

Again and Again: How Much Mercy Do I Need?

Prayer

Illumine our hearts, O Master Who lovest mankind, with the pure light of thy divine knowledge, and open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of thy gospel teachings; implant in us also the fear of thy blessed commandments, that trampling down all carnal desires, we may enter upon a spiritual manner of living, both thinking and doing such things as are well-pleasing unto thee. For thou art the illumination of our souls and bodies, O Christ our God, and unto thee we ascribe glory, together with thine unoriginate Father, and thine all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Introduction

“Why are we always repeating ‘Lord, have mercy?’ Haven’t we prayed this petition already? Just how much mercy do I need?” These questions often arise when encountering or reflecting on the litanies of the Divine Liturgy. Today we will look at several of these litanies and see how they build on each other, leading us further and further into the Kingdom.

A *litany* is a series of petitions recited by the deacon or priest with a set response by the faithful, usually “Lord, have mercy.” If a deacon is serving, he will say the petitions from the middle of the *solea*, else the priest will intone them from in front of the altar.

The first litany follows right after the opening doxology, indicating that the various petitions and the Lord’s mercy are integral to his Kingdom.

Lord, have mercy

Let’s begin with the refrain of the litanies. Why do the faithful respond “Lord, have mercy” to almost every petition? I cannot express it better than St Nicholas Cabasilas who notes that all prayers have the elements of doxology, thankfulness, and confession. After discussing the opening doxology (Blessed is the Kingdom...) he writes:

The man who is discontented with his lot in life cannot have peace within him, but only he who is grateful and “in every thing gives thanks” according to the teaching of the blessed Paul. ... He who prays in peace must first have a thankful and confessed soul. And further, the very petition which they make shows them to be in a state of thankfulness and confession. For their petition is for mercy. This is indeed the supplication of the condemned who have no possible defense and no justification to put forward; they make this one last appeal to the judge, counting on obtaining what they ask not because it is just, but because of his love for mankind. These people in fact bear witness to the judge of his great goodness and mercy and to themselves of their own iniquity; the first is an act of gratitude and the second one of confession.

When his Grace, Bishop John visited last, he told us that in Greek, ‘mercy’ sounds like the word for ‘oil’, reminding us of the Good Samaritan who bound up the man’s wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Mercy then is medicine healing our wounds inflicted by the world, the devil, and sin. He also related that in Arabic the words ‘mercy’ and ‘womb’ are related, calling to mind such passages as from the prophet Isaiah, “As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”

Throughout the Bible we see the faithful calling out to God for his mercy; Someone read Ps 122: the Psalmist cries ‘Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt.’ It is for this reason that we the faithful so frequently call out to the Lord for his mercy. Our participation is vital in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. As we go through these litanies we will see that often the priest or deacon addresses the petitions to the faithful, “let us pray” and we complete the prayer, addressing it to the Lord.

Litany of Peace

After the initial proclamation of doxology, the Divine Liturgy starts with the Litany of Peace, the first petitions are: “In peace, let us pray to the Lord,” “For the peace from above and the salvation of our souls, let us pray

to the Lord,” and “For the peace of the whole world, the good estate of the holy churches of God and the union of all men, let us pray to the Lord.”

These introductory petitions give an overview of what we ask for throughout the entire service. This peace from above is given by God alone. Peace with God, with others, and with ourselves is necessary for our salvation. When Christ was born on earth, what did the angels herald? “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill among men.” What did Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount say about the peacemakers? “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God.” Christ himself is our peace as the Apostle writes (Eph 2.13–18)

“For [Christ] himself is our peace...And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

We then move into a series of petitions asking for this in various ways, for our local church and bishop, for our city and countryside and its leaders. We pray for healthful seasons and the abundance of crops along with peaceful times. In this we recognize that all we have comes from God, including sunshine, seasonable rain, and fertile soil. The prophet Joel describes an army of locusts who utterly devour the land.

What the cutting locust left,
the swarming locust has eaten.
What the swarming locust left,
the hopping locust has eaten,
and what the hopping locust left,
the destroying locust has eaten.

And what is the result of this? Not only starvation, but “The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD.” Even our ability to worship the Lord aright is dependent on him. But he is a merciful God, and the prophet counsels the people to return to the Lord in repentance, weeping, for “Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering.”

We pray next for travelers, the sick, suffering, and captives, recalling the Sunday of the Last Judgement where Christ declares how we treat the least one of our brothers or sisters is how we treated him.

Lastly, we pray for ourselves, that by God's grace we are delivered from adversity and necessity, and the deacon addresses God directly in the last two petitions asking that the Lord save and keep us by his grace, and we remember all the saints and especially the most holy Theotokos that we may offer our whole lives to Christ our God.

