

# Liturgy of the Word

## I. Hearing the Word

### The Lectionary – History and Present Usage

Since at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Christians have begun the celebration of the Eucharist with by proclaiming the Word of God, a practice that has its roots in the Jewish synagogue service. In fact, this custom of reading the Law and the Prophets, as well as letters of Paul and stories about Jesus at liturgy, resulted in the formation of the New and Old Testament canons.

"And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things." (Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chapter 67)

From the time of the Reformation until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Catholics had been cautioned about reading the Bible because the Church was concerned that the Word might be misinterpreted. Yet, the proclamation of the Word was always a part of the Mass, however, it was read in Latin by the priest quietly; the faithful could not hear it.

While it seems that the early Church practiced a sort of continuous reading of Scripture at liturgy, it also inserted portions of the Bible that reflected more the occasion or the place where the Eucharist was being celebrated. For example, St. Luke's account of the birth of Christ was chosen for Midnight Mass on Christmas because it was celebrated in the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome. Or, the gospel for Mass on Christmas day is taken from the beginning of the Gospel of John, because it was celebrated in St. John Lateran, the cathedral church of Rome.

Attending to the early history of the liturgy, the bishops of Vatican II called for a return to use of the Lectionary (the book that contains the scripture readings for Mass). And, by separating these readings from the priest's Missal, they instituted the service of lector as a lay ministry. Today, our lectionary contains a three-year cycle of readings for Sundays and a two-year cycle for weekdays.

The three-year Sunday cycle is based upon the three synoptic Gospels: Matthew (Year A), Mark (Year B), and Luke (Year C). Selections from the Gospel of John are inserted at different times in all the three yearly cycles.

The Old Testament *first* readings were chosen because of their connection with a particular Sunday Gospel story. Excerpts from the Letters and Acts of the Apostles make up the larger part of selections for our *second* readings.

### ***The Liturgy of the Word includes:***

#### **The First Reading**

*(Usually taken from the Old Testament or the Acts of the Apostles)*

#### **The Responsorial Psalm**

#### **The Second Reading**

*(Usually taken from the New Testament Letters or the Book of Revelation)*

#### **The Gospel Acclamation**

#### **The Gospel**

#### **The Homily**

#### **The Profession of Faith**

#### **The General Intercessions**

*(also known as The Prayer of the Faithful)*

## Proclaiming and Responding to the Word

The primary parts of the Liturgy of the Word are the readings from Scripture and the Responsorial Psalm. The homily, profession of faith, and general intercessions "develop and conclude this part of the Mass." (GIRM 55) So that these concluding parts of the Word seem less disjointed and unrelated to what has gone before, it helps to understand the rhythm of '*proclamation and response*' in the liturgy.

The lector proclaims the Word, the faithful respond in the Responsorial Psalm. The lector proclaims the Second Reading, the faithful respond with silence. The deacon or priest proclaims the gospel, and the homily, creed, and intercessions respond to our encounter with the Word that day.

### Christ speaks in the Word Proclaimed

It is important to notice the strong emphasis placed on Christ speaking in the Word proclaimed:

"For in the readings, explained by the homily, God is *speaking* to his people, *opening up to them* the mystery of redemption and salvation, and *nourishing* their spirit; and Christ himself is *present* in the midst of the faithful through his word..." (GIRM 55)

Two implications follow: First, our lectors and presiders need to continue to grow in their love for the Word, their understanding of it, and their capacity to proclaim it in such a way that all can hear and receive it.

Second, we, the faithful, need to grow in our capacity to be ready and willing to listen and heed what we hear from the One who speaks. See again how the structure of the rite encourages proclamation *and* response:

*By their silence and singing the people make God's word their own and they also affirm their adherence to it by the profession of faith. Finally, having been nourished by this word, they pour out their petitions in the general intercessions for the needs of the entire Church and for the salvation of the whole world.* [GIRM 55 (Italics added)]

Proclaiming the Word means a new and vital announcement of salvation *on that day*, for Christ speaks to us as we are today! As our life's circumstances change, so does the Word address, comfort, and challenge us in different ways. Jesus spoke his saving word to all *then*. In a similar way, the Risen Christ offers us his saving word today.

Thus, the result of our encounter with the Word is not completely unlike our encounter with Christ in the Sacrament – we are to be transformed and made new in the image of the Risen One. That is why the GIRM uses the analogy of a table for both Word and Sacrament, indicating that both are to instruct *and* nourish us.

"The Mass is made up as it were of two parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. *These two parts are so closely interconnected that they form but one single act of worship.* For in the Mass the table both of God's word and of Christ's Body is laid, from which the faithful may be instructed and refreshed." (GIRM 28; refers to CSL 48, 51, & 56)

After centuries of emphasizing Sacrament, almost in opposition to the Word, we see a renewed respect and reverence for its proclamation in liturgy.

