

Chapter vii: *Kyrie.*

WE'VE REACHED THE POINT IN THE MASS when the Introit is over and the celebrant has mounted to the altar. In this freeze-frame we see him lift his hands in prayer. At once three things follow which don't have any obvious connection to each other: the Collect for Purity, which is exquisite liturgical poetry; the Summary of the Law, which is exquisite prose; and the *Kyrie eleison*, which is song, and great music too (today the almost lurid magnificence of Gabriel Fauré).

Our notes this chapter will examine these three things, and what it's like to have them fall upon the ear – there's not much for the eye this chapter, because during this freeze-frame the priest stays almost perfectly still, his face toward the East, whence comes the light, and his back to us.

Mass is not merely to be understood, it is also to be considered, and prayed, and felt. It is to resound in mind, in soul, in gut. We ought not only to comprehend but to experience the dramatic progressions of the rite, not just knowing about but also knowing its shape, feeling its structure and rhythm (as if running our hand along a carved frieze), savouring the flavours – flavours contrasting and harmonious, as at masterful banquet. This chapter we want to seize on the artistry and wisdom of a three-fold sequence of poetry, prose, song. Amidst all the details of these notes, I hope we can still trace their unity: for today we experience a single, great, ordered *movement* in this section of the Mass.

The movement is inward. It comes after the grand external ceremonies of the Introit, which stress (as these notes have stressed) how

awesome, objective, and external is our God, so that we approach His solid stone altar, where He is about to reveal Himself as Flesh and Blood, with bows, kneeling, washing, offerings of smoke. There He lies, beyond us, up at the east end, and here we are, in a long procession toward a point beyond ourselves, with the celebrant and his ministers at the head. Now, instantly, these next three steps turn and press *inward*. The Purity collect, Summary and *Kyrie*, poetry, prose and finally song, pierce into us, deeper and deeper. For if there is a God out there waiting for, then, great God, are we like? – and that thought cuts into us.

We approach the great light in the East, and it at once bores into us. That's what happens in this section of the Mass: as a human being climbs up toward God he finds himself perforated by that infinite truth, so deeply that this section of the Mass ends in a sort of climax, or crisis.

The Collect for Purity

THE CELEBRANT HAS BEEN FROZEN in the position shown on page 48 for a long while in the alternative reality of these notes, although it's only a few seconds in the real world. Now, as he utters the words of the Collect for Purity, he swings his arms up into the what is called the *orans* position (*orans* is Latin for *one who prays*): forearms raised toward God, palms facing each other. We Christians learned this harmonious pose from our pagan parents, and it moved us because it delicately suggests awe (hands reared in amazement), supplication (hands begging), love (hands caressing), rhetorical dignity (hand calmly gesturing). Christian priests strike this pose whenever they speak to God for mankind; we'll find them in a different posture when they speak with the congregation. Now the priest is speaking alone, tremendously –

*Almighty God,
unto Whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from Whom no secrets are hid;
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit,*

*that we may perfectly love Thee,
and worthily magnify Thy holy Name;
through Christ our Lord*

– totally serious words, tearing us open before God, or rather acknowledging that we are already torn open.

Here's the dilemma. God exists outside ourselves, so there is no point in congratulating myself on speaking to Him. Practising religion doesn't in itself make a man better, or more secure. God's existence does not in itself quieten our inner lives. On the contrary, as we acknowledge Him we can't help posing ourselves the hard internal question, *Why do we acknowledge Him?* I don't mean, *What good reasons can I think of for being in church;* but: *Why, as a matter of fact, am I here?* For I know the corruption of my mind, and I know how apparently good acts issue out of vile motives, or indeed issue out of God-knows-what fundamental motives; and I know how my low impulses get what they want by blanketing themselves in noble impulses. Do affectation, whimsy, fear of death, wistfulness, fear of life, mere conservatism, tribal prejudice, moral unease, arty pleasure in ritual forms, blank habit, have any place in my mind when I chose to pray? Good God, yes, they do. So have I any genuine desire and love for God? Yes; but the true desire and the low things are so subtly layered that what the foundation is I cannot tell. I can't understand myself well enough. I can't reach or even see to bottom of my *heart, desires, secrets*. But if there is a God, my *heart, desires, secrets* are *open, known, unhidden* to Him; and if I am to love Him, then He must be in the core of me, in the dark centre I cannot master. Even my motion toward Him must be His motion, for if I will to love Him, but cannot master my own will, then before I speak to Him I must ask from Him a miraculous clarity men do not naturally have.