In these petitions, we are reminded we fight against sin and work for salvation not alone, but by Christ our God. He has redeemed countless others before us. These saints intercede for us, upholding us in our struggle. Of course, the greatest of these is our all-holy, immaculate, most blessed and glorious Lady the Theotokos and we covet her intercessions.

The priest then exclaims that all glory, honor, and worship are due to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages and ages.

Little Litanies

The Divine Liturgy then progresses into a series of prayers and hymns known as the antiphons. Punctuating these (and appearing in other parts of the service) is the Little Litany. It consists of a reminder that we pray in peace "Again and again, in peace, let us pray to the Lord," and the last two petitions of the Litany of Peace.

Litany of Supplication

After the Great Entrance is concluded and the priest places the gifts on the altar, there is another litany, the Litany of Supplication, wherein we pray for our purification before consecrating and partaking of the Divine Gifts.

We ask first for the gifts 'now set forth' that they be acceptable unto the Lord and of benefit to us, for we receive all blessings from the Lord.

The following three petitions are from the Litany of peace: for this holy house and the faithful; our deliverance from affliction; and help us, save us.

The litany continues, elevating and expanding on those petitions. To these petitions we respond, 'Grant this, O Lord' for they speak to our destiny and final salvation; the ultimate realization of peace in our lives.

The next petition asks that the whole day may be perfect, holy, peaceful and sinless. This is possible only through the grace of God and in light of the eighth day which has no evening.

We ask God to grant us an angel of peace to guide us. This calls to mind our guardian angels granted to us in baptism who are assigned to protect us. The deacon then leads us in asking for forgiveness of sins and everything good and profitable for our souls, and for peace in the world.

The final two petitions before invoking the Theotokos ask that we may complete our lives in peace and repentance and that we may have a Christian ending to our life and a good defense before the fearful judgement seat of Christ.

Along my journey into Orthodoxy, I asked our previous priest Fr Philip, "What is this good defense before the fearful judgement seat of Christ?" He pointed me to the repeated refrain "Lord, have mercy" explaining that the Lord himself provides our defense by his mercy. One of the precommunion prayers of St Basil asks that "I may partake of a portion of thy holy things without condemnation,... as a provision for eternal life, *and for a good defense at thy fearful judgement seat*; so that I...with all thine elect, may also receive those undefiled good things which though hast prepared for them that love thee, O Lord, in whom thou art glorified forever. Amen."

The priest then prays that God would accept the offering that was placed upon the altar through his compassion toward us.

Litany Before the Lord's Prayer

The last litany before Holy Communion occurs after the Gifts have been consecrated and is known as the Litany before the Lord's Prayer. The deacon directs the faithful to pray for the precious gifts now spread forth and sanctified, that God (who loves mankind) would receive them on his

heavenly altar as a savor of spiritual sweetness and send down the Holy Spirit upon us in his grace.

What an amazing revelation! The altar that we see is the same as the heavenly altar, on which Christ offered himself as a sweet aroma. We offer God bread and wine, but he gives us himself in Christ and sends down the Holy Spirit to indwell us.

The next few petitions are taken from previous litanies, and the final petition asks for the unity of faith and the communion of the Holy Spirit. This is why communion is reserved for the faithful, for those who have been given the Holy Spirit in baptism, for while it life to us it is death to those who are perishing. Coming to the holy God in an unworthy manner is unwise as the story of Nadab and Abihu offering strange fire in the tabernacle teaches us. Can someone read Leviticus 10.1–3:

And when the two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, each took his fire-pan [censer], they placed fire on it and threw incense on it and offered before the Lord strange fire such as the Lord had not ordered them. And fire came out from the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. And Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the Lord spoke, saying,

‘Among those who are near me

I will be shown holy,
and in the whole congregation

I will be glorified.’ ”

And Aaron was shocked [or silent].

The priest concludes by praying that we may partake worthily and that this Holy Communion be unto the forgiveness of sins, and inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven. He then leads us in the Lord’s prayer with the boldness given from above, a petition of which is “thy kingdom come”.

Litany of Thanksgiving

After we partake of Holy Communion, we pray a short Litany of Thanksgiving wherein we give thanks to the Lord for his provision of himself to us. The priest declares that God himself is our sanctification, for

as the Scriptures teach us, every good gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.

Conclusion

We have seen therefore, as St Nicholas Cabasilas writes,

To beg for God's mercy is to ask for his kingdom, that kingdom which Christ promised to give to those who seek for it, assuring them that all things else of which they have need will be added unto them.

The litanies repeatedly ask for the peace of God, for without it we cannot worship and cannot inherit his Kingdom. Yet God is merciful and provides our salvation and a way to walk therein. We started this talk by asking 'How much mercy do I need?' Well I'll let you ponder that question: "How much mercy do you need?"

Are there any questions? {Questions and maybe answers.}

Thank you, let us close with prayer.

Our Father...

Through the prayers of all our holy fathers and mothers in the faith, O Lord Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy upon us and save us. Amen