

(Re-) Learning the Mass

Part 11 – Liturgy of the Word (2)

Following the first reading at Mass is the Responsorial Psalm. This can also be an ornate chant called the *Gradual*, which fulfills the same function, though it is only one verse of a psalm. The Book of Psalms has often been seen as the official hymn-book of the Church – in the psalms we find the full expression of human experience and our situation before God. There are songs of praise, wonder, blessing, thanksgiving, but also bewilderment, suffering, questioning, but always through the lens of faith and hope in the Lord. Besides the Responsorial Psalm, we find the texts of the Psalms throughout the Mass. They are often used with the antiphons that can optionally be sung or recited at the Entrance, Offertory, and Communion. Many prayers in the Mass reference or quote the Psalms. A good number of the songs in our hymnals are based on the Psalms.

The Psalm is called “Responsorial” because the people respond by repeating an antiphon, but also because it is a response to the reading. There is an old liturgical tradition of singing a meditative chant following a reading, to respond to it and to contemplate the actions of God.

In 2011 Pope Benedict XVI gave a series of teachings on the Psalms. He said that “they are given to us so that we may learn to address God, to communicate with him, to speak to him of ourselves with his words, to find a language for the encounter with God. And through those words, it will also be possible to know and to accept the criteria of his action, to draw closer to the mystery of his thoughts and ways (cf. Is 55:8-9), so as to grow constantly in faith and in love.” (General Audience, 22 June 2011).

We see the Psalms in the life of Jesus and the Apostles. Jesus quoted the Psalms when he was questioned (Mt 22:41-46); After the Last Supper, we are told that Jesus and the Apostles “sang a hymn” (Mk 14:26); scholars think that these were probably Psalms 114-118, which were traditionally sung following the Passover Meal. It is interesting that Psalm 118 is the traditional Psalm of Easter, and contains a beautiful message of hope. On the cross, Jesus cries out, quoting the beginning of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27: 46)

Besides singing the Psalms at Mass, they also make up the main part of the official daily prayer of the Church, called The Liturgy of the Hours. Although only clergy and religious are obligated to pray the Liturgy of the Hours, it is really for everyone, as the prayer of the whole Church. Many laypeople today have begun praying it; if your parish doesn’t have public celebrations, perhaps you could get some people together to start it!

There are other books of the Bible which contain songs, called ‘canticles’ and from time to time these are used as the “Psalm” in Mass. These are from the books of Exodus, Isaiah, Daniel, and the Magnificat from the Gospel of Luke.

Sometimes you might experience some confusion about Psalm numbers. Some people think it is a difference between Catholic and Protestant bibles, but it exists within the Catholic world too! There are two main versions of the Old Testament which have served as sources of the text in the history of the Church: the Hebrew text, and the Greek translation. We have to remember that verse numbers and chapters are something that were added to the Bible afterwards, not there when originally written, and not always in line with the meaning of the text. Psalms 42 and 43, for instance, are a single song. The tradition of the Greek manuscripts numbers the psalms differently than the Hebrew, mainly because the Hebrew considers Psalms 9-10 as separate, while the Greek combines them. The Latin Bible follows the Greek numbering, so the Latin liturgical books use it as well, and so do most languages which are closely related to Latin. English translations, however, tend to follow the Hebrew numbering.

Following the psalm at weekday Mass, or the second reading on Sundays and more solemn occasions, is the Acclamation before the Gospel. We sing “Alleluia” throughout most of the year, the joyful exultation: “Praised be God!” By it “the gathering of the faithful welcomes and greets the Lord who is about to speak to them in the Gospel and profess their faith by means of the chant.” (GIRM, 62). We are preparing to hear the teachings of Jesus! To hear his counsel, the call to deeper conversion, and to desire to follow him more fervently.

