

# A BIBLICAL WALK THROUGH THE MASS

*An excerpt from the book of Edward Sri*

## 5. THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

The Church often used the image of “two tables” to express the continuity between the two main parts of the Mass: The Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. God’s people are nourished first from the table of holy Scripture, which is proclaimed in the Liturgy of the Word. Then they are fed with the body of our Our Lord at the table of the Eucharist.

While the Eucharist is the very body and blood of Jesus and the “source and summit” of the Christian life, the Scriptures lead us to a deeper communion with Jesus in the Eucharist. We need both the inspired word of God in Scripture and the Incarnate Word of God present in the Blessed Sacrament.

The readings from Scripture do not merely provide us with exhortations for moral living and reflections about the spiritual life. In the Liturgy we encounter the words of God himself spoken personally to each of us.

While the Scriptures were written by human beings, to particular human communities, at a certain moment in history, they are inspired by God. Inspiration, from the Greek word, means “God Breathed” (2 Tim 3:16). Thus, Scripture is like Jesus Christ Himself - fully human and fully divine. Having marked ourselves with the Sign of the cross, confessed our unworthiness to be in God’s presence, and sung his praises, we are now prepared to listen carefully to God’s own inspired words. And this is a personal moment for as Vatican II taught, “In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talks with them.”

The selections from Scripture are determined by a three-year cycle of readings from the various parts of the Bible: the Old Testament, the Psalms, the New Testament, and then the Gospel. Even the order of these readings has significance, for it reflects the order of God’s redemptive plan. They move from the Old to the New - from Israel to the Church.

The readings from Scripture also correspond to the various seasons and feasts of the Church. On one level, the Church walks us through the life and mission of Jesus through the liturgical year. In four weeks of Advent, we recall the Old Testament period of humanity’s longing for the Savior. In the Christmas season, we rejoice in the coming and birth of the Son of God. In the forty days of lent, we participate in Jesus’s prayer and fasting in the desert as we prepare to enter Christ’s passion in Holy Week. In the fifty days of the Easter season, we celebrate Jesus’ resurrection and ascension into heaven, culminating on the fiftieth day with his sending of the Spirit on Pentecost. The rest of the liturgical year - known as Ordinary Time - focus attention on the public ministry of Jesus

Scattered throughout the year, the Church draws our attention to the various Saints and mysteries of faith, Chief among them and most often commemorated is the Blessed Virgin Mary.

As we cannot fully grasp the entire mystery of Christ at once, the Church marks off special days to give attention, thanks and praise for a specific aspect of catholic faith.

# A BIBLICAL WALK THROUGH THE MASS

*An excerpt from the book of Edward Sri*

## 6. SCRIPTURE READINGS

The first reading is usually from the Old Testament, except during the Easter season when it is from Acts of the Apostles. In the Old Testament, the mystery of our salvation is present in a hid-den way. “The old Testament prepares for the New, and the New fulfills the Old; the two-shed light on each other. Both are true word of God” (Cat 140).

At the end of the first reading the Lector says. “The Word of the Lord,” and we cry out in amazement that God should speak to us, “Thanks be to God.” Giving thanks to God is a com-mon facet of worship from the Old Testament (1 Chr 16:4) to the New. St. Paul used those specific words to thank the Lord for delivering him from sin and death (1Cor 15.57), (Rom 7:25}.

After hearing God’s words proclaimed in the First reading, we respond with God’s own inspired words of praise and thanksgiving from among the 150 hymns of the Book of Psalms. The ancient Israelis sang verses of the Psalms in the temple, usually by two alternating groups with a common refrain. This calling back and forth between motive and response points to a kind of liturgical dialog and is found throughout the mass. “The Lord be with you...and also with you,” “Lift up your hearts...we lift them up to the Lord.”

The second reading comes from the New Testament: one of the Epistles, the Acts of the Apostles, or the book of Revelation. These writings reflect on the mystery of Jesus Christ and His saving work and the meaning it has for us.

The last reading is from The Gospels, and the Mass reflects its preeminence because, as taught by Vatican II, “they are our principal source for the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word, our Savior”. **First**, the people stand to welcome the Lord Jesus who is about to be proclaimed in the Gospel reading. Standing was the reverent posture when Ezra read from the book of law. (Neh 8:5). **Second**, the people sing “Alleluia,” which is a Jewish expression of joy meaning “Praise the Lord.”. **Third**, during the Alleluia, the priest begins to process in the sanctuary, taking the book of Gospels from the altar to the lectern. To prepare himself to read, the priest prays: “Cleanse my heart and my lips, almighty God, that I may worthily proclaim your holy Gospel, “recalling how the Prophet Isaiah’s lips needed to be purified, before speaking the words of God. (Is 6:1-9). After another greeting dialogue, the priest announces the Gospel reading, and traces the sign of the cross on his forehead, mouth, breast, and on the book.

All this ceremony shouts out that we are approaching a most sacred moment of the mass. The Church teaches that when the Sacred Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his own word, proclaims the Gospel. Thus, Christ speaks personally to each of us through God’s divinely inspired words. We hear Him say to us “Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand (Mt 4:17). And when He speaks to the adulteress, we hear Him comforting us in our sorrow over our sins, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again” (Jn 8:11).

The readings conclude with a homily to explain their meaning and relate them to everyday practices in life. Since the Gospels are at the heart of the Bible, only as a successor of the Apostles, the Bishop, and those with whom he shares authority, have the responsibility to proclaim the Gospels, and give the homily. This assures the continuum of the Church’s apostolic faith, and its proper teaching.