be ended at his discretion; it would end only when a multiple of three was reached and in time was limited to nine. This litany, at times, was omitted from the celebration of Mass well into the Middle Ages for different reasons. In the Missal of Pius V in 1570, the *Kyrie* preceded the singing of the *Gloria*, and that is where it remained after the reform of the liturgy, following the Second Vatican Council.

As the *Kyrie Eleison* is cried out by the people, they acclaim the Lord and implore his mercy. Historically, this litany was directed to Christ and *not* Trinitarian in nature, and this continues to be true today. When used in combination with the Penitential Rite, the invocation is intended to be focused on Christ.