Understanding Kyrie Eleison: From Mass to Cultural Plea

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ABSTRACT

"Kyrie eleison," the Greek phrase meaning "Lord, have mercy," forms part of the Roman Mass's introductory rite, immediately following the Act of Penitence (Confiteor). It might seem like a plea for forgiveness amid sinfulness, yet the late-fourth-century account of pilgrim nun Egeria suggests a broader invocation of God's gracious mercy. This paper explores the term's evolution—from its post-Confiteor role in the Mass—to its potential reintroduction as a versatile prayer in multicultural contexts and everyday life. It can express joy, a cry amid calamities and war, poverty, or seek forgiveness. In the era of digital transformation, the paper argues that humanity—across beliefs and cultures—must adapt to rapid change while upholding core ideals: humility before a Higher Power for mercy, and openness to dialogue for sustainable progress. Employing textual analysis, this study clarifies misconceptions, identifies universal elements in "Kyrie eleison" resonant with diverse faith traditions, and proposes a supplicatory understanding that dialogues with other cultures and fosters a resilient, innovative society.

Keywords: Kyrie eleison, Roman ritual, liturgy, multi-faith context, sustainable societies

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between these vocative titles: Lord, have mercy or Panginoon, maawa ka (tagalog)—whether spoken within the liturgy or in the face of life's difficulties—blurs the line between public ritual and private prayer. At its heart, both are translations from the Greek word Kyrie eleison, where eleos which is the root of the word elaion refers to the healing oil of the olive (elaia) tree (Clifford, 2016). Hence, much of the Christian prayer is seen as a supplication for an outpouring of the balm of God's healing love.

On the other hand, in its pre-Christian context, the Kyrie eleison was widely used in civic and pagan ceremonies, often as an acclamation of the benevolence and mercy of the Roman emperor who is called Kyrios or Lord (Baldovin, 1986). Likewise, it functions as an expression of supplication and as such serves as a response to various sets of intercessions (Joncas, 2004).

Some key scriptural texts that voice the plea for God's mercy include: "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Lk 18:13), "Have mercy on me, God" (Ps 51:3), and "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me" (Lk 18:38).

Scripture also describes God's mercy with rich attributes such as greatness, abundance, inexhaustibility, faithfulness, patience, and unconditional generosity, as seen in passages like Ex 34:6; Dt 4:31; 2 Chr 30:9; 2 Sam 24:14; Ps 86:15; Dan 9:9; Jon 4:2; and Lam 3:22.

The Hebrew term associated with mercy is hesed but its Hebrew notion professes a magnitude of meaning. Hesed, which is God's incomprehensible mercy, is tied to the theophany in which God's self is revealed to Moses in Mount Sinai, and when God shows God's self to humanity, what is seen is hesed (Horan, 2017). It is most often translated as "love," "kindness," "loving-kindness," "steadfast love," or "fidelity." However, Davis (2025) clarifies that Divine ḥesed is a gift that Yhwh offers Israel, but one that involves obligations for Israel (Deuteronomy 7:12).

Another Hebrew term that characterizes mercy is rahamim derived from the three-consonant root r-ḥ-m, whose base meaning is "womb" (Davis, 2025). When defined as compassion, rahamim portrays God's love as

instinctive, akin to a mother's care for her child. From this perspective, one can infer that the mercy (rahamim) Yhwh extends to humankind, and likewise humans invitation to extend to one another, is patterned on the life-giving sustenance and protective security a baby receives in its mother's womb (rehem).

One of the earliest extant testimonies to the Eucharistic celebration is found in the First Apology of Saint Justin Martyr (chapters 65 and 67). From this account, it becomes evident that the Eucharist is celebrated in faithful continuity with what has been transmitted through tradition:

Liturgy of the word with readings and preaching, general intercession, the kiss of peace, and the preparation of the bread and wine, with the Eucharistic Prayer which is said standing, and Communion which is also sent to the absent (Metzger, 1997).

Notice how the Kyrie eleison did not yet find its way into the design of the worship of the people. However, as presented by Metzger (1997), Justin connects all the aspects of ecclesial communion to the Christian assembly, namely: prayers, eucharistic communion, sharing, and the organized help for the needy.

In a word, Kyrie eleison was used in the fourth century as a response to the general intercessions (Metzger, 1997). But an account about the introduction of Kyrie eleison into the Roman Mass is presented in the canon 3 of the Council of Vaison (529), which states about the letter of Pope Gregory I to John Syracuse attesting that the Kyrie is said alternatively by the clergy and the people. Then from the tenth century onwards numerous musical settings were documented (Crocker, 2001).

