

Understanding the Mass: The Liturgy of the Word

Historically, the Liturgy of the Word began with the Disciples of Jesus proclaiming the words and deeds of Jesus orally to their perspective communities to the best of their abilities. The written scriptures demonstrate that “there is good reason to believe that the proclamation of God’s word sometimes took place in conjunction with the celebration of the Eucharist.”¹

For example, remember, *“Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes”* (Acts. 2:46). *“On the first day of the week when we gathered to break bread, Paul spoke to them because he was going to leave on the next day, and he kept on speaking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were gathered”* (Acts 20:7-8). *“Give greetings to the brothers in Laodicea and to Nympha and to the church in her house. And when this letter is read before you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and you yourselves read the one from Laodicea. And tell Archippus, ‘See that you fulfill the ministry that you received in the Lord’”* (Colossians 4:15-17). *“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him, to show his servants what must happen soon. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who gives witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ by reporting what he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen to this prophetic message and heed what is written in it, for the appointed time is near”* (Revelation 1:1-3). *Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon, our beloved and our co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church at your house. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”* (Philemon



¹ The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Mass. Johnson, Lawrence FDLC 2011 Pg. 27

1-2). These “Apostolic writings were read at Christian assemblies, and it is likely that at least some of these gatherings were for the Eucharist.”²

In addition, it is important to remember the conditions required for the scriptures to make the canon. Fr. Hartin declares, “*If a book is to be considered as part of the canon*” One, “*it must be accepted by all the Christian Churches and used in their liturgy.*”

Also, “*it must come from an Apostle.*”³

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The acceptance of what twenty-seven books of Testament bears witness these scriptures, along Scriptures, were passed

along and prayed and read in conjunction with the Eucharist.

“Each major liturgical tradition or Rite (e.g. that of Eastern Syria, Jerusalem, Alexandria),” Antioch, Alexandria, Samaria, Damascus, Cyprus, Lystra, Iconium, Lycanoia, Thessalonica, Beorea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Macedonia, Miletus, Caesarea, Malta, Galatia, Philippi, Colossae (Asia Minor), and Rome, “developed its own number and selection of readings.”⁴ “Whereas four or six readings occur in some of the eastern Rites, the general rule is three readings, usually the Prophets, the Apostles, and the Gospel. Many Scholars believe that Rome originally had three readings, an arrangement restored on Sundays and major feasts by the present Lectionary.”⁵

Our current Lectionary “arranges the Sunday readings in a three-year cycle, the characteristic feature of each year being the Gospel: Year A is based on Matthew, Year B on Mark, and Year C on Luke. St. John’s Gospel occurs on the first Sunday of Lent, during the Easter season, and on certain Sundays during Year B. For weekdays

² Ibid Pg. 27

³ Introduction to the New Testament, Hartin, Patrick J, Ann Arbor: XanEdu, 2003. Print Pg. 29

⁴ The Mystery of Faith: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Mass. Johnson, Lawrence FDLC 2011 Pg. 27

⁵ Ibid Pg. 27

there is a two year cycle: the Gospels remain the same each year but the first reading varies.”⁶ The General Instruction of the Roman Missal reads,

The Readings

357. Sundays and Solemnities have assigned to them three readings, that is, from a Prophet, an Apostle, and a Gospel, by which the Christian people are instructed in the continuity of the work of salvation according to God’s wonderful design. These readings should be followed strictly. In Easter Time, according to the tradition of the Church, instead of being from the Old Testament, the reading is taken from the Acts of the Apostles.

For Feasts, two readings are assigned. If, however, according to the norms a Feast is raised to the rank of a Solemnity, a third reading is added, and this is taken from the Common.

For Memorials of Saints, unless proper readings are given, the readings assigned for the weekday are normally used. In certain cases, particularized readings are provided, that is to say, readings, which highlight some particular aspect of the spiritual life or activity of the Saint. The use of such readings is not to be insisted upon, unless a pastoral reason truly suggests it.

358. In the Lectionary for weekdays, readings are provided for each day of every week throughout the entire course of the year; hence, these readings will in general be used on the days to which they are assigned, unless there occurs a Solemnity, a Feast, or Memorial that has its own New Testament readings, that is to say, readings in which mention is made of the Saint being celebrated. Should, however, the continuous reading during the week from time to time be interrupted, on account of some Solemnity or Feast, or some particular celebration, then the Priest shall be permitted, bearing in mind the scheme of readings for the entire week, either to combine parts omitted with other readings or to decide which readings are to be given preference over others. In Masses for special groups, the Priest shall be allowed to choose texts more

⁶ Ibid Pg. 27

particularly suited to the particular celebration, provided they are taken from the texts of an approved Lectionary.

359. In addition, in the Lectionary a special selection of texts from Sacred Scripture is given for Ritual Masses into which certain Sacraments or Sacramentals are incorporated, or for Masses that are celebrated for certain needs. Sets of readings of this kind have been so prescribed so that through a more apt hearing of the Word of God the faithful may be led to a fuller understanding of the mystery in which they are participating, and may be educated to a more ardent love of the Word of God. Therefore, the texts proclaimed in the celebration are to be chosen keeping in mind both an appropriate pastoral reason and the options allowed in this matter.

