

II. Hearing the Word

The Lectionary – History and Present Usage

Since at least the 2nd century, Christians have begun the celebration of the Eucharist with by proclaiming the Word of God, a practice that has its roots in the Jewish synagogue service. In fact, this custom of reading the Law and the Prophets, as well as letters of Paul and stories about Jesus at liturgy, resulted in the formation of the New and Old Testament canons.

"And on the day called Sunday,
all who live in cities or in the country
gather together to one place,
and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the
prophets are read, as long as time permits; then,
when the reader has ceased,
the president verbally instructs, and exhorts
to the imitation of these good things."
(Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chapter 67)

From the time of the Reformation until the mid-20th century, Catholics had been cautioned about reading the Bible because the Church was concerned that the Word might be misinterpreted. Yet, the proclamation of the Word was always a part of the Mass, however, it was read in Latin by the priest quietly; the faithful could not hear it.

While it seems that the early Church practiced a sort of continuous reading of Scripture at liturgy, it also inserted portions of the Bible that reflected more the occasion or the place where the Eucharist was being celebrated. For example, St. Luke's account of the birth of Christ was chosen for Midnight Mass on Christmas because it was celebrated in the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome. Or, the gospel for Mass on Christmas day is taken from the beginning of the Gospel of John, because it was celebrated in St. John Lateran, the cathedral church of Rome.

Attending to the early history of the liturgy, the bishops of Vatican II called for a return to use of the Lectionary (the book that contains the scripture readings for Mass). And, by separating these readings from the priest's Missal, they instituted the service of lector as a lay ministry. Today, our lectionary contains a three-year cycle of readings for Sundays and a two-year cycle for weekdays.

The three-year Sunday cycle is based upon the three synoptic Gospels: Matthew (Year A), Mark (Year B), and Luke (Year C). Selections from the Gospel of John are inserted at different times in all the three yearly cycles.

This is the second in a series of eleven or so articles on the celebration of the Mass. Article #3 is entitled, "*The Lord Upholds My Life*"

The Old Testament *first* readings were chosen because of their connection with a particular Sunday Gospel story. Excerpts from the epistles and Acts of the Apostles make up the larger part of selections for our *second* readings.

The Liturgy of the Word includes:

The First Reading

*(Usually taken from the Old Testament
or the Acts of the Apostles)*

The Responsorial Psalm

The Second Reading

*(Usually taken from the New Testament Epistles
or the Book of Revelation)*

The Gospel Acclamation

The Gospel

The Homily

The Profession of Faith

The General Intercessions

(also known as The Prayer of the Faithful)

Proclaiming and Responding to the Word

The primary parts of the Liturgy of the Word are the readings from Scripture and the Responsorial Psalm. The homily, profession of faith, and general intercessions "develop and conclude this part of the Mass." (GIRM 55) So that these concluding parts of the Word seem less disjointed and unrelated to what has gone before, it helps to understand the rhythm of '*proclamation and response*' in the liturgy.

The lector proclaims the Word, the faithful respond in the Responsorial Psalm. The lector proclaims the Second Reading, the faithful respond with silence. The deacon or priest proclaims the gospel, and the homily, creed, and intercessions respond to our encounter with the Word that day.

Christ speaks in the Word Proclaimed

It is important to notice the strong emphasis placed on Christ speaking in the Word proclaimed:

"For in the readings, explained by the homily,
God is *speaking* to his people,
opening up to them the mystery of redemption and
salvation, and *nourishing* their spirit;
and Christ himself *is present* in the midst of the
faithful through his word..." (GIRM 55)

Two implications follow: First, our lectors and presiders need to continue to grow in their love for the Word, their understanding of it, and their capacity to proclaim it in such a way that all can hear and receive it.

Second, we, the faithful, need to grow in our capacity to be ready and willing to listen and heed what we hear from the One who speaks. See again how the structure of the rite encourages proclamation *and* response:

"By their silence and singing the people make God's word their own and they also affirm their adherence to it by the profession of faith. Finally, having been nourished by this word, they pour out their petitions in the general intercessions for the needs of the entire Church and for the salvation of the whole world."
[GIRM 55 (Italics added)]

Proclaiming the Word means a new and vital announcement of salvation *on that day*, for Christ speaks to us as we are today! As our life's circumstances change, so does the Word address, comfort, and challenge us in different ways. Jesus spoke his saving word to all *then*. In a similar way, the Risen Christ offers us his saving word today.

Thus, the result of our encounter with the Word is not completely unlike our encounter with Christ in the Sacrament – we are to be transformed and made new in the image of the Risen One. That is why the GIRM uses the analogy of a table for both Word and Sacrament, indicating that both are to instruct *and* nourish us.

"The Mass is made up as it were of two parts: the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. These two parts are so closely interconnected that they form but one single act of worship. For in the Mass the table both of God's word and of Christ's Body is laid, from which the faithful may be instructed and refreshed."
(GIRM 28; refers to CSL 48, 51, & 56)

After centuries of emphasizing Sacrament, almost in opposition to the Word, we see a renewed respect and reverence for its proclamation in liturgy.

Some practical notes I – at the Ambo

Among the changes to the liturgy that we will implement on the First Sunday of Advent, will be some practical instructions. All Scripture is to be proclaimed from the *Ambo*. [The "Ambo" is the name of the podium or lectern in the church that is reserved for proclaiming Scripture.] Therefore, anything to be read at liturgy that is not Scripture should be spoken from another place. Further, the GIRM underlines the fact that the proclamation of the 1st and 2nd readings is a lay, not a clerical, ministry.

"By tradition the function of proclaiming the readings is ministerial, not presidential. Therefore, a lector should proclaim the readings..." (GIRM 59)

The ambo is the place where the Word is proclaimed. Thus, it is the proper place for the *cantor* to lead the responsorial psalm, the *homilist* to deliver his homily, and the *leader* of the Prayer of the Faithful to proclaim the General Intercessions. This means that song leading, announcements, and so on, are to be done from another location.

"The priest, standing at the chair or at the ambo itself, or, when appropriate, in another suitable place, gives the homily." (GIRM 136)

Why all this fuss about the ambo? Once we acknowledge that the ambo is the *Altar of the Word* (as the *Introduction to the Lectionary* tells us) as an analogy to the *Altar of the Eucharist*, it makes sense that we would revere whatever actions are done at the ambo. The very simple proclamation and response – "The word of the Lord" / "Thanks be to God" – parallels, "The Body of Christ" / "Amen." We respond in a similar manner at the proclamation of the Gospel because Christ is speaking directly to us in his Word.

Some practical notes II – Silence

The *General Instruction* emphasizes the importance of silence during the Liturgy of the Word. By calling for a significant period of silence after each reading and after the homily, this instruction challenges us to "go against the grain" of our hurried and stressed daily lives in order to reflect on what we have just heard, letting the Word sink in to our hearts. The GIRM envisions a worshiping community that observes a pace in the liturgy that allows for more "full, active, and conscious participation" by all.

The call for silence also underscores for us the importance of the Scriptures, not only in our worship, but also in our daily lives. Hearing the Word every week as part of our spiritual lives can lead us to continued conversion in the way we live as Jesus' disciples from day to day.

For discussion/reflection:

- What new things did you learn about the Liturgy of the Word? Why is it important?
- What is my experience of the Word this week? Did it comfort me? Did it challenge me?
- What is my experience of silence? How do I respond to this new call for periods of silence?
- How might I use periods of silence profitably for my spiritual life?
- How might I prepare to receive more deeply the Word proclaimed on Sunday?

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