Also, singing trope-texts in various living languages with the Kyrie/Christe eleison refrain which is sung in Greek by the assembly may be a way of unifying diverse ethnic groups within a single worshipping assembly (Joncas, 2004).

Furthermore, the Pope is said to have ordered that a penitential procession be added to the start of Mass to combat an infestation of disease (Byer, 2018). This procession can perhaps be traced back to the liturgical processions in the Christian East which garnered popularity during its time.

The Western Rite (Roman Rite) adapted the same processional to start the Eucharist by singing a litany and having the Kyrie eleison as a response. (Baldovin, 1986).

Egeria, a fourth-century pilgrim, offers a particularly intriguing witness to the liturgical use of the Kyrie eleison in her travel diary. She reports that during a solemn celebration of Vespers, a choir of boys repeatedly sang Kyrie eleison in response to each petition proclaimed by the deacon.

On the basis of her description, this rite can be identified as the lucernarium, a candlelight service associated with the Easter Vigil, in which the gradual unfolding of light is accompanied by extended psalmody and litanic prayer. Baldovin (1986) have highlighted this passage as an early attestation of the litany-like function of Kyrie eleison within the developing Christian evening office.

Alongside these liturgical and devotional interpretations of Kyrie eleison that have developed in the Western tradition over the centuries, another striking feature may be observed. In the course of ordinary life, people also appeal to another human being with the words 'have mercy' (Foley, 2024). If this invocation expresses divine graciousness and emboldens the believer to implore God's favor, how might the very notion of Kyrie eleison also impel one to extend that same care and mercy to others?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, text-based research design to investigate the historico-biblical roots, liturgical-theological depth, spiritual riches, and pastoral implications of the Kyrie eleison. The design is structured around three core components: data, procedure, and limitations.

Data

The primary data consist of textual sources in which Kyrie eleison or the plea for mercy appear. These include:

- Biblical texts (especially New Testament passages where appeals for mercy are addressed to Jesus).
- Early Christian and patristic sources, with particular attention to descriptions of worship and fixed liturgical formulae.
- Official liturgical texts from the Roman Rite (e.g., Missale Romanum, Litany forms).
- Secondary theological and liturgical scholarship, with J. Day's "Reading the Liturgy: An Exploration of Texts in Christian Worship" (2014) serving as the principal methodological reference.

These texts are treated as the "data set" from which patterns of language, use, and meaning of Kyrie eleison are drawn.

Procedure

The research procedure unfolds in three interrelated phases:

1. **Historico-biblical analysis**

- Identify biblical passages and early Christian texts that employ mercy analogous to Kyrie eleison.
- Conduct close reading of these texts, focusing on vocabulary, narrative context, and the theological understanding of mercy they imply.
- Situate Kyrie eleison within this broader historico-biblical horizon to clarify its roots and early Christian reception.

Substantive points on the data set were covered in the introduction of this study.

2. **Liturgical-theological analysis**

- Apply Day's proposal of "re-reading" liturgical texts, examining how Kyrie eleison functions as a text within the liturgical act: its structure, repetition, address, and implied relationship between the praying assembly and God.
- Analyze how its theological nuance shifts according to context (penitential, doxological, intercessory, etc.), and how the same brief formula can carry different emphases in different celebrations.

3. **Spiritual-pastoral analysis**

- Interpret the liturgical and biblical findings in terms of Christian spiritual life and pastoral practice.
- Explore how the invocation Kyrie eleison shapes dispositions such as trust, contrition, gratitude, and compassion, and how it may inform pastoral approaches to preaching, catechesis, and communal prayer.
- Articulate concrete pastoral applications by drawing logical implications from the textual analysis (e.g., how praying "Lord, have mercy" in varied contexts can foster a culture of mercy and mutual forgiveness).

Throughout these phases, the study uses an iterative process: insights from one phase (e.g., liturgical context) inform rereadings in another (e.g., pastoral implications), consistent with Day's view that liturgical texts generate meaning both within and beyond their ritual setting.

Limitations

- **Textual and documentary scope**: The study is limited to texts available in standard critical editions and officially promulgated liturgical books. It does not attempt a comprehensive survey of all historical rites or local customs.
- **Methodological focus**: The research employs textual and theological analysis rather than empirical methods. It does not include ethnographic observation, quantitative surveys of worshippers, or audio-visual analysis of actual celebrations, which could further enrich the findings.
- **Contextual constraints**: Because liturgical texts are inherently performative, analyzing them outside their full ritual, musical, and communal embodiment can only approximate their lived meaning. The study acknowledges that certain dimensions of Kyrie eleison—for example, affective resonance, musical setting, and bodily participation—are only partially accessible through text-focused methods.
- **Theological perspective**: The analysis is carried out within a broadly Catholic theological and liturgical framework. While some ecumenical and comparative insights may be noted, a detailed treatment of non-Catholic traditions and non-Western rites lies beyond the scope of this design.

