

## Where Does the Mass “Holy, Holy, Holy” Prayer Come From?

At Mass we say, "Holy, holy, holy,\* [brief pause] Lord God of Hosts. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest." What is this prayer, where does it come from and what does "*Hosanna*" mean?

This prayer is called the *Sanctus* because that is its first word in Latin. The first line is the hymn of the Seraphim, found in Isaiah 6:3 and Revelation 4:8. The second part is what the crowd cried to Jesus at his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:9), which is modeled after Psalm 118:26.

*Hosanna* is a Hebrew term, which is derived from the words *yasha*, which means “save,” and *na*, which is an expression of entreaty or request, and can be translated in a variety of ways. For example, “I pray,” “I beseech,” “Please,” or “O’.” These Hebrew terms were combined – *yasha na* (“O’, save!”), as in Psalm 118:26 – and this became: *Hosanna*.

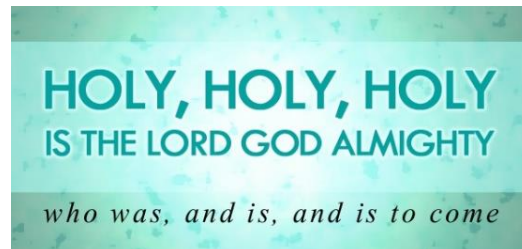
It was used as part of the Jewish temple liturgy during the feast of Tabernacles, when the priests carried willow branches and cried “Hosanna!” while processing around the altar of burnt offering’. Over time, the crowd, who gathered to worship picked it up, and it became a cry of joy. The seventh day of the feast of Tabernacles, even came to be called “Hosanna Day”.

Thus, the crowd greeted the Messiah (on what Christians now commemorate as Palm Sunday) by waving palm branches and joyfully crying, “Hosanna!” to him, as he entered Jerusalem. By this time, the term may have lost some of its original meaning and may have been mostly an acclamation of joy and petition (as it is now during the Liturgy of the Mass).

Yet it still carried the air of a joyful petition for deliverance. The expression “Hosanna to the Son of David!” was an exhortation to acclaim or praise the Messiah in hopes of deliverance (from the hated occupation afoot by the Roman Empire in the minds of those gathered in the crowd).

The expression “Hosanna in the highest!” is more mysterious. Scholarly suggestions have included that it is an exhortation to us to cry, “Hosanna!” to God; an exhortation like the angels, to cry “Hosanna!” to God, as an exhortation of a song of praise in heaven.

“*Hosanna*” was used as part of Mass in the first century. The Didache (The Teachings of the Apostles) (written 70 C.E.) includes the acclamation “Hosanna to the God of David!” among the congregation’s responses during the Prayer of Thanksgiving after Communion.



\* Holy, holy, holy: these words have been used in Christian liturgy from the earliest times.