

Exploring the Relationship between the Penitential Act and *Kyrie* at Mass

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The relationship at Mass between the Penitential Act and the chant *Kyrie, eleison* is somewhat unique, requiring careful discernment to determine when either or both of these parts are included or omitted. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM), nos. 46, 51-52, 125, and 258, treats the *Kyrie* as separate from the Penitential Act proper (with the exception of form C). GIRM no. 51 describes the Penitential Act as “a formula of general confession” and then states in no. 52:

After the Penitential Act, the *Kyrie, eleison* (*Lord, have mercy*), is always begun, unless it has already been part of the Penitential Act. Since it is a chant by which the faithful acclaim the Lord and implore his mercy, it is usually executed by everyone, that is to say, with the people and the choir or cantor taking part in it.

Each acclamation is usually pronounced twice, though it is not to be excluded that it be repeated several times, by reason of the character of the various languages, as well as of the artistry of the music or of other circumstances. When the *Kyrie* is sung as a part of the Penitential Act, a “trope” precedes each acclamation.

While the GIRM sees the *Kyrie* as separate from the Penitential Act, it also sees a close relationship between these two parts of the Introductory Rites. This is seen most clearly in form C where the *Kyrie* is incorporated into the Penitential Act itself.

Omitting the Penitential Act but Keeping the *Kyrie* as an Option

There are six examples of omitting the Penitential Act but still allowing the *Kyrie* to be used. Two come from the *Ceremonial of Bishops* (CB), the “Reception of the Bishop in his Cathedral Church” (no. 1143) and the “Investiture with the Pallium” (no. 1155). The remaining four examples are in the *Roman Missal*, namely, Ash Wednesday (including any stational processions during Lent), Palm Sunday, the extended form of the Vigil Mass for Pentecost, and the combining of Mass with Morning or Evening Prayer. In all of these examples, the rubrics say more or less the same thing, that the Penitential Act is omitted, “and, if appropriate, the *Kyrie*...”

The two examples from the CB seem to omit the Penitential Act because a reception of various persons takes its place. Indeed, there is a pattern in the Roman liturgy that whenever something additional takes place at the beginning of Mass, then the Penitential Act is omitted. In the CB, however, the *Kyrie* may also be omitted “as circumstances suggest,” perhaps because of the rite of sprinkling, which took place when the Bishop first arrived in the church (no. 1142), or perhaps simply because the reception of persons could take a long time.

Slightly different are the first two examples from the *Missal*. Both Ash Wednesday and Palm Sunday foresee, where possible, a solemn procession from a separate place to the church of celebration. The Ash Wednesday (and Lenten) procession calls for a Litany of the Saints to be chanted, which normally includes a *Kyrie* chant. While the Palm Sunday procession does not require the same Litany, it does prescribe “suitable chants in honor of Christ the King.” It seems, then, that the *Kyrie* becomes optional in these circumstances because of a solemn procession that would normally include a *Kyrie* or related chant. The papal Mass for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in 2014 supports this reasoning. The rubrics for the feast day do not explicitly state that the Penitential Act is omitted, but otherwise imply

that it is, following the logic mentioned above that when something additional takes place at the beginning of Mass, the Penitential Act is omitted. Neither do the rubrics mention anything about the *Kyrie*, but the papal Mass, having omitted the Penitential Act, included a *Kyrie* (again, following the logic that a solemn procession may be concluded with a *Kyrie*).

The example of the Pentecost Vigil Mass has the same rubrics given for the combination of Mass with Morning or Evening Prayer: “After the Psalmody, omitting the Penitential Act, and if appropriate, the *Kyrie*...” (Pentecost Vigil Mass, no. 2; cf. *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours*, nos. 94-95). The Psalms have traditionally been understood in a spiritual sense to prefigure the suffering of Christ and thus they fittingly take the place of the Penitential Act. In this case, the *Kyrie* serves, optionally, as a fitting conclusion to the Psalmody, similar to how the “Christ, hear us” chant sometimes concludes the Litany of the Saints in a Christological key.

