

Of Litanies and Rogations in Old England

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The narratives, teachings, and poetry of Holy Scripture are occasionally enriched with a technique known as the envelope structure (often called *inclusio* in Biblical studies). The “envelope” is created by a phrase that is repeated at the beginning and end of a literary unit, as in the following example from Psalm 103, which opens and closes with the speaker exhorting himself to praise God:

O my soul, bless thou the Lord:
 thou, my God, hast shown thy glory,
clothed thyself in splendor and majesty:
 radiance is thy garment.

...

Let sinners vanish from the earth,
 and the wicked be no more.
O my soul,
 bless thou the Lord.

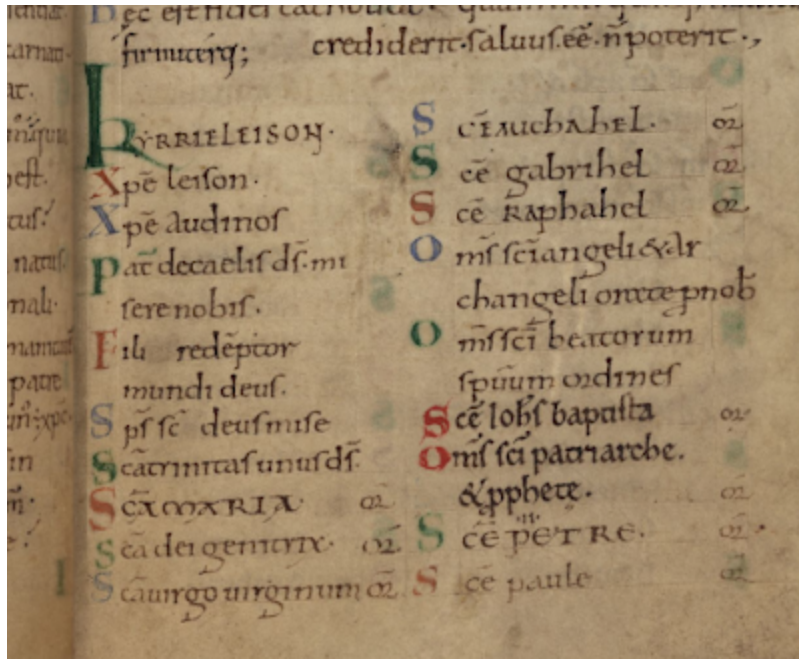
Envelope structures create a sense of unity and closure, with emotional effects similar to those of a decrescendo in music, and they may also accentuate an important theme or precept in the enclosed text. They are used throughout the Bible – in the New Testament and the Old, in verse and in prose. And if we think of sacred liturgy as a dramatic celebration and continuation of the events, heroes, teachings, and poetic meditations of Holy Scripture, we will expect to find envelope structures in the Church’s public worship.

Indeed, we are now in the midst of one: the Litany of Saints that signaled the beginning of the Easter Vigil Mass on Holy Saturday will soon be repeated on the three Rogation Days that precede Ascension Thursday. What a memorable way this is to emphasize the spiritual and liturgical unity of the forty joyful days when the risen Christ walked the earth and conversed with men. It also draws our minds to the essential fruit of Our Lord’s Resurrection: the Saints in heaven, who were once mortals like us, burdened by sin and doomed to die, and are now gloriously alive, shining on high with God and His angels.



“What I saw seemed to me to be a smile / the universe had smiled; my rapture had / entered by way of hearing and of sight. // O joy! O gladness words can never speak! / O life perfected by both love and peace! / O richness so assured, that knows no longing!” (Dante, *Paradiso*, 27; Mandelbaum translation)

Litanic prayer originated in the East, where it formed part of both the Eucharistic liturgy and the Divine Office, and it soon migrated to the Roman church. These texts were shorter and less elaborate than the prayers that we now call litanies, and their defining characteristic was supplication (for the sick, the dead, the bishop, etc.) intensified by a communal response such as *Kyrie eleison* or *Domine exaudi et miserere*. (The word “litany” derives from Greek *litaneia*, which simply means “petition” or “entreaty.”) The *Kyrie eleison* as it currently exists in the Roman Mass is actually a vestigial form of litanic prayers recited during the Eucharistic liturgy in the early Church.



