

Explaining the Mass

With Fr. Mark Bentz, STL

Part 6: Liturgy of the Word, part 2

We now come to the Gospel. This is the climax of the Liturgy of the Word and you might wonder why we stand. Dr. Brant Pitre sees our posture as a continuation of Jewish tradition when they would read the Torah. “And Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden pulpit which they had made for the purpose... And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people; and when he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God; and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands; and they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground... [Also,] the Levites helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. And they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”(Nehemiah 8:1ff)¹

You notice how on Sundays we make a procession with the book of the Gospels and treat it with great reverence. Jesus is the Word of God, and the Gospel is also the Word of God so our respect for the book of the Gospels is a symbol of our respect for Christ. But it is even deeper than a symbol. For we truly believe that when the Gospel is proclaimed in the assembly at Mass-Christ becomes present. That is why we stand at attention recognizing the true presence of Christ among us as the Gospels are proclaimed. This is not always so easy to see or understand-- which is why the Homily takes on such great importance.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read that, after the Resurrection, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus walked with two disciples and “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.”²

¹ Pitre, Brant, “Biblical Explanation of the Mass”, www.brantpitre.com

² Luke 24:27

After this experience, the disciples remarked to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?”³ The homily should elicit the same reaction from us—it should set our hearts on fire as we come to understand more deeply who Jesus is and how He has fulfilled every prophecy of the Old Testament and saved us from our sins. “The Old Testament is made manifest in the New, and the New Testament is hidden in the Old” as many Church Fathers have told us. If you are looking for an introduction to Scripture to get your heart ‘burning,’ I recommend to you Dr. John Bergsma’s excellent little book, “Bible Basics for Catholics.” He was my scripture professor in college and every class of his was like a ‘little Emmaus’ for me and my classmates. I owe any profound insights in preaching I have to him. We are going through his material in our parish wide study on Thursday evenings—come join us!

Who can give a homily? The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* tells us, “The Homily should ordinarily be given by the Priest Celebrant himself or be entrusted by him to a concelebrating Priest, or from time to time and, if appropriate, to the Deacon, but never to a lay person. [64] ... On Sundays and Holydays of Obligation there is to be a Homily at every Mass that is celebrated with the people attending, and it may not be omitted without a grave reason. On other days it is recommended, especially on the weekdays of Advent, Lent, and Easter Time, as well as on other festive days and occasions when the people come to church in greater numbers”⁴

After the proclamation of the Gospel and the homily, we take a moment of silence. In fact, silence is an essential part of the mass. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* states, “The Liturgy of the Word is to be celebrated in such a way as to favor meditation, and so any kind of haste such as hinders recollection is clearly to be avoided. In the course of it, brief periods of silence are also appropriate... by means of these, under the action of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response through prayer may be prepared.”⁵

After an appropriate period of silence, we stand to profess the creed, where we will pick up next time...

³ Luke 24:32

⁴ GIRM 66.

⁵ GIRM 56.