Cries of Supplication, Cries of Joy

BY JOSEPH GELINEAU, S.J.

The text of Psalm 106/7 describes all the grief of the world that liturgy calls on us to assume in its supplications and all the joy of paschal freedom that liturgy invites us to welcome: “Then they cried to the Lord in their need... Let them thank the Lord for his love...”

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But the grief and the joy in question are not symmetrical; they do not balance as suffering and enjoyment do when experienced successively. Between the cry of appeal and the cry of joy the whole situation has been utterly reversed for the person of the Bible. For instance, some people (in the text of the psalm) are lost in the desert—a desert of burning sands or a deadly solitude of the soul—and suddenly a track appears, leading to the city where people can live in harmony. Some others, deportees, are enslaved, but suddenly their chains fall off. Other people are crushed by evil, but a loving word brings them recovery.

Every time these people called out, a liberation occurred. Their grief was changed into joy because the God of salvation intervened, the God who reverses any situation, changing streams into a desert, but desert into streams, pouring contempt on rulers, but raising the needy from distress. A “passage,” a “passover” took place.

Through its cries of appeal and joy, each liturgy calls us to experience this passover, but we have to remember that neither suffering nor its conversion into joy are experienced in the liturgy the way they are in daily life. In life, experiences of suffering and liberation are perceptible, immediate, and successive; they are events of our earthly history. The liturgy gives us sorrow and joy in a “ritual” mode, as “figure” and “sacrament.” At liturgy the narrative of past paschal liberations is told, and the liberation in Christ risen is announced. One is united here and now to Christ’s passion and glorification in his suffering and glorified members, but always in signs and by faith.

This fact has two consequences in our context. First, unlike ordinary life, in which disease precedes recovery, the prayer of the psalms and the whole liturgy begins right away with thanksgiving: “O give thanks to the Lord for he is good; for his love endures for ever.” Only afterwards do we add the because: We give thanks because you have delivered us from distress. We recall the memory of the help granted in order to give thanks. On the other hand—the second consequence—unlike everyday life, in which objective events or things hurt or heal us, in the liturgy the “figure” of the rite, the word, or the song becomes both the sign and the reality of the paschal event.

As celebrating subjects of the paschal mystery, then, we are invited to assume the “figures” of supplication and praise. But we have to enter as fully as possible into these words and intonations, vowels and consonants, tones and cadences, which give form to the cries of appeal from those who suffer and the cries of the past to those who are free.
joy from the saved. In fact, the pastoral ministry of liturgy consists in giving the signs and sacraments the best chance to lead us into the mystery that is celebrated.

And how does the celebration invite us through its rites to become entirely the supplicants' call of appeal and the cry of joy from the saved? To try to answer this question, let us start from the two great biblical cries that from the beginnings of the church, have irrigated its liturgical prayer. First the cry of appeal, according to the Greek of the Septuagint translation: *Kyrie, eleison*, with its meter of seven syllables familiar to ethnomusicologists; its invocation of the “Kyrie,” who for us is the one “whom God has made both Lord and Messiah” through his resurrection (Acts 2:36); and its appeal to God's eleos, the faithful love of the God of the covenant. Second, the alleluia, the four incomparable syllables of biblical praise (“Praise God!”) that lets the joy of paschal victory peak forth in every human language.

The unchanging sound figure of these two ritual formulas is meant to signify an infinite variety of situations and feelings suggested to us by Christian worship, with its multiplicity of melodic, rhythmical, and harmonic forms endlessly invented for supplication and praise. We need to explore the way these two texts express such variety.

**Kyrie, Eleison**

In crying for help the one who is alone in a situation of distress sin first to be heard, to attract someone's attention by calling out: "Kyrie!" He or she keeps on crying out louder and louder, repeating the cry unceasingly until out of breath. But the Lord assures us: "Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you" (Luke 11:9; This is the fundamental call at the beginning of the Litany of the Saints, a cry expressed in a ritualized and stylized form, musically “polished” yet suggestive and moving.

Soon, though, the supplicant loses breath, is exhausted, less and less able to rely on his or her own strength. Then the cry turns into a complaint; the sound tapers off. It has less intensity and more soul. The appeal becomes entreaty (as in the ferial *Kyrie* of Mass XVI) because the one being called on,

When the New Testament deals with prayer, it keeps telling us: Ask tirelessly, insist! Act like the importunate friend for whom the door will be opened just to gain peace (see Luke 11:6) or like an annoying child who will be given whatever he wishes. At this point we come face to face with someone, looking and talking directly to this "someone" until the features of that face will move at last. The music acts like a file or a gimlet, scraping and piercing. (But Jesus asks: "If you, with all your sins, know how to give your children good things, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" (Luke 11:13)

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The supreme quality inculcated by the Bible is that of those who pray is confidence: If you ask for something, believe that you will get it, and it will be granted to you. After being violent, plaintive, and insistent the supplication quiets down, because we learn to say with Jesus: “Father, I know that you always hear me” (John 11:42). Mysteriously, the strongest request becomes the gentlest; it is aware that it is already fulfilled. The psalmist says that even while crying out to God, he was ready with praise. This is why we sing so gratefully; it is a way to understand the melodic expansion of so many Gregorian Kyries, such as Fons Bonitatis #2, which integrates the ferial Kyrie and makes it overflow with confident tenderness. The sound “figures” of supplication are unlimited, like the corresponding vibrations of the praying soul that oscillates between rebellion and peace, distress and compassion.

