

Believe Celebrate Live THE EUCHARIST

The Liturgy of the Word

Storytelling

“Storytelling is the single most important energy of all religious celebration,” writes Father Eugene Walsh, ss. “Storytelling lies at the heart of worship” (Walsh, *Proclaiming God’s Love in Word and Deed*, pp. 10–11). On the first Holy Thursday, Jesus gathered in the upper room with his disciples for a specific reason: to celebrate the Passover, to join in the ritual retelling of the story of how the Hebrews became God’s chosen people. Within the context of that story, Jesus began to tell a new story, by taking bread and wine and sharing his very self with his disciples.

Today, it is in the context of Christ’s story that our own stories unfold. As we celebrate the Liturgy of Word, “we don’t leave our lives and our moment in history behind as we listen to these stories from the past; we actually take them up anew in the light of the Word we have heard. The story of our lives is seen to be part of a larger story—the story that the Bible tells” (Driscoll, *What Happens at Mass*, p. 39). In the proclamation of the scriptures at Mass, ancient wisdom and long-ago wonders are made present; and the words of prophets once again await their fulfillment, in our own place and time.

The Table and Altar of the Word

We say “Amen” to the opening prayer of the Mass. All are seated. The lector, and later the psalmist, proceeds to the ambo. We have taken our places around the table and altar of the Word.

The readings we share at this table are not chosen at random. In fact, they are not “chosen” at all; they are drawn from a book of readings known as the Lectionary. The Lectionary was developed at the direction of the Second Vatican Council, which in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* called for a

more plentiful sharing of the scriptures. Arranged in a three-year Sunday cycle and two-year daily cycle, the Lectionary provides three readings and a psalm for each Sunday of the year. In the course of three years we hear almost the entirety of the New Testament, and a good portion of the Old as well.

Who Wrote the Bible?

At the beginning of each reading, we are given a short introduction that tells us who wrote it: “A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah,” for example. But at the end of the reading, a new attribution is made: this is “the word of the Lord,” not in the past but in the present tense. Is there a contradiction here? Perhaps, but it is a wonderful one, which illuminates our Catholic understanding of the sacred scriptures. For these sacred writers, chosen by God, were not simply saintly secretaries, passively taking dictation from above. According to Vatican II, they “made full use of their powers and faculties so that, though God acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written” (*Constitution on Divine Revelation* #11). They wrote in the language and the forms of their day. They used images and concepts familiar to their audience. That is why it is so important that we understand who wrote the text, in what setting, and to whom.

The First Reading

The first reading is drawn from the Old Testament, except during Eastertide, when we hear passages from the Acts of the Apostles. This reading is usually the one most closely connected to the Gospel by theme or imagery. For instance, when Jesus tells the parable of the sower, the first reading compares God’s word to rain falling on the earth and making it fruitful. When Jesus feeds the five thousand in the Gospel, in the first

reading Isaiah describes the heavenly banquet. As we listen to the reading from the Hebrew scriptures, we should think of Jesus on the road to Emmaus, explaining to his disciples that he was the fulfillment of the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms (see Luke 24:44). Their words are like steppingstones that lead us to the risen Lord.

The Psalm

After the first reading comes the responsorial psalm. The psalms are “the heart of the Bible,” as Cardinal Lustiger says (Lustiger, *La Messe*, p. 70), the ancient “hymnal” of the Hebrew people. These prayers were the daily fare of Jesus and his disciples, and of the early church, and they are still at the center of the Church’s liturgical prayer. In addition to being prayed at every Mass, the psalms form the basis of the Liturgy of the Hours (sometimes known as the Office). The psalm usually has a very close connection to the first reading, and often will serve as a link with the Gospel.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* teaches that the psalms are a school for prayer; they “continue to teach us how to pray” (CCC #2587). What do they teach us? They teach a kind of prayer that sings lovingly, often boldly, to God: a prayer filled with awe at God’s creation and trust in God’s promised mercy. It is a prayer that is totally honest about human suffering and human cruelty, a prayer that does not hesitate to ask questions, a prayer that intercedes for the entire community and for the world. It is a prayer of rejoicing, suffering, praising, trusting, glorifying, prophesying.

The Second Reading

While the first reading corresponds closely with the Gospel, the second reading—usually drawn from one of the letters of St. Paul or one of the other apostles—often does not. Instead, for example, during the weeks of Ordinary Time, we simply read segments of the letters in sequence. Sometimes, though, these readings resonate wonderfully in their own way with the first reading and the Gospel.

This happens most often during the major seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. The apostolic letters are written to the people of specific communities (Corinth, Philippi, Ephesus, Rome); in other words, to Christian communities struggling to understand the mysteries of their faith and to live out their baptism in Christ in often trying circumstances. So the apostles speak to people just like us!

The Gospel

The reading of the Gospel is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. We stand. The priest or deacon holds the Gospel book high in solemn procession to the ambo. During this procession, we sing *Hallel Yah!* “Praise God!” As St. Augustine observed, “Alleluia” is the song proper to an Easter people. We sing alleluia, our resurrection song, because in the proclamation of the Gospel we meet the risen Christ. “Jesus rose from the dead with the whole life he once lived rising with him . . . every word that Jesus spoke, every action he performed, can be present to us because it rose with him” (Driscoll, p. 36).

