

(Re-) Learning the Mass

Part 12 – Liturgy of the Word (3)

“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.” (*GIRM*, 60)

The proclamation of the Gospel is the high point of the liturgy of the Word because the Gospels themselves are the high point of the Sacred Scriptures – “for they are the principal witness for the life and teaching of the incarnate Word, our savior” (*Dei Verbum*, 18).

During the Acclamation Before the Gospel, the faithful stand. This difference in posture compared to the other readings is another example of the esteem with which we hold the Gospels. We rise to greet Christ who is entering our midst in a particular way, through the words of the Gospels.

The Gospels may be read from a special book, often quite ornate, ritually expressing our veneration for them. The procession taking the Book from the altar to the ambo may involve candles and incense. All of these testify to the unique place the Gospel holds in the Church; as St. Caesaria the Younger, a sixth century abbess, put it, “There is no doctrine which could be better, more precious and more splendid than the text of the Gospel. Behold and retain what our Lord and Master, Christ, has taught by his words and accomplished by his deeds” (Letter to St. Richildis and St. Radegunde).

At Mass the Gospel is proclaimed by a deacon, or else by a priest. But why is that? The Sacrament of Holy Orders “configures the recipient to Christ by a special grace of the Holy Spirit, so that he may serve as Christ’s instrument for his Church. By ordination one is enabled to act as a representative of Christ, Head of the Church, in his triple office of priest, prophet, and king.” (*CCC*, 158). Since the Gospels are the testimony

to Christ himself, his words and his actions, it is fitting that a minister who sacramentally represents Christ to the assembly proclaims the Gospel.

When a deacon proclaims the Gospel reading, he asks the priest for a blessing. A priest does the same if he is reading the Gospel at Mass celebrated by a Bishop. The blessing states: “May the Lord be in your heart and on your lips, that you may proclaim his Gospel worthily and well, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, + and of the Holy Spirit.” But if there is no deacon or the Bishop is not present, the Priest bows before the altar and says: “Cleanse my heart and my lips, almighty God, that I may worthily proclaim your holy Gospel” (*Order of Mass*, 14).

The preparation by the minister, and the dialogue before the reading, where again, the minister says “The Lord be with you” and the people respond “and with your spirit” testify to the spiritual depth of what is occurring in the reading. We are truly encountering Christ, and this encounter is treated with the awe, reverence, and joy that it deserves.

Why do we cross ourselves in a unique way at this point? We sign ourselves with the cross on our forehead, lips, and heart- we prepare ourselves to hear the words of Christ. Some pray the following prayer as they do so, which expresses what the action symbolizes: “May the Lord be on my mind, on my lips, and in my heart.”

The people’s responses when the minister announces the Gospel reading, “Glory to you, O Lord”, and at the end of the reading, “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ” are yet further recognition of the importance of what has happened with the Gospel’s proclamation. We praise and glorify Christ who is speaking to us, who is sharing with us the deeds that he performed in the course of his earthly life.

Following the reading, the minister kisses the Gospel (or brings it to the bishop to kiss, if he is present). While doing so, he prays “Through the words of the Gospel may our sins be wiped away.” May this be so for all of us who follow Jesus and hold fast to his holy Word.

