

Why the Repetitions of “Lord Have Mercy”?



by Sr. Vassa

“Lord, have mercy!” (Frequent refrain in Byzantine Liturgy)

Isn't it somewhat morbid, how often we repeat, in our church services, “Lord, have mercy” (Kyrie eleison)? It is, if we misunderstand the word “mercy” (*eleos*), limiting it to what it means in today's English, a “withholding of punishment.” But the term means much more in patristic usage. “Mercy” is in and from our “merciful” God, as His way of being, and His way of acting. With respect to us, “mercy” (*eleos*) is an overflowing of God's goodness, spiritual riches, and salvation, abundantly upon us, if we are open to it, like a soothing oil (*elaion*). That's why, traditionally, “oil” is seen as a symbol of God's “mercy.”

So, when we say, “Lord, have mercy,” we are saying, Yes, have it Your way. Have mercy. We are open to it. And that means, also being “merciful” to others and to ourselves, so that we can be in sync with God's mercy.

“For You are a merciful God, and You love mankind, and to You we ascribe glory, to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages.”

Amen!

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