### Some practical notes I – at the Ambo

Among the changes to the liturgy will be some practical instructions. All Scripture is to be proclaimed from the *Ambo*. [The "Ambo" is the name of the podium or lectern in the church that is reserved for proclaiming Scripture.] Therefore, anything to be read at liturgy that is not Scripture

should be spoken from another place. Further, the GIRM underlines the fact that the proclamation of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> readings is a lay, not a clerical, ministry.

"By tradition the function of proclaiming the readings is ministerial, not presidential. Therefore, a lector should proclaim the readings..." (GIRM 59)

The ambo is the place where the Word is proclaimed. Thus, it is the proper place for the *cantor* to lead the responsorial psalm, the *homilist* to deliver his homily, and the *leader* of the Prayer of the Faithful to proclaim the General Intercessions. This means that song leading, announcements, and so on, are to be done from another location.

"The priest, standing at the chair or at the ambo itself, or, when appropriate, *in another suitable place*, gives the homily." (GIRM 136)

Why all this fuss about the ambo? Once we acknowledge that the ambo is the *Altar of the Word* (as the *Introduction to the Lectionary* tells us) as an analogy to the *Altar of the Eucharist*, it makes sense that we would revere whatever actions are done at the ambo. The very simple proclamation and response – "The word of the Lord" / "Thanks be to God" – parallels, "The Body of Christ" / "Amen." We respond in a similar manner at the proclamation of the Gospel because Christ is speaking directly to us in his Word.

### **Some practical notes II – Silence**

The *General Instruction* emphasizes the importance of silence during the Liturgy of the Word. By calling for a significant period of silence after each reading and after the homily, this instruction challenges us to "go against the grain" of our hurried and stressed daily lives in order to reflect on what we have just heard, letting the Word sink in to our hearts. The GIRM envisions a worshipping community that observes a pace in the liturgy that allows for more "full, active, and conscious participation" by all.

The call for silence also underscores for us the importance of the Scriptures, not only in our worship, but also in our daily lives. Hearing the Word every week as part of our spiritual lives can lead us to continued conversion in the way we live as Jesus' disciples from day to day.

### **For discussion/reflection:**

What new things did you learn about the Liturgy of the Word? Why is it important?

What is my experience of the Word this week? Did it comfort me? Did it challenge me?

What is my experience of silence? How do I respond to this new call for periods of silence?

How might I use periods of silence profitably for my spiritual life?

How might I prepare to receive more deeply the Word proclaimed on Sunday?

## **II. "The Lord upholds my life."**

*"What is more pleasing than a psalm? David expresses it well:*

*'Praise the Lord, for a psalm is good:*

*let there be praise of our God with gladness and grace!*

*Yes, a psalm is a blessing on the lips of the people, praise of God, the assembly's homage, a general acclamation, a word that speaks for all, the voice of the Church, a confession of Faith in song." St. Ambrose of Milan*

### **Responding to the Word through Psalmody**

The faithful respond to the Word of God proclaimed in the First Reading by singing the *Responsorial Psalm*. Not only is the *Responsorial Psalm* a response to the Word proclaimed, but

even its form is characterized by the structure of *proclamation and response* – a sung response alternating with chanted verses by a cantor or choir.

"By responding to [the First Reading], the gathered people honor the word of God that they have received in faith and with grateful hearts." (GIRM 59)

"After the first reading comes the responsorial psalm, which is an integral part of the liturgy of the word... *because it encourages meditation on the word of God*. The responsorial psalm should correspond to each reading and should, *as a rule*, be taken from the Lectionary." (GIRM 61)

It is interesting to note that we employ God's Word to *respond* to God's Word. Drawn from the Book of Psalms, as well as some canticles from other books of Scripture, the *Responsorial Psalm* provides the faithful with words tried and tested in the fires of life's joys and sorrows. Observe the broad significance of the *Responsorial Psalm*: its importance is equal to the other readings from the Old and New Testaments.

"[The psalm *recalls*] the saving events of the past, yet extends into the future, even to the end of history; it *communicates* the promises God has already kept, and *awaits* the Messiah who will fulfill them definitively. Prayed by Christ and fulfilled in him, the Psalms remain essential to the prayer of the Church. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2586*)

### **A Clarification:**

A common misconception about the *Responsorial Psalm* is that it is either one more reading at Mass (if not sung) or simply a song to follow the first reading. However, the Church has always held it significant as another proclamation of the Word. It is best to sing the psalm, not recite it. Neither songs nor hymns may replace either the psalm of the day or one from the collection of seasonal psalms.