Omitting Both the Penitential Act and the *Kyrie*

The clearest example for the omission of both the Penitential Act and the *Kyrie* is when the *Rite for the Blessing and Sprinkling of Water* is used in place of the Penitential Act at the beginning of Mass. Following the sprinkling and absolution prayer, the rubrics immediately prescribe the *Gloria*. In describing a solemn Mass of the Bishop in his Cathedral, the *Ceremonial of Bishops* is even clearer: “After the Penitential Act, the *Kyrie* is said, but not when the sprinkling of holy water has been carried out or the third form of the Penitential Act has been used or the rubrics direct otherwise” (no. 134). The blessing and sprinkling of water is always used at the beginning of the dedication of a church and/or an altar, which explains why the Penitential Act and *Kyrie* are both omitted in those rites. A modified form of the sprinkling rite is used at a funeral Mass when the reception of the body takes place, and again, both the Penitential Act and the *Kyrie* are omitted.

Another example of this is found when Baptism takes place during Sunday Mass. The *Rite of Baptism for Children* states, “If Baptism takes place during Sunday Mass... the Greeting and Penitential Act are omitted” (no. 29.1). This rubric was corrected and clarified in the *Roman Missal, Third Edition’s* Mass “For the Conferral of Baptism,” where the rubrics make no mention of omitting the greeting, but state explicitly that both the Penitential Act and the *Kyrie* are omitted.

Omitting the Penitential Act, but Unclear Rubrics Regarding the *Kyrie*

Finally, there are two instances where the rubrics are somewhat ambiguous. In the *Blessing on the Occasion of the Installation of a New Episcopal or Presidential Chair* and in the *Order of Celebrating Matrimony*, the rubrics state simply that the Penitential Act is omitted with no reference about the *Kyrie*. In this case, the funeral Mass and the *Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling of Water* (*Roman Missal*, Appendix II) can be a guide, as well as the *Rite of Baptism for Children* (as clarified in the *Missal*). Neither service makes mention of the *Kyrie*, but it is clear from their rubrics (and, in the case of the sprinkling rite from no. 134 of the *Ceremonial of Bishops*) that the *Kyrie* is also omitted. Such an omission, especially in the rite of Marriage, may strike one as a bit awkward—at least in the normal experience—to go from the Sign of the Cross and greeting directly to the *Gloria*, but the *Order of Celebrating Matrimony, Second Edition* does include two sample introductions prior to the singing of the *Gloria*. These introductory texts ease the transition from the procession and welcome of the couple. Adding a simple phrase such as, “And so let us sing our joy in the *Gloria*” or something similar would facilitate this even further.

After surveying multiple examples, including no. 134 of the *Ceremonial of Bishops* (“After the Penitential Act, the *Kyrie* is said...”), it seems clear that, while the *Kyrie* is a separate piece from the Penitential Act,

the two are normally tied together in the Ordinary Form of the Roman Rite. Any exceptions to the rule are usually noted, as in CB no. 134, which states that the *Kyrie* does not follow “when the sprinkling of holy water has been carried out or the third form of the Penitential Act has been used or the rubrics direct otherwise.”

Conclusion

The following principles may be gleaned from this brief survey of the Penitential Act and *Kyrie*:

- Normally, when something additional takes place at the beginning of Mass, then the Penitential Act is omitted, including the *Kyrie*, unless the rubrics provide otherwise;
- the *Kyrie* may be used without the Penitential Act in some circumstances, such as the conclusion of a solemn procession (normally only when a *Kyrie* was not included in the processional chant itself);
- Psalmody in the Mass may be concluded by a *Kyrie*; and
- when the *Rite for the Blessing and Sprinkling of Water* is used in place of the Penitential Act at the beginning of Mass, the *Kyrie* is always omitted.

For a thorough history of the *Kyrie*, the article “The Meanings and Functions of *Kyrie eleison*” by Dr. Peter Jeffery is most informative (found in *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer: Trinity, Christology, and Liturgical Theology*, edited by Bryan D. Spinks [Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008], pages 127-194).