By explicitly defining its data set, procedural steps, and limitations, this research design seeks to offer a methodologically transparent and theologically grounded account of how Kyrie eleison functions as a locus of biblical memory, liturgical practice, and pastoral meaning.

DISCUSSION

It is said that the origins of the Kyrie are not entirely clear; it may be the remnant of a litany once sung in procession from the gathering church to the place of celebration (Witczak 2004). The introduction of this paper has sought to outline key aspects of the historical development of Kyrie eleison in order to illuminate its authorship and the immediate liturgical context in which it is employed. It has also provided biblical passages in which pleas for mercy are voiced, situating Kyrie eleison within a broader historico-biblical horizon to clarify its roots and its early Christian reception. The remaining aspects of this study will be taken up in the following sections.

Kyrie eleison and its Liturgical-Theological Analysis

Day's (2014) proposed re-reading of liturgical texts offers a helpful hermeneutical lens for a liturgical-theological analysis of Kyrie eleison. The 1969 Missale Romanum of Paul VI presents the Kyrie as an acclamation that both praises the Lord and implores his mercy, structured to be sung or recited alternately immediately following the Confiteor (I confess…).

At the same time, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal allows considerable flexibility in the placement and performance of this acclamation, for instance by placing it after the Confiteor or as a distinct invocation (GIRM 52; Baldovin 1986). Baldovin further underscores the dual character of this ritual expression: it functions both as a penitential supplication and as an acclamatory plea for God's mercy.

In continuing the process of re-reading the Kyrie eleison, another angle to look into is the Litany of the Saints where the threefold "Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy" no longer functions only as a penitential formula but, discloses itself as an intercessory acclamation in which the assembly names its vulnerability and entrusts its needs to God's compassionate regard (Byer 2018). In this light, "Lord, have mercy" emerges as a compact, easily available text that believers can re-appropriate as a spontaneous invocation of blessing in the concrete circumstances of daily life.

Another attempt at re-reading is looking into the Philippine translations of Kyrie eleison such as **Ginoo, kaloy-i kami** (Cebuano), **Panginoon, maawa ka sa amin** (Tagalog), **Ginoo, kalooyan mo kami** (Hiligaynon), **Apo, kaasianna kami** (Ilocano), and **Kagurangnan, kaheraki kami** (Bicolano). These reveal how local churches "write themselves into" the ancient text. These renderings preserve the supplicatory core of Kyrie eleison while inscribing it within particular affective worlds, cultural idioms, and experiences of sin, suffering, and hope. From

Day's perspective, one can assume that such translations are not merely functional equivalents but performances of the text in which its meaning is expanded through concrete histories of pain and confidence in divine mercy, both within and outside the context of the Confiteor.

Ecumenical and interfaith usages further confirm how Kyrie eleison can be re-read as a shared grammar of mercy. In ecumenical worship, the response "Lord, have mercy" to prayers of repentance becomes a performative act of common humility before God, re-scripting the text as a sign of reconciled diversity rather than confessional boundary. Likewise, in Taizé prayer—rooted in an ecumenical monastic community founded by Brother Roger in the 1940s—the repeated singing of Kyrie eleison after each intercession enacts Day's insight that texts form communities even as communities re-shape texts; the invocation becomes a contemplative refrain through which divided Christians and peoples rehearse reconciliation as the heart of mercy.

Placed in dialogue with other religious and cultural appeals to mercy, Kyrie eleison can be re-read as one particular articulation of a more universal human grammar. The Islamic formula Bismillah-ir Rahman-ir-Rahim ("In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate"), learned at the very threshold of a child's religious education, and the FABC's description of the Church in Asia as a "community of needy supplicants" all point to a shared posture of dependence, poverty of spirit, and dialogical humility before God and neighbor. Re-read through Day's lens, these parallels do not relativize the Christian confession but deepen the text's resonance: Kyrie eleison becomes a site where Christian prayer touches the broader human and interfaith longing for mercy and mutual recognition.