We also acknowledge Christ’s risen presence in the dialogue we now exchange with the priest or deacon. Once again, as at the beginning of the Mass, he reminds us that God is with us: “The Lord be with you.” (This dialogue takes place four times during the Mass—always at important moments, to mark the beginning of something new.) This time, when the reading is announced, we respond with an acclamation of praise: “Glory to you, O Lord!” That acclamation is accompanied by the sign of the cross, made in a special way. A cross is drawn on the open pages of the Gospel book, and then the whole assembly marks forehead, lips, and heart with the cross. This gesture is in itself a prayer, as we ask Christ to open our minds to understand, our lips to speak, and our hearts to believe his Gospel. After the Gospel reading, we join in another acclamation: “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ!” We speak directly to Christ, whom we acknowledge as present in the words of his gospel, spoken long ago, but renewed this day and fulfilled in our hearing.

At the conclusion of the Gospel reading the deacon or priest kisses the book and prays one of the silent prayers of the Mass: “May the words of the Gospel wipe away our sins.” The kiss reminds us that Christ’s gospel is alive and present in our midst, and the silent prayer reminds us of its power to save us, here and now.

A Living Word

“The Sacred Scriptures, above all in their liturgical proclamation, are the source of life and strength” (*Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass* #47). Each Christian community needs to hear the scriptures proclaimed in its midst, in its own accent, as it were. That is why the ministries of reader and psalmist are so important; that is why a good sound system is not a luxury, but an absolute necessity. “By the word we speak or the song we sing, we have the power to bring people to life or to bore them to death. If we speak and sing God’s word in dull and listless accents, we bore people to death by the very word that is designed to bring people to life. What a paradox!” (Walsh, p. 51).

The message is clear: in the Liturgy of the Word, we need to hear God’s word. “Faith comes through hearing,” St. Paul wrote to the Romans—and to us.

Homily

Following the proclamation of the Gospel, we are again seated to listen to the homily.

If you have traveled in Europe, or have seen some older churches in the United States, you have probably seen examples of pulpits from the past, quite different from what we are used to today. These grand installations (the vast majority of which are no longer in use) dominate the nave and are often splendid artistic creations, with saints swarming over their decorated surfaces, supported by larger-than-life figures like St. Jerome or the four evangelists, and approached by elaborate staircases. They are also located at a considerable distance from the altar.

These pulpits speak powerfully of the importance of God’s word. But they also speak of a separation of the word from the action of the Mass. Where early church

fathers like St. Augustine almost always preached on the readings of the day, in the Middle Ages sermons came to be more like lessons in catechism, teaching truths of the faith without much—if any—connection to the scriptures. The principal preaching would sometimes take place at a service like Benediction, and not in the context of the Eucharist at all. This was the case even into the twentieth century.

In the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, the first major document the Second Vatican Council produced, the council fathers affirmed that the homily “forms part of the liturgy itself” (*CSL* #52). There is a world of meaning in those words, and they have had an impact on everything from church architecture to homiletic style. If the homily is part of the liturgy, then it necessarily takes its subject matter from the liturgy itself—from the readings of the day, the feast or mystery being celebrated, from the Eucharist we are soon to receive. If the homily is part of the Mass, then clearly catechism lessons, theological discourses, or overly complex biblical explanations—valuable as these are—belong elsewhere in Catholic life. If the homily is part of the Mass, then its function becomes quite specific: it “points to the presence of God in people’s lives and then leads a congregation into the Eucharist, providing, as it were, the motive for celebrating the Eucharist in this time and place (cf. *Lectionary for Mass*. English translation of the Second *Editio-Typica* [1981] no. 24 prepared by International Commission on English in the Liturgy.) . . . the homily should flow quite naturally out of the readings and into the liturgical action that follows” (p. 23).

The homilist, therefore, has the daunting task of helping people to experience that “the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12). There are as many ways of responding to that challenge as there are homilists! (Look at Luke 4 for a “homily” by Jesus—it must be one of the shortest on record. See Acts 2:14–36 to read Peter’s homily on the first Pentecost.) Brilliant, bland, or in between, “if we listen with open hearts” to the homily, writes Msgr. Joseph Champlin, “the

Holy Spirit will use a word, a phrase, a concept, a story from the homily to speak to us, to touch us” (Champlin, *The Mystery and Meaning of the Mass*, p. 72). Cardinal Lustiger adds: “It is not the priest who changes the hearts of the faithful, but the Holy Spirit, to whom both the priest and the faithful should be open in this sacramental action of the Church” (Lustiger, p. 72).

Dismissal of the Catechumens

The practice of dismissing the catechumens, those preparing for baptism, goes back to the early church. “After the sermon the catechumens are dismissed,” wrote St. Augustine, “and the faithful remain” (Cabié, *The Eucharist*, p. 70). Even after infant baptism had become the norm in the Roman Church, the dismissal survived, nominally. One early rite had the deacon exclaim just before the Liturgy of the Eucharist, “Let catechumens depart! Any who are still catechumens must leave! All catechumens outside!” (Cabié, p. 70). Some may even remember the days when the Liturgy of the Word was called “Mass of the Catechumens.”

