

The Greater Litanies

April 25 is honored in the Liturgy by what is sometimes called *Saint Mark's Procession*. The term, however, is not a correct one, inasmuch as the Procession was a privilege peculiar to April 25 previously to the institution of the Evangelist's Feast which, even as late as the 6th century, had no fixed day in the Roman Church. The real name of this Procession is The Greater Litanies. The word Litany means supplication, and is applied to the religious rite of singing certain chants whilst proceeding from place to place in order to propitiate Heaven. The two Greek words *Kyrie eleison* (Lord, have mercy on us) were also called Litany, as likewise were the invocations which were afterwards added to that cry for mercy, and which now form a liturgical prayer used by the Church on certain solemn occasions.

The Greater Litanies (or processions) are so called to distinguish them from the Minor Litanies, that is, processions of less importance as far as the solemnity and concourse of the faithful were concerned. We gather from an expression of St. Gregory the Great that it was an ancient custom in the Roman Church to celebrate, once a year, a Greater Litany, at which all the clergy and people assisted. This holy Pontiff chose April 25 as the fixed day for this Procession, and appointed the Basilica of St. Peter as the Station.

The question naturally presents itself—why did Pope St. Gregory choose April 25 for a Procession and Station in which everything reminds us of compunction and penance, and which would seem so out of keeping with the joyous Season of Easter? Liturgists have shown that in the 5th, and probably even in the 4th century, April 25 was observed at Rome as a day of great solemnity. The faithful went, on that day, to the Basilica of St. Peter, in order to celebrate the anniversary of the first entrance of the Prince of the Apostles into Rome, upon which he thus conferred the inalienable privilege of being the capital



of Christendom. It is from that day that we count the 25 years, 2 months and some days that St. Peter reigned as Bishop of Rome. The Sacramentary of St. Leo gives us the Mass of this solemnity, which afterwards ceased to be kept. St. Gregory, to whom we are mainly indebted for the arrangement of the Roman Liturgy, was anxious to perpetuate the memory of a day which gave to Rome her grandest glory. He therefore ordained that the Church of St. Peter should be the Station of the Great Litany, which was always to be celebrated on that auspicious day. April 25 comes so frequently during the Octave of Easter that it could not be kept as a feast, properly so called, in honor of St. Peter's entrance into Rome; St. Gregory, therefore, adopted the only means left of commemorating the great event.

But there was a striking contrast resulting from this institution, of which the holy Pontiff was fully aware, but which he could not avoid: it was the contrast between the joys of Paschal Time and the penitential sentiments and Station of the Great Litany. Laden as we are with the manifold graces of this holy Season, and elated with our Paschal joys, we must sober our gladness by reflecting on the motives which led the

Church to cast this hour of shadow over our Easter sunshine. After all, we are sinners, with much to regret and much to fear; we have to avert those scourges which are due to the crimes of mankind; we must, by humbling ourselves and invoking the intercession of the Mother of God and the Saints, obtain the health of our bodies and preservation of the fruits of the earth; we have to offer atonement to Divine Justice for our own and the world's pride, sinful indulgences, and insubordination. Let us enter into ourselves, and humbly confess that our own share in exciting God's indignation is great; and our poor prayers, united with those of our Holy Mother the Church, will obtain mercy for the guilty, and for ourselves who are of their number.

Commentary from The Liturgical Year by Dom Prosper Guéranger (1805-1875).



Proper Prayers of the Mass in the Extraordinary Form

ADDENDUM:

APRIL 25

COMMEMORATION OF THE GREATER LITANIES



SECOND COLLECT

PRÆSTA, quæsumus, omnipotens Deus: ut, qui in afflictione nostra de tua pietate confidimus, contra adversa omnia, tua semper protectione muniámur. Per Dóminum nostrum Jesum Christum Filium tuum, qui tecum vivit et regnat in unitate Spiritus Sancti ...

GRANT, we beseech Thee, O almighty God, that we, who in our affliction put our trust in Thy mercy, may ever be defended by Thy protection against all adversity. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee, in the unity of the Holy Ghost ...

SECOND SECRET

HÆC múnera, quæsumus, Dómine, et víncula nostræ pravitátis absolvant, et tuæ nobis misericórdiæ dona concilient. Per Dóminum nostrum Jesum Christum Filium tuum, qui tecum vivit et regnat in unitate Spiritus Sancti ...

MAY these oblations, O Lord, we beseech Thee, loosen the bonds of our wickedness, and obtain for us the gifts of Thy mercy. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee, in the unity of the Holy Ghost ...

SECOND POSTCOMMUNION

VOTA nostra, quæsumus, Dómine, pio favóre proséquere: ut dum dona tua in tribulatione percípimus, de consolatione nostra in tuo amore crescámus. Per Dóminum nostrum Jesum Christum Filium tuum, qui tecum vivit et regnat in unitate Spiritus Sancti ...

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