The cries of indigenous communities in the face of ecological devastation similarly invite an expanded reading of Kyrie eleison as a plea for integral mercy. When indigenous understandings of well-being embrace the whole tribe, the land, and all living and non-living elements of the ancestral home, and when the Church, through the Pan-Amazonian Synod and Laudato si', calls for a paradigm of integral ecology, Kyrie eleison can be re-heard as a cry for healing not only of individual sinners but of peoples, cultures, and the wounded earth. In Day's terms, the text is thus "opened out" toward the groaning of creation; the ancient acclamation becomes a performative lament and hope for the common home.

Framed in this way, the section shows that a re-reading of Kyrie eleison—along the lines proposed by Juliet Day—moves beyond a narrow, rubric-centered account of its liturgical use. It uncovers the text as a dynamic, relational, and context-sensitive invocation that is continually re-performed in different rites, languages, traditions, and struggles. This explicit hermeneutical foregrounding strengthens its pedagogical potential: in the classroom, Kyrie eleison can be presented not only as a fixed element of the Roman Rite but as a living text through which learners in multicultural and plural contexts explore shared human experiences of guilt, need, reconciliation, and hope in the mercy of the Creator.

Kyrie eleison and its Spirituality

Building on the biblical understanding of mercy as hesed and rahamim, Kyrie eleison can be re-read—following Day's approach—as a spiritual text that both reveals God's redemptive love and shapes concrete patterns of life across cultures. Horan (2017) argues that mercy as hesed is more of the revelation of God to humanity with his redemptive love and as Davis (2025) clarifies, involves an obligation: the mercy to others. In this light, the liturgical cry "Lord, have mercy" is not only an admission of sin but an act of trust in a God whose identity is merciful love, and whose gift of self overflows into the believer's own merciful posture toward the world.

Clifford (2016) deepens this perspective by retrieving the Latin misericordia, literally "to have one's heart (cor) with the poor (miseri)." To be merciful, as enjoined in "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36), is to allow one's heart to be drawn into solidarity with those who suffer. Seen through this lens, Kyrie eleison becomes a school of the heart: in repeatedly voicing this acclamation, the assembly learns to see as God sees and to feel as God feels. Mercy is no longer only something requested from God; it is a habit that is slowly inscribed in those who pray, orienting them toward the poor, the wounded, and the marginalized.

This spirituality of mercy resonates beyond explicitly Christian settings. Across diverse beliefs and cultures, the simple cry for help—"Lord, have mercy," "God, help me," or analogous appeals in other traditions—reveals a

common intuition of radical dependence on a transcendent Source for every moment of existence. Clifford's reflection on God being moved with compassion "from the gut," the seat of deep emotion, evokes the biblical rahamim: a God who looks upon chaos, suffering, and sin and responds not with indifference but with visceral tenderness. In personal spirituality, this awareness can nurture humility, gratitude, and a readiness to entrust even one's most chaotic interior spaces to a God whose first movement is compassionate regard.

From this vantage point, Kyrie eleison within the liturgy can be understood less as a narrow penitential rubric and more as an acknowledgment of God's redemptive love seeking relationship with the beloved, whose authentic fruit is mercy toward others. The acclamation thus functions performatively: it names who God is, forms the praying community in God's image, and sends that community forth as bearers of mercy. Outside the ritual and communal setting, this same dynamic can develop into a personal spirituality that is enriched through encounters with other peoples and cultures—especially where similar cries for mercy, justice, and healing are voiced. In such encounters, believers discover that the spirituality of Kyrie eleison is not confined to the sanctuary; it extends into the shared human work of compassion, solidarity, and care for a wounded world.

Kyrie Eleison and its Pastoral Implication

Mercy, understood in the key of hesed, rahamim, and eleos, speaks of unmerited loving-kindness that springs from the love of a mother or father—"womb-love" that always issues in concrete action. In this perspective, language barriers and even differences in faith expression become secondary. What takes priority is a shared desire: to seek forgiveness for sins committed against the environment, against fellow Christians whose faith has been questioned or doubted, and against indigenous peoples who continue to bear the weight of misconceptions about their rituals, language, and way of life.

Yet how can praying "Lord, have mercy" in varied contexts foster a culture of mercy and mutual forgiveness? In theory, responding to the cry of others—especially those of different religious beliefs—seems straightforward, but in practice it is far more complex. It may appear easy to offer aid to the hungry, the displaced, and the poor, yet it is much more difficult to confront the deeper needs of those displaced by war, of indigenous peoples, and of all those "others" marginalized by belief, culture, or identity, particularly when genuine compassion is obstructed by ignorance, prejudice, or personal bias.

Where there is a true understanding of the supplication Kyrie eleison, there will also be authentic manifestations of mercy. A culture of mercy must be nurtured not only inside formal places of worship but also within "spaces of worship" that can arise anywhere where people share stories, offer prayers, and strengthen one another to face the challenges of daily life. But how can such spaces be created if one faith tradition is regarded as inherently superior to all others?