360. At times, a longer and shorter form of the same text is given. In choosing between these two forms, a pastoral criterion should be kept in mind. On such an occasion, attention should be paid to the capacity of the faithful to listen with fruit to a reading of greater or lesser length, and to their capacity to hear a more complete text, which is then explained in the Homily. [141]

361. When a possibility is given of choosing between one or other text laid down, or suggested as optional, attention shall be paid to the good of participants, whether, that is to say, it is a matter of using an easier text or one more appropriate for a given gathering, or of repeating or setting aside a text that is assigned as proper to some particular celebration while being optional for another, [142] just as pastoral advantage may suggest. Such a situation may arise either when the same text would have to be read again within a few days, as, for example, on a Sunday and on a subsequent weekday, or when it is feared that a certain text might give rise to some difficulties for a particular group of the Christian faithful. However, care should be taken that, when choosing scriptural passages, parts of Sacred Scripture are not permanently excluded.

362. The adaptations to the *Ordo Lectionum Missae* as contained in the Lectionary for Mass for use in the Dioceses of the United States of America should be carefully observed.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal sums up how important the Word of God is in the context of the Liturgy just as the Vatican II document the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* does. The GIRM Reads,

When the Sacred Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his word, proclaims the Gospel. Therefore, the readings from the Word of God are to be listened to reverently by everyone, for they are an element of the greatest importance in the Liturgy. Although in the readings from Sacred Scripture the Word of God is addressed to all people of whatever era and is understandable to them, a fuller understanding and a greater efficaciousness of the word is nevertheless fostered by a living commentary on the word, that is, by the Homily, as part of the liturgical action (GIRM 29).

Moreover, The GIRM adds,

The Liturgy of the Word

55. The main part of the Liturgy of the Word is made up of the readings from Sacred Scripture together with the chants occurring between them. As for the Homily, the Profession of Faith, and the Universal Prayer, they develop and conclude it. For in the readings, as explained by the Homily, God speaks to his people,[57] opening up to them the mystery of redemption and salvation, and offering spiritual nourishment; and Christ himself is present through his word in the midst of the faithful.[58] By silence and by singing, the people make this divine word their own, and affirm their adherence to it by means of the Profession of Faith; finally, having been nourished by the divine word, the people pour out their petitions by means of the Universal Prayer for the needs of the whole Church and for the salvation of the whole world.

Silence

56. 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, accommodated to the assembled congregation; 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. It may be appropriate to observe such periods of silence, for example, before the Liturgy of the Word itself begins, after the First and Second Reading, and lastly at the conclusion of the Homily.[59]

The Biblical Readings

57. In the readings, the table of God's Word is spread before the faithful, and the treasures of the Bible are opened to them.[60] Hence, it is preferable that the arrangement of the biblical readings be maintained, for by them the unity of both Testaments and of salvation history is brought out. Nor is it lawful to replace the readings and Responsorial Psalm, which contain the Word of God, with other, non-biblical texts. [61]

58. In the celebration of the Mass with the people, the readings are always read from the ambo.

59. The function of proclaiming the readings is by tradition not presidential but ministerial. Therefore the readings are to be read by a reader, but the Gospel by the Deacon or, in his absence, by another Priest. If, however, a Deacon or another Priest is not present, the Priest Celebrant himself should read the Gospel, and moreover, if no other suitable reader is present, the Priest Celebrant should also proclaim the other readings as well.

After each reading, whoever reads it pronounces the acclamation, and by means of the reply the assembled people give honor to the Word of God that they have received in faith and with gratitude.

60. The reading of the Gospel constitutes the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. The Liturgy itself teaches the great reverence that is to be shown to this reading by setting it off from the other readings with special marks of honor, by the fact of which minister is appointed to proclaim it and by the blessing or prayer with which he prepares himself; and also by the fact that through their acclamations the faithful acknowledge and confess that Christ is present and is speaking to them and stand as they listen to the reading; and by the mere fact of the marks of reverence that are given to the Book of the Gospels.

Lawrence Johnson reflects on the Liturgy of the word. He writes,

The purpose of the Liturgy of the Word is not to communicate information about God in the works of God. It is to forge a common identity and spirituality based upon the action of God among God's people today. Its goal is to touch, move, and transform hearts, doing so by a dynamic blend of proclaiming, listening, responding, meditating, and being silent. In the readings, explained by the homily, God is speaking to his people, opening them up to the mystery of redemption and salvation, and nourishing their spirit; Christ himself is present in the midst of the faithful through his own word," which we have seen in GIRM 55.⁷

Johnson adds, "The Liturgy of the Word, then, is not just a preparation for the Eucharist. A profound relationship exists between the two since the Word of God and the bread of life are two aspects of the same mystery."⁸ The most profound explanation of this relationship is revealed in the Vatican II documents. *Dei Verbum* reads,

⁷ Ibid Pg. 31

⁸ Ibid Pg. 31

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body. She has always maintained them, and continues to do so, together with sacred tradition, as the supreme rule of faith, since, as inspired by God and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the word of God Himself without change, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and Apostles. Therefore, like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the Word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. Consequently these words are perfectly applicable to Sacred Scripture: "For the word of God is living and active" (Heb. 4:12) and "it has power to build you up and give you your heritage among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32; see 1 Thess. 2:13).⁹

In addition, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* adds, "The two parts which, in a certain sense, go to make up the Mass, namely, the Liturgy of the Word and the Eucharistic Liturgy, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship. Accordingly this sacred synod strongly urges pastors of souls that, when instructing the faithful, they insistently teach them to take their part in the entire Mass, especially on Sundays and feasts of obligation."¹⁰

Ultimately, True Disciples of Jesus will enter into the Mass knowing that all the mysteries that are celebrated through the Mass are the celebration of the Paschal Mystery of Christ, which is the definition of the Liturgy.

⁹ Dei Verbum Par. 21

¹⁰ Sacrosanctum Concilium Par. 56

Photo Sources

Gathering to break bread Pg. 1

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Greek NT Text PG. 2

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