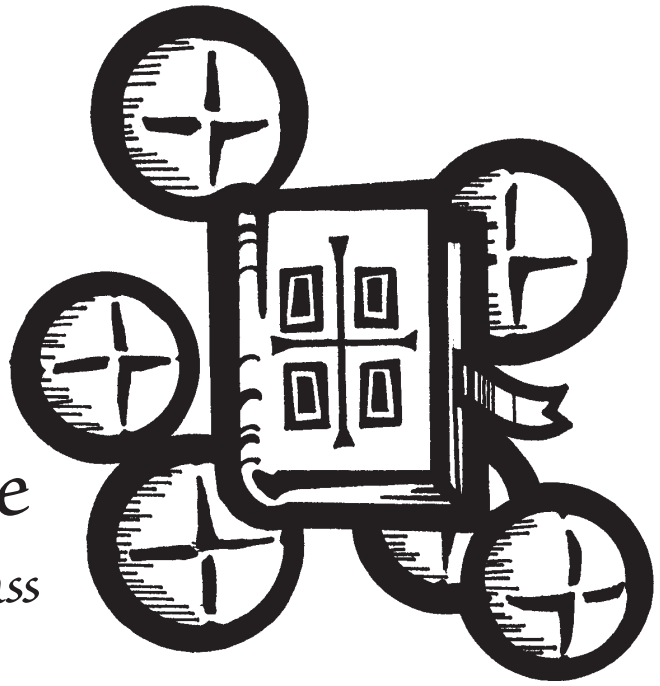


Give Thanks and Praise

A Popular Explanation of the Mass



Part 3

The Liturgy of the Word (a)

God wants to speak to us. He wants to speak to us about his love for us, a love that began before we were born, before the first human walked this earth.

God wants to speak to us about the goodness of all creation, about the goodness of this earth, of this world. He desires to speak about the incredible goodness of the men and women who have lived, who inhabit this place now, and who are yet to be born.

God wants to speak to us about life that is yet to come; about life in the yet to be fulfilled Reign and Kingdom of God; about the incredible, incomprehensible, wonderful new life in heaven; about a *new life* beyond the one we now know.

God wants to speak to us about what it means to be God. And we are often surprised, aren't we? Surprised at a God who is not only strong and sure and protecting, but also gentle and merciful and affectionate. We are surprised at a God who often seems slow to hear and slower to answer. And we are surprised at whom God chooses, whom he calls. Not only the distinguished and the worthy: Abraham, David, Isaiah, and Mary. But also the weak and the unsure: Jeremiah, Peter, the poor, the lame, the widow, the outcast, the unwanted. The ones we least expect, including ourselves.

Nature of the Liturgy of the Word: Simply stated, the Liturgy of the Word is the Church's special moment to hear God speaking through the scriptures. From its earliest days the Christian community has always deemed it essential that its members be nourished at both the table of the word and at the table of the eucharist.

Our Task: Our task is to listen to God speaking. Our task is to attend to the word and to be attentive to it. Our task is to open

our whole being to the God who speaks. We know and believe that God is always present with us. Yet because we cannot always reach out with our hands and touch God we often find it very hard to *listen*. The structure of the Liturgy of the Word provides us with a pattern for truly listening and responding to the God who speaks. In reading, in song, and in silence we attend to the spoken word of the Lord.

Structure of the Liturgy of the Word: The pattern for the liturgy of the word is quite simple. Its general rhythm is one of proclamation and response.

Proclamation	Response
First Reading	Responsorial Psalm
Second Reading Gospel (preceded by its Acclamation)	Profession of Faith General Intercessions
Homily	

First Reading: This selection is usually taken from the Hebrew scriptures (during the Easter season it comes from the Acts of the Apostles). The presence of the Old Testament reading manifests the Church's firm conviction that all scripture is the word of God. There is a continuity between the two Testaments: both lead us to Jesus Christ. As St. Augustine stated it: "In the Old Testament the New is hidden, in the New Testament the Old appears." Furthermore, the story of the people of old is also our story. It is part of our heritage. On Sundays the selection usually relates to the Gospel reading by reasons of topic, mood, or focus.