That's to put the problem in a turgid way. But this prayer is not turgid: how calmly it throws the problem onto God! We have to ask God's aid perfectly to love Him – *perfectly!* – for without His help we cannot love Him at all. We even have to ask Him – dropping the temperature a bit – to aid us *worthily* [to] *magnify Thy holy Name;* for although worship is offered my man to God, it would be a sad farce if He

did not first give man a certain clarity of desire. It's only through His gift that we can give Him praise; and the nature of that gift, which this prayer placidly solicits, is for us to be inspired by the Holy Ghost, or in other words to become so full of God that our wishes are more than our wishes, our nature supernatural, our mind partly divine.

I've quoted the whole prayer so we can savour the steady, quiet, rhythm of its music. The beautiful and alarming petition rends our bowels, but its acoustic is gentle as a *haiku*. Astonishing.

This marvel is called the 'Collect for Purity': that is, it's in the form of a collect (see pages 13-14); and it begs God, who knows our psychologies better than we know them, to make us psychologically pure. The supplication is staggeringly extreme, almost desperate. Nonetheless, the priest strikes the elegant *orans* pose, and recites this serene, intense little prayer of Cranmer's.

But who is Cranmer? We haven't said yet.

Thomas Cranmer

WHAT IS OUR MASS at Ascension and St Agnes – I mean, what precisely are these words, and who wrote them? The question is more quickly posed than answered, and we'll be coming back to it, but one answer is that they are the words of the Latin Mass inherited from the Middle Ages, translated and smashed apart by England's Protestant Reformers, now stuck together again, with some of the Reformers' own words still adhering to them. And when we say the words of England's Protestant Reformers, we really mean the words of one man.

In the mid-sixteenth the tyrant Henry VIII, surely the wickedest person ever to rule England – not even excepting King John or Neville Chamberlain – usurped control of the Church of England. He needed a biddable Archbishop of Canterbury, and head-hunted for the purpose a Cambridge don named [Thomas Cranmer](#). (A don is a university professor, and Cambridge is a university, of sorts, built of multi-coloured brick in an immense bog beyond Ely.)

This Cranmer was an odd creature, in most ways a shoddy piece of work: full of snuffling doubts and moral fudges, easily bullied and bounced. He leaned toward Protestant heresy – he had to because, although sworn to priestly celibacy, he had secretly married a German Lutheran. Henry came to value Cranmer because he was so biddable about marrying, divorcing or killing the king’s wives for him, one after another, and also about enforcing on the Church Henry’s religious views, which swung back and forth between Catholicism and heresy. When Henry’s daughter Mary swung back to the Pope, Cranmer swung too, but she burned him alive anyway, about which it is hard not to feel a certain glee.

Like Edward Gibbon, Jefferson and Rousseau, Cranmer was a man of small soul and great prose – that mysterious combination. His theological views wavered and quibbled and blurred (which, to be fair, is how thought is done in Cambridge), and not even Protestants value them. He had none of the hearty empirical inconsistency of a healthy English mind. Hence he drifted helplessly toward radical systems concocted on the Continent (this is another Cambridge trait, and the reason so many Cambridge men found themselves Calvinist regicides in the seventeenth century, and in the twentieth, Soviet spies). He was intellectually not particularly English. Nonetheless, it is for *his* English that we value Cranmer. He wrote the most beautiful prose, or rather liturgical poetry, and he had a literary genius for translating and adapting the ancient Latin liturgies into stately English. In the mid-sixteenth our language was entering onto its golden age: it was nearly impossible to write badly: but no one wrote as melodiously and nobly as did this wretch. Allied with his terrible taste about what things liturgy should say was an ethereal discernment about how it should say them.