"*It is preferable that the responsorial Psalm be sung, at least as far as the people's response is concerned. If the Psalm cannot be sung, then it should be recited in such a way that it is particularly suited to fostering meditation on the word of God.*" (GIRM 61)

The revised *General Instruction* calls for the *Responsorial Psalm* to be sung from the Ambo (the lectern from which Scripture is proclaimed). [Recall how the GIRM describes the ambo as the Altar of the Word.] *At least* the response ("The Lord upholds my life") should be sung and the verses proclaimed by the reader. Still, simply reciting the psalm should always be considered the least desirable option.

### **The Gospel Acclamation – Singing Alleluia!**

The second musical piece of the Liturgy of the Word is the Gospel Acclamation (usually the *Alleluia*). This acclamation immediately precedes the proclamation of the Gospel, which is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. Notice that the *Alleluia* is *not* a response to the Second Reading. The appropriate response to that reading is silence. The *Alleluia*, rather, announces the Gospel.

"After the reading that immediately precedes the Gospel, the *Alleluia* or another chant indicated by the rubrics is *sung*, as required by the liturgical season. *An acclamation of this kind constitutes a rite or act in itself. By it the assembly of the faithful welcomes and greets the Lord who is about to speak to them in the Gospel*, and professes its faith by singing. All stand and sing the *Alleluia*, led by the choir or a cantor." (GIRM 62)

The acclamation helps us to reverence the Gospel using our most festive of acclamations. It also helps us to know that what is happening next is the most important part of the Liturgy of the Word.

This acclamation is so important that the *General Instruction* is very specific - *it must always be sung - never recited.* (GIRM 62c)

### **Shaped by the Seasons of the Year**

Every Sunday, the Church celebrates the gift of our redemption in Christ's death and resurrection, and so we sing, *Alleluia!* However, as we read above, the liturgical seasons form and shape our use of this acclamation. We fast, as it were, from this song of joy beginning with Ash Wednesday all the way until the Easter Vigil when the Church takes it up again with jubilation. The return of the *Alleluia* at the Easter Vigil is so momentous, that we are asked to sing *several verses* instead of just one.

### **Other musical options in the Liturgy of the Word**

The Profession of Faith (the Creed) and the General Intercessions are also available to be set to music. The Profession of Faith was included in many musical settings of the Tridentine Mass. Few have been composed since Vatican II, perhaps from the desire not to overwhelm the next part of Mass.

### **The Profession of Faith**

The Profession of Faith, as the GIRM states below, helps us acknowledge and profess the great deeds of God in salvation history – in creation, redemption, and in continued fidelity to the Church. These are the mysteries we recall in the Eucharist as the Church remembers our faithful God who continues to act in human history.

"By reciting the rule of faith in a formula approved for liturgical use, the people *call to mind and confess* the great mysteries of the faith before they begin to celebrate these mysteries in the Eucharist." (GIRM 67)

### **The Prayer of the Faithful**

Many parishes sing at least the people's response ("Lord, hear our prayer") to the petitions during one or other of the liturgical seasons of the year. It is very important to note that this is the prayer of the *faithful*, not of the priest or reader. These ministers can facilitate the community's exercise of their baptismal priesthood in the practice of their role by a judicious use of silence within the petitions.

"In the general intercessions or prayer of the faithful, the people *respond* in some way to the word of God which they have *welcomed* in faith and, *exercising an office of their baptismal priesthood, offer prayers to God for the salvation of all.*" (GIRM 69)

### **For discussion/reflection:**

What new insights did I receive from this article?

Is it easy for me to enter into the singing of the psalm on Sundays? How might I enter into that singing more fully and actively?

How does the *Alleluia* help me prepare to hear Christ addressing me in the Gospel?

Do the General Intercessions function as the prayer of the faithful? Do I experience this prayer as an exercise of my baptismal priesthood? How might that happen?

## ***III. "The Gospel of the Lord"***

### **Proclaiming the Good News**

The proclamation of the Gospel at Sunday Mass is replete with rich and significant ritual gestures: the choir or cantor intones the *Alleluia*; the people join in singing with gusto; the Presider blesses the deacon; a procession to the ambo with the Book of Gospels; the proclamations / responses:

"The Lord be with you" / "And also with you." "A reading from the holy Gospel..." / "Glory to you, O Lord." Finally, the faithful sign their foreheads, lips, and breast.

The assembly does all this to underscore its belief that the proclamation of the Gospel is the climax of the Liturgy of the Word. In the Gospel, Christ speaks to his people.

Let us reflect for a moment on the following several ritual gestures that are proper to the proclamation of the Gospel:

### **The Opening Dialogue:**

The dialogue between the minister and the congregation informs us that it is Christ speaking directly to us in the words of the Gospel proclaimed. The people acknowledge that truth in faith by their response, "Glory to you, Lord." At *that* moment we are all speaking directly to Christ and not the minister.

