

The Mass

The Parts of the Mass - Part 2

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

This beautiful three-fold plea for God's mercy at Mass appropriately comes immediately after we have taken a moment to remind ourselves of the sins we have committed in violation of God's laws. Coming at the beginning of the Mass, it also parallels our three-fold affirmation of God's holiness that we sing later in the Sanctus, as we glory God singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of Hosts."

The prayer for God's mercy is meant as a spiritual preparation for us, as we are drawn deeper and deeper into the Mass. As we join the angels and saints in praise of God, we slowly move closer and closer to the Divine. This movement toward our perfect God should only cause us to pause and reflect upon our own imperfections and inadequacies. How can we, sinful creatures that we are, dare to come into the presence of perfection? On our own, we cannot. However, God in his infinite mercy and love is willing to forgive us, while granting us access to his very presence.

A study of scripture reveals several moving accounts about individuals calling out for God's mercy. Psalm 51, for example, beautifully expresses sincerity and vulnerability. Psalm 51:1-4a:

"Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me...

Against you, you only, have I sinned,
and done that which is evil in your sight..."

But, what does it mean to ask for God's mercy? This can very easily be misunderstood if we fail to grasp what mercy actually is. Pope Saint John Paul II once remarked that we often mistakenly view mercy as creating "a relationship of inequality" between the one extending mercy and the one receiving it. In that mindset, God is seen as the Almighty King who merely pardons his sinful subjects.

Biblical mercy isn't like that. Rather, the relationship of mercy is best exemplified in the parable of the Prodigal Son. In that parable, the younger sinful son, suffering in his misery, begins to recognize his own sinful choices. He repents and returns to his loving father. The father's reaction isn't simply to pardon his son for his offenses. Instead, he sees the good taking place in his son, the conversion taking place in his heart, and his desire to heal the relationship with his family. The father rejoices in what he has witnessed, and joyfully welcomes his son back into his home.

In many ways, this is how God, our Father, views us when we sin and sincerely repent. He doesn't just focus on the legal fact of our sins. God also sees and acknowledges our contrite heart. The fact is a sincerely sorrowful heart is irresistible to God. This is the proper context for understanding mercy. Mercy isn't to be seen as a higher power randomly pardoning criminals in his kingdom. It is about God's love for us, even in the face of our sins.

The Gospels also offer examples of people approaching Jesus to ask for God's mercy on those they love. We, too, can entrust those we love to the Lord, every time we pray Kyrie eleison (Lord, have mercy) at Mass. Like those biblical figures who approached Jesus in need, we can say, "Have mercy on my children who no longer practice their faith." "Have mercy on my friend who lost his/her job." "Have mercy on my neighbor who was diagnosed with an illness or disease."