We’re going to come across Cranmer’s work a good deal in these notes, so more about him then: no more idle praise of his Collect for Purity, which in any case isn’t his. Cranmer didn’t compose it *ex nihilo*; like most great poetry and great liturgy, it was adapted from earlier drafts by earlier and better men, in this case a prayer of preparation (composed by St Gregory of Canterbury in the eighth century?), recited by priests in the sacristy, begging for sincerity of mind before the rite of sacrifice

began. The Archbishop's genius was in shaping old words to such loveliness.

But alas! his magnificent prose-writing faculty was enslaved to a foreign heresy, and immediately after the triumph of the Collect for Purity, Cranmer's order of service plummeted into a catastrophic addition to the rite of Mass, namely the Decalogue.

Law and anti-Law

PROTESTANTISM HAS A WEAKNESS – indeed, it has more weaknesses than we can count, but one in particular catches our eye at the moment, its weakness for legalism. Protestants tend to fall away from the Christian insight that we must live by love, and lapse back into the Jewish or Pharisaical habit of mind, which understands religion as a huge number of dour and explicit prohibitions.

So it was Cranmer's unhappy notion at this point in the Mass to replace the ancient singing of *Kyrie eleison, Lord have mercy*, with a recitation of the Ten Commandments, or 'Decalogue' ('Ten Laws'). The celebrant would rehearse every *Thou shalt not* in full, however odd (. . . *make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth . . .*). After each prohibition the people would abjectly murmur *Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our heart to keep this law* – a nicely worded phrase (Cranmer was incapable of bad wording), but dreary, especially after its tenth repetition. Moreover, Cranmer got rid of the *Gloria*, which normally comes after the *Kyrie*, and thus gave the whole first part of his Mass a dismal, penitential quality.

But read on, and reflect on the wonderful cunning of Providence when it comes to liturgical manners. From 1688 the rightful royal house of England was overthrown, and has never been restored. The Church of England shamefully went along with this shoddy act – all but for a loyal minority of archbishop, bishops, priests and people who continued to maintain that usurpation is usurpation, however convenient. This loyal minority were known as the Non-Jurors. Non-Jurors were despised and abused by Anglican authority as impractical fogies incapable of keeping

step with the spirit of the age, nostalgic bigots irritatingly clinging to principles which the Church had outgrown, *etcetera, etcetera*. Non-Jurors were thus in some ways like modern Anglo-Catholics, and like Anglo-Catholics they were much given to quarrelling among themselves, and to passionate love of the liturgy (in an age without liturgical taste).

In 1718 some Non-Jurors had the happy idea of transforming Cranmer's Decalogue. Since the Prayer Book rite was weighed down by this legalism, and since Christ had abolished the Mosaic Law, why not replace Moses' negative commands with Christ's positive commands? For certain legalistic Jews had once come to Christ with a fiendishly hard legal question: if a woman has, in obedience to Moses' Law, repeatedly remarried a dead husband's brother, outliving all seven brothers and spouses before dying herself, what are her marital arrangements in the afterlife? (This is much like asking *Who is Henry VIII's wife in Hell?*) This argument was meant to prove that there was no afterlife. Christ cut through this and every legal quibble by advancing a Summary of the whole Law which could not be quibbled with:

thou shalt love . . . God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and . . . Thy neighbour as thyself. . . . On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

Christ's Summary of the Law is that there is no law, if by law we mean a vast number of negative commands. Goodness is not achieved that way. What matters is loving of God, and what follows from that love (*the second* [commandment] *is like unto it*), the love of man.¹ Very well, argued the Non-Jurors, Moses's embargoes on carved fish and milling on Saturdays are less to the point than Christ's two humane commandments, which cover all of life. And the Non-Jurors boldly did away with the former in favour of the latter.

After a century or so the Non-Jurors died out. But their liturgical reforms have remained influential, so that in due course most of the Anglican Communion got rid of Cranmer's Decalogue, replacing it with the Law as summarised, and exploded, by Christ.

¹ Matthew xxii³⁷⁻⁴⁰.

This has the extra advantage of obliterating Cranmer's misuse of the phrase *Lord have mercy*, so that the *Kyries* could be restored.

Every so often when, we hear the Summary of the Law and then the *Kyries* at Mass, we ought to recall the Non-Jurors, who preserved the honour and enriched the liturgy of the Anglican Communion during her most sordid generation. Because of them, at this point in the Mass we are back in unity with the Church throughout the world, bursting into music with the ancient cry *eleison*.

