



FOUR MINUTE TEACHINGS ON THE MASS (3 of 7)

Catholic Mass and Worship

Ideas from Bishop Ken Untener, late Bishop of Saginaw

Adapted for The Church of Saint Ann

Liturgy of the Word

We've been looking at the Mass as a ritual with four "movements." The second movement is the **Liturgy of the Word**. The "movement" here is from God to us—God's Word coming upon us like the gentle rain or warm sun.

The truth is, for quite a few centuries we Catholics have underestimated the power of the Word of God. Our emphasis was on the Eucharist. We used to teach, for example, that you could miss the **Liturgy of the Word** without missing Mass.

It might surprise many Catholics to see what the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) said about this. Here it is: **"The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord."** Well, we have "always" done that in principle, but not in practice. Lately, we've been improving by leaps and bounds.

We've come to realize more fully that when Jesus talked about the "Bread of Life" he was talking about the Word, *and* the Eucharist. In our churches we have tables: The **Table of the Word** (the ambo where the scriptures are proclaimed) and the **Table of the Eucharist** (the altar where we, with Christ, offer our lives to God).

It is our teaching that when the Word of God is proclaimed at Mass, we are not remembering something God once said. *God is speaking to us live now* through these graced words. For sure, God speaks something to each of us in every liturgy. We don't know what it will be, or even when it will come. It may be a word of consolation, or of a challenge, or an insight, or something we don't know how to describe...but for sure, in each liturgy, God speaks to each and all of us.

We need to let his words fall upon us, strike us in whatever way God intends. It is not an instruction we have to take notes on as though we were in class. We simply prepare ourselves to listen, open our hearts and minds, and let God speak. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) used a beautiful image for this: "The Father who is in heaven meets his children with great love and speaks with them."

Here is the shape of the **Liturgy of the Word**:

- **First Reading:** This is almost always from the Old Testament, our oldest treasury of God's word. As a young boy, these were the only scriptures Jesus had, and he studied them.
- **Responsorial Psalm:** This is not a regular song. It is sung scripture. The Psalms are the prayers that Jesus grew up on. They teach us to pray our deepest feelings—joy, frustration, pleading. We sit back, savor the words being sung, and repeatedly sing a refrain. It is a wonderful way to pray the scriptures.
- **Second Reading:** The New Testament is made up of 27 books. The second reading is always taken from one of the 23 books that are not the Gospels.
- **Gospel:** The Church teaches that, "Christ, present in his own word, is proclaiming the Gospel." That is why we stand, to greet him, eager to listen to what he has to say to us.
- **Homily:** This is not a "talk" inserted into the Mass. It is intended to illumine the words we have heard.
- **Profession of Faith:** As early as the 5th century the Creed was part of the Mass. It is a statement of what we Catholics believe.
- **General Intercessions:** Finally, we have the General Intercessions in which we respond to the word of God by praying not only for our own needs, but for the needs of the whole Church and the whole world.

Applying the Liturgy of the Word to Daily Living:

- Reflect on the importance of sacred scripture as it mediates God's presence to us and gives us a deeper relationship with Jesus.
- Live in confidence, knowing that God's great deeds of the past are continuing in the present and will continue in the future.
- Live with an awareness that all time belongs to God and that no single moment is ordinary.