

“DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME”

A Class on the Mass

Part 4: Liturgy of the Word

The Liturgy of the Word is made up of the readings from Sacred Scriptures, a Homily, Profession of Faith, and the Prayer of the Faithful. Our bishops describe what is to happen during this major part of the Mass by writing:

“For in the readings, as explained by the homily, God speaks to his people, opening up for them the mystery of redemption and salvation and offering them spiritual nourishment and Christ himself is present in the midst of the faithful through his word. By their silence and singing the people make God’s word their own, and they affirm their adherence to it by means of the Profession of Faith. Finally, having been nourished by it, they pour out their petitions in the Prayer of the Faithful for the needs of the entire Church and for the salvation of the whole world.” (GIRM 55)

Our active role during this part of the Mass is very important if we want to experience Christ’s Presence in his word. This involves arriving on time to hear and to listen attentively to the Scripture as it is read, allowing the message to touch our hearts. The bishops instruct us:

The Liturgy of the Word is to be celebrated in such a way as to promote meditation, and so any sort of haste that hinders recollection must clearly be avoided. During the Liturgy of the Word, it is appropriate to include brief periods of silence, accommodated to the gathered assembly, in which, at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response through prayer may be prepared. It may be appropriate to observe such periods of silence, for example, before the Liturgy of the Word itself begins, after the first and second reading, and lastly at the conclusion of the homily. (GIRM 56)

The roles of the Reader/Lector and the Priest are very important in aiding us to hear the Word of God. Their articulation, expression, and devotion while proclaiming the Scriptures helps us absorb the words as they are proclaimed.

The biblical readings which are always proclaimed from the ambo (in our church the pulpit is located to the right of the altar) involve three readings: The first comes from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament; the second from the Christian Scriptures, the New Testament, usually the letters attributed to St. Paul, the Pastoral Letters, the Acts of the Apostles or the Book of Revelation; the Responsorial Psalm, which is our prayerful response to these readings; and the third, the Gospel. These readings follow a cycle of three years: Year A emphasizes the Gospel of Matthew, Year B, the Gospel of Mark, and Year C, the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel of John is used during the major liturgical seasons especially Lent. In reality we hear all the Gospels every three years.

The lector/reader begins the **First Reading** by saying “A Reading from the Book of.....” and ends the reading with the announcement: “The word of the Lord,” to which we express our gratitude by responding: “Thanks be to God.” This is then followed by a few moments of silence to allow the words to permeate our hearts. The **Responsorial Psalm** follows this period of silence and is led by the lector. If it is sung it is led by a cantor. This psalm fosters meditation on the word of God and is related in some way with the reading. It is our response in prayer to the Scripture.

The **Second Reading** is introduced with the words: “A Reading from the Letter or Book of.....” and concludes once again with the announcement: “The word of the Lord” and we once again respond “Thanks be to God.” This is followed by a few moments of silence before the **Alleluia** is sung. The Alleluia is the Latin derivation of the Hebrew “Praise God” and is omitted

if not sung. During Lent the Alleluia is not sung which adds to the impact it has when it is finally sung at the Easter Vigil.

It is during the singing of the Alleluia that the priest bows to the altar and prays silently: “May the Lord be in my heart and on my lips that I may proclaim the Gospel worthily.” If a deacon is to proclaim the Gospel he asks the priest for a blessing and the priest bestows a blessing by saying: “May the Lord be in your heart and on your lips that you may proclaim the Gospel worthily.” (The priest or deacon may carry the Book of the Gospels to the ambo if it was carried into the church and placed on the altar by the deacon or in his absence by the lector at the beginning of the Mass.) The proclamation of the **Gospel** begins with the priest/deacon saying: “The Lord be with you” to the congregation who respond “And also with you.” In the new translation this will become: “And with your **spirit**.” The priest/deacon then proclaims: “A Reading from the Holy Gospel according to.....” and we acclaim: “Glory to you, O Lord” while making a little cross with our thumbs on our foreheads, lips, and heart. This gesture expresses our desire that the Gospel touch our minds with a deeper understanding of what is being proclaimed, that we would be given the power to proclaim the message to others, and that the words permeate our hearts to truly live what we hear. After the proclamation of the Gospel, the priest/deacon says: “The Gospel of the Lord” and we answer: “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ”. The priest then kisses the book and quietly says: “Through the words of the Gospel may our sins be washed away.”

The **Homily**, which comes next, is a shorter sermon given by the priest or deacon which is an instruction, commentary, or exposition of some aspect of the readings from the Sacred Scriptures. It is designed to nurture our Christian life by taking into account both the mystery celebrated and the particular needs of the listeners. The homily provides an aid to help us in living our faith in a more complete way.

The **Profession of Faith or the Creed** has as its purpose to allow us to respond to the word of God proclaimed in the readings and explained in the homily and that we might also call to mind and confess the great mysteries of the faith. Historically, it was added to the Mass to combat the heresy of Arianism which denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. In the new translation we will no longer begin with “**We** believe in one God” but “**I** believe in One God” which is the correct translation of the Latin “Credo.” There are other changes in the wording as well, such as the use of “consubstantial” instead of “being” in describing Jesus’ relationship to his Father.

Something that we often neglect to do is **bow** at the words: “by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man.” This gesture expresses our awe and wonder that Jesus, fully divine, humbled himself to become fully human in the Mystery of the Incarnation.

The Liturgy of the Word ends with **The Prayer of the Faithful or General Intercessions**. This is an opportunity for us to offer prayers to God for the salvation of all. These prayers include petitions for the Church, public officials, those burdened by any kind of difficulty, and the local community. The priest introduces the Prayer of the Faithful and the intentions are announced from the ambo by the deacon or in his absence the lector. The priest then concludes the prayer.

Reflection Questions:

1. Do you consider the Liturgy of the Word as an important part of the Mass?
2. Do you arrive early enough to prepare yourself to attentively hear the word of God?
3. Do you try to honestly apply the message of the Scripture and of the homily to your daily life?