'Kyrie eleison'

SO FAR THIS CHAPTER we've been dealing with Anglican eccentricities. The mediæval Latin rite, which is of course the foundation of all Western Masses, goes straight from Introit to *Kyrie*. So when we hear the Collect for Purity and Summary of the Law at Mass, we should think of them merely as the first two parts of today's three-fold sequence: a unhappy interpolation by Cranmer, and a brilliant counter-interpolation by the Non-Jurors, a peculiarly Anglican preliminary for the great universal cry *Kyrie eleison! Christe eleison! Kyrie eleison!* For with that cry we are at the climax of this part of the service.

What's actually being said here? *Kyrie eleison* is a simple phrase. *Kyrie* meant *Lord*, or *sir*, or *Señor*, and indeed still does: if you go to Greece and are a man you'll be addressed as *kyrie*. *Eleison* means *have mercy*. *Kyrie eleison* could not be simpler; nor could it be more central to all worthwhile faith, Christian or not.

If we have a sane comprehension of divinity, almost our first impulse must be to recoil, aghast at the gap between divine perfection and our imperfection. We can't go on unless we first beg God or the gods to endure our presence; almost the first thing we have to say is something like *Lord, have mercy*. The pagans had such phrases (they sometimes used them to the Emperor as well as to the gods), and the Old Testament is full of them, already pretty such set into the formula *Lord, have mercy*. The phrase is an almost necessary part of every prayer. Indeed, in one of Our Lord's stories, a flamboyantly smug pharisee (a type all-too-familiar in our own society) strides into the Temple and shouts out a television

evangelist's extempore prayer: *Deus gratias ago tibi quia non sum sicut ceteri hominum*, which is to say *Awh Low-ard Gah-awd, I jist wanna thank Thee for makin' me so darned good not like all them gawdless folks*; meanwhile a guilty tax-farmer sidles into the Temple, murmuring over and over *Lord have mercy on me, a rotter*; and it is the tax-farmer, not the televangelist, whose liturgy is acceptable.² You can't go far wrong with a *Kyrie*.

The *Kyrie* in the Catholic Mass, however, is not only simple and necessary, but also complex and profound. What makes it complex are these things, which we'll think about in order: the language, which is, amazingly enough, Greek; the interweaving of the titles *Lord* and *Christ* into numerically elaborate repetitions; and the music composed for singing the *Kyries* (although the [musical setting](#) of Mass is too huge a topic for this chapter, and we'll come to it in the next chapter).

Greek and Christianity.

THE *KYRIE* IS GREEK because Christianity is a Greek religion. It arose in Greek-speaking lands, or at least in lands where Greek was the literary language; its Scriptures were written in Greek; its theology was formulated in terms of Greek philosophy. For a long time Greek seemed so much the Christian tongue that even in Rome Mass was celebrated in Greek. A Latin-speaking girl named Perpetua, whose name crops up in the Canon of the Mass, had visions of paradise on the eve of her martyrdom in March, 203, and she reported that everyone there spoke Greek.³ (I've never had a vision of heaven myself, but if it weren't for Perpetua I'd have imagined that in intervals of shouting *Sanctus* the blessed company chat in faultless Latin.)

We now have to digest a central fact about ourselves, and with it some terminology.

Christianity has two personalities because it grew up in the ancient world, which was politically one under the Emperors, but culturally two.

² Luke xvii⁹⁻¹⁴.

³ *Passio SS. MM. Perpetuæ et Felcitas*, iii-x; English translation by Harris and Gifford (1890); Joyce M. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion* (1997), p.113.

The Mediterranean world had a Western, [Latin](#)-speaking half; and an Eastern, [Greek](#)-speaking half; and Europe still has that division, which has outlasted the destruction of the Empire and twenty centuries of history, most of it disastrous. American intervention in the Balkan Wars of the 1990s was necessary because the Serbs, who are Eastern, Greek Christian Europeans, could not believe that Western Christians would side with Muslims against them.

