

2017-04-23, Series on the Mass, Part 69

*The Agnus Dei*

The *Agnus Dei* is a prayer that entered the Roman liturgy in the West from the Eastern usage by Pope St. Sergius I (+701), a native of Antioch. In the Early Church when they had the processions from the “collect church” to the “stational church”, the various litanies would be sung, in which the *Agnus Dei* was a part of the prayer, as it is today. It is quite likely from this practice that the prayer entered the liturgy, first in the East and then in the West.

*Agnus Dei* is the name given to Christ by St. John the Baptist. It signifies a victim offered to God to expiate sin, just as the lambs that the Jews sacrificed in the Old Testament were consumed at the Passover. This image of the slaughtered lamb was a prefigurement of the sacrifice of Christ.

After addressing Christ as the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world, we ask Him for mercy because we are sinners in need of forgiveness. This is why we strike our breast at each of these invocations, which recalls the actions of the publican standing afar, who “would not so much as lift up his eyes towards heaven, but struck his breast saying: O God, be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13). The third invocation ends with “grant us peace”. This was added in the 11th century because of all the serious troubles there were at the time and it was kept ever since. This peace that we pray for is the result of a pure conscience. On Holy Thursday the *miserere nobis* is used a third time because the Passion of our Lord has begun.

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