Responsorial Psalm: The Book of Psalms is the most ancient songbook of the Church. It is the inspired word which has always served as the basis and inspiration for the community's sung praise of God. The responsorial psalm following the first reading is the only psalm used in the Mass for its own sake and not to accompany an action. This text is primarily our response to the reading that has just been proclaimed. We use God's word to respond to God's word. To a certain extent the psalm serves to stimulate reflection on the reading giving us an opportunity to mull over some aspect of God's word. As the most important psalm found in the celebration, the text should ordinarily be sung.

Second Reading: This selection, always from the New Testament, opens up to us the belief and practice of the early Church. The witness of the apostolic community provides an example for all time since Christians of every age are to recall the love of the Father enfleshed in Christ, the good news of redemption, as seen and lived by the early followers of the Lord. All of us are called to live decently and without blemish, to be tolerant of one another, to be steadfast in the faith. During certain seasons of the year, e.g., Advent, the reading echoes the mood and focus of the other bible passages. At other times we hear selections from one letter presented over a period of Sundays.

Gospel: The highpoint of the Liturgy of the Word is the proclamation of the gospel. The Good News of salvation is proclaimed to us by the Risen Lord. It is Christ, living and present among his people, who continues to speak as he calls us to deeper faith and conversion. From earliest times the primacy of the gospel has been emphasized by special signs of respect and honor surrounding its liturgical proclamation.

The gospel is preceded by an acclamation, normally expressive of paschal joy and accompanying a procession. Through the singing of an acclamation we praise Christ who comes to proclaim the message of salvation. Ordinarily we sing "Alleluia," an Easter shout meaning "Praise Yahweh" or "Praise God." During Lent we use an equivalent acclamation of praise so that at Easter we may sing "Alleluia" with even more exuberance and joy. This acclamation is so important that liturgical directives insist that it must be sung.

Adding even more solemnity and festivity to the proclamation are the procession of ministers to the ambo, the use of candles and incense, and the standing of the assembly out of respect for the Risen Christ who is still with us. The priest or deacon begins with a greeting of the people and makes the sign of the cross on the book, on his forehead, mouth and breast, reminders that Christ is to be in our thinking, on our lips, and in our hearts now and always.

As members of the assembly we listen with attention, not to some words of past events but to the word spoken anew in our own day. We listen to Jesus Christ who is the spoken word of God, now present among us.

Homily: The homily is an integral part of the liturgy of the word since the homilist shows how Christ is continuing to act and speak among us today. The task of the homilist is not just to help us understand what we have heard, not to give moral exhortations or to provide scientific explanations of the text. Rather, the homilist is called to "break open the word" so that it might penetrate our very beings with its energizing power.

Profession of Faith: As a response to God's word proclaimed in the scriptures and preached in the homily, we stand and give a corporate profession of faith in a formula dating back to the early councils of the Church. Through this text we assent not only to the doctrines we believe, but also to the very person of Christ present in his word. As a community we affirm those mysteries of faith which will be again proclaimed in the eucharistic prayer.

General Intercessions: In the New Testament we are urged to offer "petitions, prayers, and intercessions" (I Timothy 2:1) for all the people on earth. As a priestly people we do so in a special way in this series of requests. These prayers draw us away from an exclusive concern with our own needs and invite us also to pray for the needs of the Church at large, for public authorities, the salvation of the world, and for those oppressed by any need.

Times for Silence: The very intense character of the Liturgy of the Word calls for this time of the celebration to be punctuated with periods of silence. We need time to absorb the Lord's message. We need time to attend to the promptings of the Holy Spirit dwelling within each of us and in the community gathered together. Such silent moments also remind us that we indeed need to "wait on" the Lord, to "waste time" on God, and not be in a hurry to "get on with it."

Many communities frame the psalm response with silence before and after the singing. There could also be a period of silence after the second reading or after the homily. No matter what options are chosen, it is important that this time be allowed by readers, musicians, and presiders. The way we spend these precious moments can contribute much to our prayerful experience of the Mass.

Next time we will continue our reflection on the Liturgy of the Word by considering how the system of readings proclaimed at Mass relates to our yearly cycle of feasts and seasons.