Not surprisingly, given the frailty of human nature and the squabblesomeness of clergy, the Christian Church long ago divided along this cultural fault-line into a Latin half (which proudly calls itself [Catholic](#), meaning ‘universal’) and a Greek half (which proudly calls itself [Orthodox](#), meaning ‘right-thinking’). History has been cruel to the Eastern Church, and the Orthodox lands – Greece herself, the Balkans, Russia – are far much powerful and populous than the West. Nonetheless, this division is the oldest, bitterest and most tragic of Christianity’s divisions, and also the most pointless, because East and West are not divided in doctrine, and need each other so much, not least because our liturgical traditions have much to learn from each other. The West, too, is orthodox, the Greek East, too, is catholic, and it is tragic that we remain cut off from each other.

We were not always cut off. Soon after the Empire became Christian, a sensible Roman woman named Etheria made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and being a natural travel writer, published her charming journal of the trip. She was intelligently interested in the customs of the Greek Christians, and immensely moved by something she saw in Jerusalem: “As the deacon says the names of various people [at the Intercessions] a number of boys stand and answer always, *Kyrie Eleison*, as we should say, *Miserere Domine*”.⁴ In other words, the phrase *Kyrie eleison* was sung by a boys’ choir in a [litany](#), or sequence of petitions to God with set response, much as we sang *Have mercy upon us* in our processional Litany last week on Advent Sunday (see p. 54 of the Prayer Book).

⁴ Heræus’ edition (Heidelberg, 1908), XXIV, 5, p. 29.

Etheria wasn't the only Latin-speaking Christian impressed by the Greeks' *Kyrie*, and within a century or so we find a Council at Vaison in France decreeing:

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 – because so sweet and pleasing a chant, even though continued day and night without interruption, could never produce disgust or weariness.⁵

In other words, Latin Christianity had adopted the Greek chant of *Kyrie eleison*, and incorporated it not only into every Mass, but into most of its other services. The Westerners made some changes, dropping the petitions themselves (so the *Kyrie* ceased to be a litany), and varying *Kyrie, O Lord, with Christe, O Christ.*

But here is the remarkable thing: they did not translate the chant into their own Latin tongue and sing *Miserere Domine*. They reverently sang it in Greek, as we still do. Why?

Language

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD, and the Word was in Greek. What St John wrote was that in the beginning was the *λογος*, *Logos*, which could be translated *Word*, or *Logic*, or *Reason*, or *Pattern*, or *Intellectual Principle*. No translation does the same work of John's original word, and the Church was at first reluctant to translate the New Testament into Latin. Much later on, she was wisely reluctant to allow translations into vernacular, for by then, after eleven centuries of exclusive use, the Latin (or 'Vulgate') Bible had become *the* Bible of the Western Church: every word of it had dug into the Western mind. With the age of vernacular translations, a certain unity is lost to our Church and civilisation.

For the truism that all languages are equal is not so when it comes to the family of the Church. We have a family history which makes some

⁵ Second Council of Vasio (Vasio, near Arles), held in A.D. 529, can. ii; Hefele-Leclercq, *Histoires des Conciles* (Paris, 1908), pp. 1113-1114; Duchesne, *Origines*, p. 183.

languages matter more than others, and some languages more naturally native to the Gospel. Vernaculars such as English shouldn't forget that they're dependent on ancient languages. Even excellent Bible translations, such as the Authorised Version, should feel a certain humility toward the original Hebrew and Greek texts and, even more, to the Vulgate, which is the Bible of universal Christendom. Even excellent vernacular liturgies, such as ours, ought to defer to the Latin Mass, of which they are echoes. That's partly why our choir often sings in Latin, and why even the English 'Propers' are given their original and true Latin titles in our bulletin.

As far as we know, the first thing ever written about Christ was written by Pontius Pilate, not a friendly commentator but a witness and a wit. He archly wrote THIS IS JESUS OF NAZARETH KING OF THE JEWS on a placard, and had it hammered to His scaffold. This writing was not of course in English, but in the local *patôis*, 'Hebrew' (or Aramaic, which is dog-Hebrew); Greek; and Latin. The Church takes seriously those three languages above all others. The words of Mass are traditionally Latin, but there are many Hebrew terms in it (*amen, hosanna, cherubim, alleluia*) which are not translated, and the *Kyrie* is carefully left untranslated as well. Thus at Mass we declare over the same sacrificed Body the same statement in the same tongues – THIS IS THE KING! – using the words of Hebrew, in which the Gospel was first spoken, and Greek, in which it was first written, and Latin, in which it conquered the world.