The catechumenate was restored following the Second Vatican Council, and with it the public dismissal of those preparing for baptism. Those who are not yet baptized do not profess the creed or join in the prayers of the faithful, nor do they remain for the Liturgy of the Eucharist. And yet, these “hearers” (which is what the word “catechumens” means) are already “part of the household of Christ” (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* #47); they have begun to live the Christian life, and they participate fully with the rest of the community at the table of the word. They are sent forth with the prayers of the whole community, to gather in a separate place, where they continue the work of the Liturgy of the Word, exploring the ways the readings speak to them in their own lives, endeavoring to understand how God’s living word is speaking to them here and now.

Creed

After the catechumens have been dismissed, we stand together and recite the Nicene Creed. The creed is one of the most recent additions to the

Mass, becoming part of the Roman liturgy only in the eleventh century.

The creed is one of our richest prayers. “Just as the mustard seed contains a great number of branches in a tiny grain, so too this summary of faith encompassed in a few words the whole knowledge of the true religion contained in the Old and New Testament,” writes St. Cyril of Jerusalem (CCC #186). Largely scriptural in its content, the creed expresses in a few sentences the basics of Christian faith in God, Father Son, and Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed, which we share with all the principal churches of East and West, was formulated by the first two great ecumenical councils of the church, in 325 (Nicaea, from which the creed gets its name) and 381 (Constantinople, where it assumed its final form). The creed has its own extraordinary history (for a readable account, see Thomas Bokenkotter’s *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*).

The public profession of the creed at the Mass serves several purposes. It is a reminder of our baptism, when our first profession of faith was made; in reciting the creed together we reaffirm our Christian identity before we begin the celebration of the Eucharist. We also give honor to Christ’s presence among us, bowing at the words that speak of his becoming flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

The creed is sometimes called the “Symbol.” “The Greek word *symbolon* meant half of a broken object, for example, a seal presented as a token of recognition. The broken parts were placed together to verify the bearer’s identity” (CCC #188). The creed is the sign of our Christian identity, the “spiritual seal,” as St. Ambrose called it, by which we recognize our fellow believers throughout the world. In reciting the creed, we assert our oneness with the Church throughout the world and across time. “How tremendous is the Amen that resounds at the end of the Creed,” writes Father Jeremy Driscoll, “echoing round the globe, echoing through the centuries, echoing in the halls of heaven” (Driscoll, p. 57).

Intercessions

The Liturgy of the Word concludes with the general intercessions. The intercessions were an important part of the liturgy of the early church, but dropped out of the Roman Rite around the sixth century. They survived at certain key moments in the Church's year—most notably on Good Friday, when the intercessions are still one of the most solemn moments of that solemn liturgy. The intercessions were restored in the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. They usually follow a set pattern, as we pray for the needs of the universal Church, for public authorities and the salvation of the world, for those experiencing difficulties of various kinds, and finally for the local community.

The general intercessions are among the most important acts of the gathered faithful, for here we fulfill our baptismal call to be a royal priesthood, interceding for others on behalf of the whole world. "Coming as they do after the dismissal of the catechumens, [the intercessions] are a privilege of the faithful, and they underscore the latter's priestly character. To present to God the appeals and hopes of the entire human race is to share in the care and

concern of the Priest of the New Covenant who gave his life for the salvation of the world; it is to share in his mission" (Cabié, p. 75).

The intercessions are intentionally broad, because at this moment we are called to look beyond the boundaries of our parish community and to pray for all who are in need—the whole world, in fact. And it is precisely in looking beyond our own personal needs that we become catholic, that is, universal. "As a sign of the universal Church, each community must also be a sign of its universal prayer. . . . Between God and the nations of the world, God has placed each Christian community, little as it may be. Between God and the pain of humanity, God has placed the intercession of the smallest community. The Prayer of the Faithful is the mystery of love that binds this community to the universe" (Deiss, *The Mass*, p. 47).

In a few moments, the faithful will bring forward gifts of bread and wine to be transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ; at this moment, in the general intercessions, "the Church brings both herself and the world forward and petitions transformation" (Driscoll, p. 60).

At the end of the first century, St. Clement of Rome concluded his own letter to the Corinthians with what is called "the great prayer," the first example of a litany (the same form as the general intercessions). In this prayer, we see the early Christian community praying not only for its own members, but for the whole world.

We pray you, Master, be our help and protection.
Save the afflicted among us, have mercy on the lowly.
Raise up the fallen, show yourself to those in need.
Heal the sick, and bring back those who have strayed.
Fill the hungry, give freedom to our prisoners.
Raise up the weak, console the fainthearted.
Let all peoples acknowledge that you alone are God,
and Jesus Christ is your Child,
that we are your people,
the sheep to whom you give pasture.

(Quoted in Deiss, *The Springtime of the Liturgy*, pp. 83–84)