Drawing on the witness of many ecclesial documents and the example of the late Pope Francis, Buchanan-Gellel (2015) notes that encounters with those of other religious traditions should be marked by mutual respect, reverence, and openness to the truth and grace present in the other. In this light, Kyrie eleison, richly expressed in varied cultural languages, can become a safe and hospitable ground where different faiths and cultures meet. Hornedo (1997) similarly observes that in traditional Philippine society, ritual prayer is understood not only as speaking with God in praise and petition, but also as speaking about God and God's marvelous deeds. Here, "spaces of worship" are born in the communal recognition—personal and social—of the Magnalia Dei, the marvelous works of the Creator One.

The Second Vatican Council names this dynamic "liturgical pluralism" (Amazonian Synod 116), referring to "legitimate variations and adaptations for various groups and peoples" (SC 38). For indigenous communities, the notion of buen vivir—"living well" (Magni 2017; Amazonian Synod 9)—describes an organic way of life in which relationship with the Creator One is expressed through rituals rooted in concrete experience. For instance, a rite of thanksgiving before cutting trees for a new home, acknowledges the Creator's gift and implores mercy and goodness upon the community. Likewise, Christians may gather in a place of worship and, through diverse rituals, songs, dances, and spoken prayer, worship together as a community that embraces multiple cultures and, at times, multiple faith traditions.

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In this context, the Ilocano and Ivatan term Apo—used for grandparent or respected elder of either sex—connotes intimate affection. When an Ivatan says, Mangdaw ta di Apu ta su Kasisien ("Let us ask our Lord for mercy"), the sense is akin to "Let us ask our grandfather for some goodies," echoing the classic understanding of Kyrie eleison as asking for God's favor. Hornedo (1997) further notes that Filipino expressions for God as Redeemer or Savior—tagapagligtas, manunubos, mananakop, maawa ka sa amin, kaawaan mo kami, patawarin mo kami (Tagalog); mangahwad, ichasi mo yamen, pakaabuhen mo u gatus namen (Ivatan); pakaawanem ti basol mi (Ilocano)—often carry the sense of a "debt-payer" who redeems from the burden of sin. In praying Panginoon, maawa ka and its regional equivalents, the faithful express the conviction that God's great redeeming love is freely given, even when undeserved.

Finally, a remarkable trait of Filipino spirituality is its habitual reliance on the awa ng Diyos. In planting and harvesting, in life's successes, in hopes for a better future, in serious illness, and in times of hardship, calamity, or war, the familiar sigh sa awa ng Diyos is almost spontaneously uttered. This gesture of sighing, joined to the supplication, reveals a deep desire to communicate with the God of love. In all these ways, Kyrie eleison becomes more than a liturgical formula: it is a lived pastoral language through which individuals and communities continually entrust themselves, their neighbors, and the whole of creation to the mercy of God.

These pastoral implications, read alongside the earlier liturgical-theological and Day-inspired analysis, show that Kyrie eleison functions as a bridge between worship and life: the same acclamation that forms a merciful community at prayer also sustains concrete practices of compassion, solidarity, and ecological responsibility in daily experience. In classrooms or formation settings, this allows Kyrie eleison to be presented not merely as a fixed element of the Roman Rite but as a shared spiritual language through which learners can name their dependence on God, confront structures of exclusion, and imagine new "spaces of worship" marked by mutual respect and mercy across cultures and faith traditions.

CONCLUSION

The supplication Kyrie eleison, though often treated simply as a brief acclamation, has surfaced several important insights. It has corrected the common misconception that it is purely penitential in character and has recovered a richer understanding of the phrase as an expression of God's gracious and ever-available mercy.

Furthermore, the related biblical and theological notions of hesed, rahamim, and eleos have been outlined as complementary dimensions of mercy. These perspectives reveal mercy as unmerited favor that empowers those who receive it to cry out to the Giver and to ask for concrete blessings, even when they are wholly undeserved.

One may sigh, utter, or sing Kyrie eleison in one's own language and within the nuances of one's belief, yet what ultimately matters is a deep awareness that receiving the mercy of the Creator One moves a person to extend mercy to others—most especially to religious "others." Educators and Formators are therefore called to sustained engagement in discourse and knowledge-building that deepen understanding of the many interwoven elements of faith and culture. The task now is to embrace intercultural and dialogical approaches in conversation, so as to generate new insights, pursue renewed goals and content, and welcome all beings into a shared journey toward the final transformation of all things, when God will "be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).

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