The Meaning of the Mass: Part Ten
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LITURGY OF THE WORD

One of the key elements in the reform of the liturgy, by the Second Vatican Council, was a particular concern with regard to Scripture. Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy states that, “Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy” (SC, 24). This is affirmed not only in the proclamation of the Word, but also in the way that the Scriptures inspire the prayers, Collects, and songs of the liturgy. With regard to the Liturgy of the Word, the Constitution determined two key reforms: that the Scriptures be proclaimed in the language of the people, the vernacular (see SC, 36), and that “the treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that a richer share in God's word may be provided for the faithful” (SC, 51; see also SC, 35 §1).

This last demand was fulfilled by the publication of the Lectionary, which sets out the pattern of Scripture readings for all of the celebrations of the Eucharist and the other sacraments. For the Sunday celebrations, the Church now follows a three-year cycle, in which the Ordinary Sundays of each year are entrusted to one of the synoptic evangelists, to present his portrait of Christ (Matthew in Year A; Mark in Year B; and Luke in Year C). John’s Gospel has the pride of place during the Seasons of Lent and Easter. The first reading is principally from the Old Testament and chosen to correspond to the Gospel passage. The second reading (from the apostles) follows a semi-continuous pattern of its own, independent of the Gospels and the first reading. For the Seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and various solemnities, however, all three readings are chosen to support one another. Every Liturgy of the Word has a responsorial psalm, which is “an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word” (GIRM, 61), and which the Lectionary says should, as rule, be sung (General Introduction to the Lectionary, 20).

The vital nature of the Liturgy of the Word to the whole celebration is summed up by the Constitution: it states that the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist form one act of worship. It uses the image of our being nourished at two tables: the table of God’s Word and the table of the Eucharist (SC, 51). When we think about the scriptures, it is important to recognize, as Paul writes to us in Timothy, that “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:16-17) As we listen to God’s word proclaimed, we come to understand the reality of our lives in Christ. But the word finds its fullest meaning in our realization that the very proclamation of them brings about their fulfillment in our midst. We just need to recall what Jesus said in Luke’s Gospel... “Rolling up the scroll He gave it back to the assistant and sat down. All in the synagogue had their eyes fixed on Him. Then, He began by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.’” (Luke 4:20-21)