

Explaining the Mass

With Fr. Mark Bentz, STL

Part 5: Liturgy of the Word, part 1

After we are seated, the readings are proclaimed. The degree of solemnity determines how many readings there are. For example, on a ‘ferial’ day (where there is no saint or mystery of the Lord recalled), there is a first reading, a psalm, and a Gospel. On ‘Solemnities’ (Sundays, feasts of the Lord and the Blessed Mother, other holy days of obligation), there will be at least a first and second reading, a psalm, and a Gospel passage. I say, “at least” because at the Easter vigil, there are seven prescribed readings (and 6 responsorial psalms) before the Gospel!

One of the large changes that happened after the Second Vatican Council was a revision of the Lectionary (the book of readings at mass). *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Vatican II document on the liturgy, asked that there would be more varied reading from scripture at mass. (SC, 35) The revised lectionary that we currently use ensures that, if you faithfully attend mass every Sunday, you will hear all 4 Gospels read every three years! This year (2016), we are in year ‘C’, so we are going through the Gospel of Luke on Sundays. Next year will be Matthew, and then Mark. The Gospel of John is interspersed throughout the years, especially during Lent and Easter. Daily mass readings are on a different ‘track’ that resets every two years. If you attend daily mass, you will encounter almost the entire rest of the Bible every 2 years!

As a priest, having a fixed lectionary is very spiritually beneficial, because it forces you to preach the whole Gospel, rather than just choosing a topic and using your favorite passages to go along with it as some Protestant denominations do. While a common complaint is that Catholics don’t know the Bible, if we would only follow the readings at Mass diligently, we would learn more than most Protestant denominations! As time goes on, many other Christian churches have adopted our lectionary for this exact reason.

The first reading is almost always from the Old Testament (except during the Easter season) and is followed by a psalm response. We often forget this, but the psalm is actually a scripture reading—so what we call the “second” reading is really

the “third.” Since the psalm is a reading, it is important that any musical adaptations of the psalms remain faithful to the approved translations of Scripture! The psalms are a treasure-trove of sacred poetry, theology, historical ballads, and even prophecy about Jesus Christ. Many of the church Fathers wrote extensive commentaries on the psalms because they have been a part of worship since the reign of King David! The Jews would chant particular psalms at different sacrificial offerings and seasons of the year. We do the same. If there is a ‘second’ (third) reading after the psalm, it is either from the New Testament letters, the Acts of the Apostles, or the Book of Revelation (always from the New Testament).

Perhaps a word about ‘lectors’ and ‘acolytes’ would be appropriate here. Before Pope Paul VI, in the Latin Church, lay people were not permitted to read the Scriptures at mass. The office of ‘lector’ was part of the ‘minor orders’ that a seminarian received on the path to ordination to the priesthood (the others being ‘tonsure’, ‘porter’, ‘acolyte’, and ‘subdeacon’). This is because the proclamation of Scripture is such an integral part of the Eucharistic sacrifice that it has a ‘quasi-priestly’ nature (even in Jewish tradition). In addition, there was a practical reason—the readings were in Latin, and the most literate people were usually those in seminary! In 1972, Pope Paul VI eliminated the minor orders and permitted lay people to be given the office of lector and acolyte, but only men in order to keep continuity with the tradition. In the United States, the bishops decided that this appeared discriminatory towards women, so they decided not to ‘officially’ install lectors or acolytes outside of seminary. Instead, they decided the compromise would be to ‘temporarily deputize’ lectors and acolytes at the local level and thereby allow both women and men the opportunity to read the Scriptures at mass or to be servers. Technically speaking, then, if you are a reader or a server at mass, it is only for your local church—you would need to receive deputation from another church if you moved there. Also, this ‘deputizing’ needs to be renewed after a determined period of time, usually every year. If you are an ‘officially instituted’ acolyte or lector, this is a permanent office. More to come next week...