

CHRIST HIMSELF SPEAKS: THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

We have gathered and begun our shared prayer. Following the Introductory Rites of the Mass (see Part 1 in this series!) we move into the Liturgy of the Word.

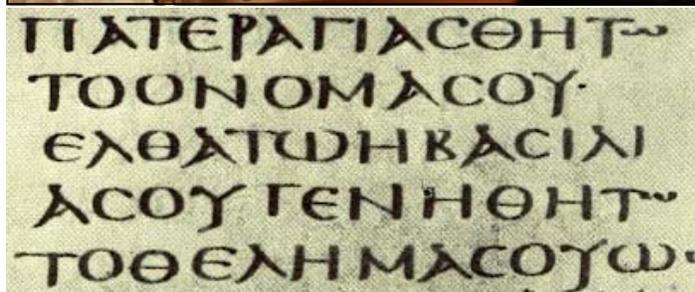
The Church tells us that Christ is present in the liturgy in four ways: in the sacrament of his Body and Blood, the Eucharist; in the assembly gathered for prayer; in the priest presider; and in the word proclaimed: “Christ himself speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church.” In other words, the Liturgy of the Word is sacramental.

The Second Vatican Council spoke about *two* tables being spread before us in the Mass: the table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist. We receive the same Christ at both tables. At the beginning of Mass, the Book of the Gospels is placed on the altar, honoring the presence of the same Christ who will feed us with his Body and Blood later on in the Mass.

Jesus was nourished by the Scriptures and knew them intimately. In his teaching, he referenced dozens of passages that span the Old Testament, from the Pentateuch to the Prophets. After his Resurrection, Jesus explained the Scriptures to two of his disciples as they walked from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Down through the ages, the Church has continued to walk that road with Jesus, seeking to understand the Scriptures in light of the Resurrection. The Bible, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, is “a mirror in which the pilgrim Church on earth looks at God” (*Dei Verbum*, 7).

The Lectionary

At every liturgy of the Church—from Sunday Mass to a communion visit by a lay minister to the Rite of Committal at a graveside—a passage from Scripture is proclaimed. At Mass, the readings come from a book called the Lectionary. The Lectionary is the same everywhere—on any given day, any Catholic Church you might visit, anywhere in the world, is proclaiming, listening to, and reflecting on the same Scripture readings.



ABOVE: Father Ryan proclaims the Gospel. BELOW: A detail from the *Codex Sinaiticus*, one of the earliest existing Biblical manuscripts, dating to around 330-360. It is in Greek, and contains all of the New Testament and most of the Old Testament, though some sections have been lost. This passage is Luke 11:2: “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.”

The Lectionary is a book of carefully selected passages from the Bible. Before the Second Vatican Council, the Lectionary was fairly limited in its scope. In fact, only 16% of the New Testament and 1% of the Old Testament were proclaimed in the course of the year! The expanded Lectionary that has been used since 1969 includes a lot more Scripture, but still falls far short of including the entirety of the Bible: in the course of three years, we hear 71.5% of the New Testament, and 13.5% of the Old Testament. (The lesson here is: we are really missing out if we do not read the Bible on our own or as part of a study group, in addition to hearing the readings at Mass!)

The Lectionary is designed with several purposes in view. The readings are chosen to include key passages from the Scriptures, especially the Gospels; to illuminate the liturgical seasons; and to allow the Old and New Testaments to “speak” to one another, as it were, by highlighting Old Testament

passages that foreshadow teachings and events in the life of Jesus.

On Sundays, we hear three readings. Except in Easter Time, when the Acts of the Apostles is read, the First Reading comes from the Old Testament and usually relates closely to the Gospel. For example, when we hear the parable of the dishonest steward from Luke, we also hear a passage from the prophet Amos about God's anger with those who defraud the poor. "God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New" (DV, 16).

The First Reading is followed by a psalm—one of the 150 songs included in the Old Testament book of Psalms, which was and is the prayer and hymn book of the Jewish people. Jesus prayed the psalms; as he hung upon the cross, the words of two psalms were on his lips (see Psalm 22:1; Psalm 31:5). The psalm is chosen for its connection to the First Reading and is called "responsorial" because we join in a sung or spoken response.

The Second Reading is often the wild card of the Liturgy of the Word. In Ordinary Time, the Second Reading is simply a semi-continuous reading of one of the New Testament Epistles, moving through the text over the course of several weeks, without reference to how the passage lines up with the other readings.

The third reading is the Gospel and is set apart in several ways. This reading is proclaimed by an ordained minister, a deacon or priest. We stand to listen. The reading is proclaimed from a special Book of the Gospels. Candles are carried, and the book is solemnly carried from the altar to the ambo. Sung acclamations give special honor to the Gospel reading. Through all of these outward signs, we acknowledge the living word of God and the presence of Christ. The proclamation of the Gospel is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word.

Responding to the Word

After listening to the Word in the three readings and the psalm, we respond in three ways.

The homily forms part of the Liturgy of the Word. In it, the preacher makes a connection between the Scriptures and our own community, our own place and time. The homily is not a Scripture lesson, but an integration of the Scripture readings into our lives. The preacher's task is to help us find ourselves in the Scriptures, as Jesus did in his conversation with the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Our second response is the creed or profession of faith. These words express the core of our belief about who Jesus is and who we are. This profession



Pope Francis holds the Book of the Gospels at Mass. *Photo from ncronline.org.* "What would happen were we to treat the Bible as we treat our mobile phone? Were we to always carry it with us, what would happen? Were we to turn back when we forget it: you forget your mobile phone — 'oh! I don't have it, I'm going back to look for it'; were we to open it several times a day; were we to read God's messages contained in the Bible as we read telephone messages, what would happen?" (Pope Francis, March 5, 2017)

unites us with the Church throughout the world. At the heart of the Creed is the identity and the ongoing presence of Jesus.

Our third response is the Prayer of the Faithful, also called the Universal Prayer. In these prayers, we get specific: we bring before God the needs of our Church, our world, and our own faith community. Nourished by the Scriptures, which have been broken open for us in the homily, we broaden our perspective, looking beyond our individual needs and intentions to the needs of the world.

Throughout the Liturgy of the Word, there is a pattern of listening and response. We do not take in the word passively, but actively. How can we keep responding to the word of God *after* Mass is over?

—Corinna Laughlin, *Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy*

A Prayer before the Liturgy of the Word

*"If today you hear God's voice,
harden not your hearts."
(Psalm 95)*

Come, Holy Spirit,
Spirit of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding!
Open my ears to the Word,
so that I may believe what I hear,
understand what I believe,
and love and live my faith more effectively. Amen.