The Latin West has enough humility toward the East to treasure the *Kyrie eleison*, that Greek slither amidst all the Mass' Latin. Loving reverence is how languages work in the family of the Church. Using their very words, we are in perfect unity, even at the level of sound, with the people who first cried *Amen!* to God's revelation, the Hebrews; and to those who first acknowledged Jesus of Nazareth as *Kyrie*; and to the Latin Church, universal throughout the world, incomparably the greatest and oldest of human institutions, which cries *Sanctus! Sanctus! Sanctus!* forever on earth, and will not cease that cry when time is over.

Ninefoldness

ONCE THE LATINs HAD ADOPTED the *Kyrie* from the Greeks, their manner of reciting it was for the choir to sign *Kyrie elesion* three times, then *Christe eleison* three times, then *Kyrie elesion* three times, then *Christe eleison* three times, and so on until the bishop (it was usually a bishop in those days) thought that he'd had sufficiency and signalled the choirmaster to stop. You'll remember this also used to be the custom with Introit psalm for the choir to kick off . . . and the celebrant, when he had reached the altar and thought it had gone on long enough, would nod for a halt. But this uncertainty wasn't much fun for the choir, and anyway the impulse of the Mass is towards perfect and explicit order, not spontaneous individualism by the celebrant. So it became a fixed principle that the *Kyrie* is always exactly [ninefold](#), said alternatively by priest and people at said Masses, recited by the choir at sung Masses.

Why ninefold?

Well, in the first place, it has to do with the Holy Trinity: we can think of the first three *Kyrie eleisons* as being addressed to the Father, the three *Christe eleisons* to the Son, the last three *Kyries* to the Spirit.

And ninefoldness makes for an aesthetically delightful pattern of three threes, creating a fine weaving motion at Low Mass: the celebrant begins one series of three, the people the second, the priest the third, the people saying *Kyrie*, *Christe*, *Christe*, *Kyrie*, the priest *Kyrie*, *Kyrie*, *Christe*, *Kyrie*, *Kyrie*: this is the sort of dance-like movement that raises the words of the Mass to poetry and the devoted ear to rhapsody.

The ninefold *Kyrie* and the nine choirs

ALSO THERE'S THIS REASON for the nine verses (not at all a modern reason).

The voice of my beloved!
behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains,
skipping upon the hills.
My beloved is like a roe or a young hart:
behold, he standeth behind our wall,

*he looketh forth at the windows, shewing himself through the lattice.
My beloved spake, and said unto me,
Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.
For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;
The flowers appear on the earth. . . .*

Here's the same poetry in the Latin of my very great liking, and of (after all) very great authority:

*vox dilecti mei :
ecce iste venit saliens in montibus
transiliens colles*

The verses are from the Song of Solomon (ii⁸⁻¹³), a mellow, luscious love poem of great beauty and antiquity which the Church reads as the love-song of Christ and Man, each rapturously desiring the other: Christ the divine Groom, and humanity glorified as the Church, worthy to be Christ's Bride and at last entirely desirable. – When reading bedtime stories of dragon-hunts and enchantment to children, I find that most children are wise enough to listen and wonder, then sleep and dream, awaking saner than ever the next day. Only peevish brats keep whining *But Uncle Wichid, Uncle Wichid, ith it all twue, Uncle Wichid?* Most modern Biblical commentators are of the peevish persuasion, and make a great fuss of pointing out that when the Song was first composed by Solomon (or whoever it was; no, little brats, we know it wasn't *weally weally* King Solomon), the poet wasn't thinking of Christ, but of erotic love. Yes, we know that, too. That is not how poems work. There is a truth or sense to them so solid that it doesn't come to pieces when you move it from one great topic to another. *Because* the Song of Solomon is so vividly about the love of man and woman, it is strong enough to work as an image of the love between Christ and humanity.

