

Why is the Greek "Kyrie" Still used in the Latin Mass?

Here are some thoughts and comments, ideas and resources. They were provided by the wonderful folks on my Defenders of the Catholic Faith Discussion Forum at <http://forums.catholicconvert.com>.

According to [New Advent](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08714a.htm) (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08714a.htm>) it might be to its ancient use:

Kyrie Eleison (Greek for "Lord have mercy"; the Latin transliteration supposes a pronunciation as in Modern Greek) is a very old, even pre-Christian, expression used constantly in all Christian liturgies. Arrian quotes it in the second century: "Invoking God we say Kyrie Eleison" (Diatribæ Epicteti, II, 7). A more obvious precedent for Christian use was the occurrence of the same formula in the Old Testament (Psalm 4:2, 6:3, 9:14, 25:11, 121:3; Isaiah 33:2; Tobit 8:10; etc., in the Septuagint). In these places it seems already to be a quasi-liturgical exclamation. So also in the New Testament the form occurs repeatedly (Matthew 9:27, 20:30, 15:22; Mark 10:47; Luke 16:24, 17:13). The only difference is that all these cases have an accusative after the verb: Kyrie eleison me, or eleison hemas. The liturgical formula is shortened from this."

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"HISTORY

It is not mentioned by the Apostolic Fathers or the Apologists. The first certain example of its use in the liturgy is in that of the eighth book of the "Apostolic Constitutions". Here it is the answer of the people to the various Synaptai (Litanies) chanted by the deacon (Brightman, "Eastern Liturgies", pp. 4 and 5; cf. "Ap. Const.", VIII, vi, 4). That is still its normal use in the Eastern rites. The deacon sings various clauses of a litany, to each of which the people answer, Kyrie Eleison. Of the Greek Fathers of the fourth century, Eusebius, Athanasius, Basil, Cyril of Jerusalem, and the two Gregories [of Nazianzus and Nyssa] do not mention it. But it occurs often in St. John Chrysostom. Its introduction into the Roman Mass has been much discussed. It is certain that the liturgy at Rome was at one time said in Greek (to the end of the second century apparently). It is tempting to look upon our Kyrie Eleison as a surviving fragment from that time. Such, however, does not seem to be the case. Rather the form was borrowed from the East and introduced into the Latin Mass later. The older Latin Fathers, Tertullian, Cyprian, etc., do not mention it. Etheria (Silvia) heard it sung at Jerusalem in the fourth century. It is evidently a strange form to her, and she translates it: "As the deacon says the names of various people (the Intercession) a number of boys stand and answer always, Kyrie Eleison, as we should say, Miserere Domine" (ed. Heræus, Heidelberg, 1908, XXIV, 5, p. 29). The first evidence of its use in the West is in the third canon of the Second Council of Vaison (Vasio in the province of Arles), in 529. From this canon it appears that the form was recently introduced at Rome and in Italy (Milan?): "Since both in the Apostolic See as also in all the provinces of the East and in Italy a sweet and most pious custom has been

introduced that Kyrie Eleison be said with great insistence and compunction, it seems good to us too that this holy custom be introduced at Matins and Mass and Vespers" (cf. Hefele-Leclercq, "Histoires des Conciles", Paris, 1908, pp. 1113-1114; Duchesne, "Origines", p. 183). The council says nothing of Africa or Spain, though it mentions Africa in other canons about liturgical practices (Can. v). It appears to mean that Kyrie Eleison should be sung by the people cum grandi affectu. E. Bishop (in the "Downside Review", 1889) notes that this council represents a Romanizing movement in Gaul."

We might also wonder why we keep the Hebrew "Alleluia" and "Hosanna" and "sabaoth". Even though those are not Latin words, I don't think anyone was confused by them -- any more than an English speaker is confused singing a "Sanctus" or an "Agnus Dei".

There actually was one other retention of Greek in the liturgy that I can think of, and that is the "Agio o Theos" in the Good Friday Liturgy.

"The Liturgy of the Word in the Early Church", Peter Cobb, in THE STUDY OF THE LITURGY, ed. Jones, Wainwright, Yarnold & Bradshaw says that the Kyries "...are the vestigial remains of the litany introduced into the Roman Rite, probably by Pope Gelasius...in imitation of the East, where the form first appeared in the fourth century..." and that this is preserved in a 9th century manuscript containing the *Deprecatio Gelasii*. Dix, in THE SHAPE OF THE LITURGY, says a lot about the Kyries, as litany, but not anything I can find about why they are still retained in the Greek. And everything else I have on the Liturgy is packed. A common ailment.