

# (Re-) Learning the Mass

## Part 10 – The Liturgy of the Word

“[I]n 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” (*Dei Verbum*, 21).

The main part of the Liturgy of the Word is made up of readings and meditations from the Sacred Scriptures. The rest of the Liturgy of the Word- the Homily, the Profession of Faith, and the Universal Prayer (Prayers of the Faithful) are a response to and development of the proclamation of God’s holy Word.

As with all encounters with Scripture, the point isn’t to just get through it, but rather, encounter God who is speaking to us, today, through that word. This is why the Church asks that the Liturgy of the Word “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.” (*GIRM*, 56). So not only the proclamation of Scripture is important, but also periods of silence- “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.” These periods of silence can take place before the readings, after each reading, and finally at the conclusion of the homily. We are encouraged to spend time in silent prayer, taking in what God has spoken through the Word and allowing it to transform us.

At Sunday Mass, there are two readings before the Gospel, one usually from the Old Testament, and another usually from the New Testament letters or Revelation. The Acts of the Apostles takes the place of the Old Testament reading during the season of Easter. Generally, the Old Testament readings are new to the Mass- while they were read in other liturgies such as the Liturgy of the Hours, in the history of the Roman Rite of Mass there was usually only one reading before the Gospel, which most of the time came from the New Testament letters. The Old Testament mainly appeared through the use of the Psalms throughout the Mass, in the chants and in many of the prayers. The Second Vatican Council asked that the “treasures of the bible ...be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare

may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word. In this way a more representative portion of the holy scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 51). The added Old Testament readings were part of this.

In the Sunday Lectionary (the Lectionary is the book of readings appointed for each day of the liturgical year), the Old Testament reading was often chosen because of its relationship with the Gospel reading. This highlights the unity of the Old and New Testaments. As St. Augustine put it, “the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.” This also highlights the uniquely Christian way of reading the Old Testament: “in the light of Christ crucified and risen”, though “it must not make us forget that the Old Testament retains its own intrinsic value as Revelation reaffirmed by our Lord himself.” (CCC 128, cf. Mk 12:29-31). Sometimes Christians have been tempted to either look down upon the Old Testament, or even discount it entirely, because there are parts which are difficult to understand or interpret. Bishop Robert Barron has a homily addressing this issue which can be found online: <https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/homily/the-hard-texts-of-the-old-testament/1014/>

During Ordinary Time, the second reading is usually a semi-continuous reading of sections of those books from week to week. In the past several weeks we have had readings from St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians and the Letter of St. James, soon to be followed by readings from the Letter to the Hebrews.

At weekday Masses, there is only one reading before the Gospel, which is usually a semi-continuous reading from various Old or New Testament books.

The readings are proclaimed from the ambo. As with the altar, the nature of what happens at the ambo means that it is not appropriate for unrelated things to be read or announced from that sacred place. Only the readings, the Psalm, the homily, and the intercessions (along with the Easter Proclamation at the Vigil and certain other special moments during the liturgical year) may be done at the ambo – never announcements or talks. Only a minister of the word should stand at it (*GIRM* 309).