Each of these musical figures has a grace of its own that we must recognize when forming it on our lips and fashioning it with our voice.

Alleluia

We turn now to the cry—the song—of one who lives a paschal experience, who passes from grief to joy, death to life, despair to exaltation, at first something inside in the process of awakening. The singer has been made for life and here life is, rising inexorably like someone awakening from sleep (see Ephesians 5:14). It is like Mary Magdalen’s heart awakening to the sound of a voice uttering her name on Easter morning, as she recognizes her Lord: “Rabboni!” In some alleluias, then, we sense that something is being born, something that draws us from our “sleep.” But there is still a haze floating above the finale.

What is coming to birth takes shape in the cry of the psalms of Thanksgiving: “I will praise you, Lord, you have rescued me . . . you have raised my soul from the dead . . .” This is the cry of Christ, who has risen from the dead, and the cry of the baptized. The one held by the bonds of death is now free, released to dance by the breath of the Spirit to the tune of the paschal alleluia. Yet even this melody, seemingly so conclusive, does not impose a final cadence. It is as if the risen Lord is dancing away from us, inviting us to follow further, moving from one passage to another.

The dance of those who are “awakened and risen” leads to a true song, a jubilation, the expansion of a life renewed, rejuvenated. Along the banks of the rivers that spring from the new temple (the body of the risen Christ from whom the Spirit comes), the trees blossom and bear fruit every month, while fish abound in the waters, and birds sing by the springs (see Revelation 22:1-2; Ezekiel 47:1-12). Holding palm branches, the 144,000 redeemed follow the Lamb wherever he goes, singing the new canticle (see Revelation 14:1-4).

Christ is risen, he is free; he becomes eucharist, pure praise to the glory of his Father. The expansion of his risen body henceforth encompasses the whole renewed creation, the new heavens and the new earth, containing “wine to cheer our hearts; oil to make our faces shine and bread to strengthen our hearts” (Psalm 104:15). The risen body encompasses all the baptized who, like birds, are the singers and harvesters of the Father’s holy vineyard.

Kyrie/Alleluia

How do supplication and praise appear in the rites’ unfoldings? There are strong moments of demand: the penitential preparation, the refrain of the general intercessions, and the “Lamb experiences; we will have to overcome such oppositions. Even a demand made with tears is biblical and Christian only if it is made in total confidence, and if the demander is already giving thanks. Paul writes to Christian congregations: “I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be offered for all” (1 Timothy 2:1). That pervasive presence of thanksgiving in all prayer is why the psalms, which are a model of revealed prayer, are called the “Book of Praise” in Hebrew (Tehillim = “Praises”), even though the major part of them are laments. It is also why the liturgy of the hours is called the “office of praise” and why the Mass, above all, is a “sacrifice of praise.”
But the reverse is also true: It is impossible to give thanks and glory to God fully as long as redemption is not yet completed, all of humanity not yet saved. So after thanking God for the marvels of the past, the church exclaims: And now, Lord, behold your people, humanity, your creation... See how evil continues to devastate! Therefore have mercy; grant us recovery, salvation, and resurrection so that we may fully thank you at last.

The liturgy teaches us not only to rejoice after grief has ended, but to change grief into joy, for it is entirely a paschal work. Thus a cry of appeal may become a cry of praise. For instance, the word “Hosanna” means “Save us, by your grace,” but in the Sanctus the phrase “Hosanna in the highest” is perceived as an acclamation of praise.

When we implore pity and forgiveness, God grants us divine “charis”—“grace.” Then we can offer God eucharistia, the “beautiful grace” that returns to its source. Blessed is the “man of suffering” whose suffering becomes, even in this world, the crucible of the purest joy and the radiant paschal alleluia! For such is the love of the Lord.


2. See verses 33, 35, 40, and 41.
3. Verse 1. See also the eucharistic preface dialogue: “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.”
4. How can one resist the intensity of the final note? It is not a major third or a mediant, but a tonic: the tension of the ultimate superior degree in the mode.
5. An example is the Kyrie of Mass XVIII.
7. Psalm 30:2,4.