The Church is wise, then (*But ith it all twue?* – hush, little Biblical critic) to apply these erotic words to her own great love. She sees the ascended Christ as the Lover who *standeth behind our wall*, [and] *looketh forth at the windows, shewing himself through the lattice: stat post parietem nostrum despiciens per fenestras prospiciens per cancellos*. These verses, then, are about Christ's Ascension, about His soaring up to the heights of heaven: *ecce iste venit saliens in montibus, transiliens*

colles : behold, [my beloved] cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills. As you probably know, the Church pictures nine bright orders of angel, nine ‘choirs’, each glorying on one of the nine levels of paradise; and there’s a fine old tradition that as He mounted in from earth, Christ paused for a day’s triumph with each of those blessed tribes:⁶ a Man still, going where man naturally can never go, leaping up those unimaginable mountains of being, skipping over those deathless hills where flesh had never been, and where we now can hope to go. *For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone: The flowers appear on the earth*

Brats ask *How d’we know dat’s twue?* Wise children are jubilant at this rumour of a splendour (after all) beyond human understanding. One way for wise children like us to listen to the nine *Kyries* – especially in this church, with its epic painting of Christ’s Ascension above the altar, and the red-hot wings of the seraphim, in the highest of the nine spheres – is to hear them as a cry for mercy with is also an exultation, a hymn of ascending. For the Lord on Whom we sing for mercy is also a Man, like us, and He is ascended. Those shouts for mercy aren’t abject: we know why mercy will be granted us: for with each of them Christ pierces another circle of infinity; until with the ninth cry He reaches highest heaven and all creation bursts into the *Gloria in excelsis Deo!* (except in wintry Advent, when the *Gloria* doesn’t happen).

Modern progress: chucking the ninefold *Kyrie*.

THE FATHERS OF THE COUNCIL of Vaison in 529, musing upon the ninefold choirs and the huge hopes of the Catholic Faith, called the *Kyrie so sweet and pleasing a chant, [that] even though continued day and night without interruption, [it] could never produce disgust or weariness.* They wouldn’t have said that if they’d foreseen the Hippies, who didn’t much consider Archangels and burning Seraphim, and for whom disgust and weariness were second nature. I need hardly tell you,

⁶ Durandus, “Rationale”, IV, xii; Adrian Fortescue “*Kyrie Eleison*”, in the on-line *Catholic Encyclopædia*.

because you'll have guessed, that the peevish Hippie reformers of the 1960s, who despised us (dear God, how flatly and calmly they despised us parochial worshippers) concluded that we were too stupid and restless to keep managing a ninefold *Kyrie* in Greek. They fobbed us off a bleak wee set of versicles and responses: the priest says, or chants to a bastardised ballad tune (choral singing is officially discouraged, at least in the Roman Communion) *Lord, have mercy*, the people parrot it; the priest switches to *Christ, have mercy*, the people parrot it; the priest yawns *Lord . . .*, and the people sigh that too; and so the half-hearted business of the 'sixfold' *Kyrie* is over.

Nietzsche said we always get history twice, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. We had the Reformation, which at least was a fully-realised heresy and an open attack on the Faith, quite as formidable as Arianism or Islam. Before that sulphurous blast the Anglican Communion lost half its inheritance as a branch of the Catholic Church, including prayers fundamental and natural as the ninefold *Kyrie*. That was tragedy. The triumph of the Liturgical Movement (so pious when it was young, so rabid in middle age) is farce, since we stand to half-lose our inheritance all over again, this time for no particular reason at all. Of liturgical reformers the ominous Rose – if you remember her from last chapter – remarks: *They modernised . . . They fell victim to the municipal line of thought which goes: "That's beautiful. It must be old. We'd better knock it down."*⁷ The ninefold *Kyrie* is a classic example of how the municipal mind works.

GREEKS, NON-JURORS, St Perpetua, angelic choirs, and other blasts of local colour aside, what we've been studying this chapter is the Mass' thrust inward at us. When in the Collect for Purity, we ask God to make us mean what we pray, we quail to think of how we generally pray. When in the Summary of the

⁷ Alice Thomas Ellis, *The Sin Eater*, pp. 95-96.

Law we hear Christ invoke the perfect law of love, beyond all laws, we blanch at how lovelessly we live. And the human soul utters the only thing it can when it sees itself: *Kyrie – eleison! Christe – eleison!* We reach a dramatic crisis, all the more dramatic because now, all at once, we have launched into great and troubling music, which carries us on at once into –