The beginning of the Litany of the Saints in the eleventh-century breviary known as St. Wulfstan's Portiforium (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 391, p. 221). Note the legibility of the text (compared to some manuscripts produced much later) and the visual prominence given to the names of Our Lady and St. Peter.

Other occasions on which the Church employed litanies were solemn processions. This practice is of venerable antiquity, dating at least to the fifth century, and has endured to the present in the Church's traditional Rogation Day ceremonies. A homily composed by St. Avitus, a sixth-century bishop of Vienne in southern Gaul, is a striking example of historical continuity in Catholic liturgy. He refers to Rogation fasts, which included processions and litany chants, occurring on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday before Ascension Thursday—precisely as they do in the Roman liturgy of our own day. [1]



Jules Breton, *La Bénédiction des blés en Artois* (oil on canvas). The artist is portraying the blessing of agricultural fields that occurred during the Rogation processions.

Latin-language Saint litanies are relatively abundant in manuscripts from the Anglo-Saxon period of English Catholicism. The earliest records take us all the way back to the seventh century, but most of what has survived dates to the tenth century or later. These litanies vary

in form and content, but exhibit a common structure that is remarkably similar to what we pray and sing today in the Roman rite.

A story recounted by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (see book I, chapter 25) reveals that the combination of litany and procession has an illustrious role in the history of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. When St. Augustine and his evangelizing companions reached the Isle of Thanet in Kent, King Ethelbert, who knew of Christianity but was still a pagan at the time, was “sitting in the open air” and

ordered Augustine and his companions to be brought into his presence. For he had taken precaution that they should not come to him in any house, lest, according to an ancient superstition, if they practiced any magical arts, they might impose upon him.

Thus, the missionaries came to the king—himself later venerated as a saint—in procession,

bearing a silver cross for their banner, and the image of our Lord and Savior painted on a board; and singing the litany, they offered up their prayers to the Lord for the eternal salvation both of themselves and of those to whom they were come.

Anglo-Saxon Saint litanies were prayed both publicly and privately, and many of the surviving litanies appear in



Stained-glass depiction of King Ethelbert (d. 616), from All Souls College Chapel, Oxford.

manuscripts that are primarily psalters. This suggests that they served as a supplement to the psalms, which were the principal fount of prayer for laity and clergy alike during the Ages of Faith.

One thing that stands out in the litanies of Old England is the multitude of English saints. Names such as Æthelthryth, Cuthberht, Botwulf, Wihburg, Mildthryth, and Switthun are well represented in these texts. How exactly liturgical singers integrated these names into the Latin pronunciation system is an open question, but in any case, I feel some nostalgia for a time when the Church's litanies were inhabited by a more equal distribution of local and universal saints.



Litany of the Saints in the late-ninth-century Psalter of Count Achadeus (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 272, folio 151r). This litany invokes 160 saints.

Scholars do not know when exactly the Western churches began incorporating individual saints into their litanies. In other words, the history of litanic prayer in general is well established, but the origin of what we now call the Litany of the Saints has proved elusive. The eminent medievalist Dr. Michael Lapidge, whose research inspired me to write this article, believes that Saint litanies first achieved widespread usage in eighth-century England. What an extraordinary thought, that Anglo-Saxon England—a recently converted, far-flung outpost of Western Christianity—may have been the birthplace of the Latin Litany of the Saints, which would soon spread to continental Europe and eventually occupy a place of great honor and distinction in the liturgy of the universal Church.

[1]. These three days are currently known as the Minor Rogations. A Major Rogation takes place every year on April 25th.