A significant change of posture occurs at the singing of the *Alleluia* – the community stands. No longer seated as disciples, as those who are ready to hear and be taught by God, now the faithful stand to receive the Good News. This change of posture certainly speaks of respect and honor. When someone important comes into our presence we stand as a sign of respect or honor. But, notice, too, that when the faithful stand during Mass, they do so at those times that reveal the Church as the Body of Christ – at the Entrance Procession, the start of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and at the Communion Procession. In a way, then, like speaks to like – the Word of Christ addresses the Body of Christ in the World.

### **The Signs of the Cross**

The act of making the signs of the cross on the forehead, lips and breast is a ritual gesture that we often do without much thought. The meaning of the crossing of the forehead, lips, and breast (heart) is revealing: thoughts, words, and works – the whole person and his or her actions are dedicated to Christ.

Two suggestions might enliven our practice of this simple gesture:

First, the faithful could pray the prayer that the priest prays or the deacon is blessed with prior to proclaiming the Gospel. "May the Lord be in our minds, on our lips and in our hearts as the words of the holy gospel are proclaimed to us."

Second, in the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, the sponsors of the inquirers claim the new Catechumens for Christ by signing all five senses of the person – plus, their shoulders, hands, and feet. We might recall how hearing the Gospel claims us anew for Christ each time we sign ourselves with the cross at this point.

### **The Book of Gospels**

The Book of Gospels? In many places the Book of Gospels has been used only in cathedrals when the bishop presides at ceremonies. But now, the revised *General Instruction* has mandated that a Book of Gospels be used now at every Sunday Mass.

The Book of the Gospels differs from the Lectionary because it contains *only* the gospel readings for the liturgy, while the Lectionary contains the First and Second Readings as well as the Responsorial Psalms. The use of the Book of Gospels at liturgy demonstrates ritually the primacy of the Gospel of Christ, the lens through which Christians interpret all Scripture. It signifies the Church's faith that Christ speaks directly to us through the Gospel.

Various signs of honor attend the use of the Book of Gospels: incense, candles, and kissing the book at the conclusion of the proclamation of the Gospel. Recall that the only other thing kissed in the liturgy is the Altar, which, because it has been anointed with chrism, stands for Christ, our salvation.

## The Four Evangelists and their symbols

The four evangelists have been associated in Christian art with "the four living creatures." The scriptural background to these symbols can be found in the prophecies taken from the prophet Ezekiel, the book of Daniel, and the book of Revelation. We read in Ezekiel:

"As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a **human being**, the face of a **lion** on the right side, the face of an **ox** on the left side, and the face of an **eagle**..." (Ezekiel, 1:10)



### St. Matthew the Evangelist:

St. Irenaeus (in *Adversus Haereses* 3.11.8 (in *ANF* 1.854-55) seems to have been one of the early Church theologians who identified the four evangelists with the four living creatures.

He says that "'the third [living creature] had, as it were, the face as of a *man*,' -- an evident description of His advent as a human being." Matthew is depicted as human, because he instructs us about the human nature of Christ and he begins his gospel with Jesus' genealogy.



### St. Mark the Evangelist:

St. Irenaeus describes the significance of the lion: , "The first living creature was like a *lion*," symbolizing His effectual working, His leadership, and royal power." Mark's gospel begins with the words spoken about John the Baptist, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness," suggesting the roar of the lion.



### St. Luke the Evangelist:

Here, St. Irenaeus says that "the second [living creature] was like an *ox*, signifying [His] sacrificial and sacerdotal order." Luke the evangelist is symbolized by the winged ox, because he deals with the sacrificial aspects of Christ's life and since his version of the Gospel begins with a scene in the Temple at Jerusalem



### St. John the Evangelist:

Finally, St. Irenaeus refers to the eagle: "the fourth [living creature] was like a flying *eagle*, pointing out the gift of the Spirit hovering with His wings over the Church. And therefore the Gospels are in accord with these things, among which Christ Jesus is seated. For that according to **John** relates His original, effectual, and glorious generation from the Father, thus declaring, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'"

Thus, John the evangelist is symbolized by the rising eagle, since his gaze pierces so far into the mysteries of heaven and because his Gospel begins with a lofty prologue, a hymn to the Word made flesh.

### For discussion/reflection:

- What new things did I learn from this article?
- Do I experience the proclamation of the Gospel as the highpoint of the Liturgy of the Word in our parish worship?
- How might the signs of the cross that I make on my forehead, lips and breast be more meaningful to me now?
- Does my worshipping community use a Book of Gospels? What might the ritual use of such a book mean to me?

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