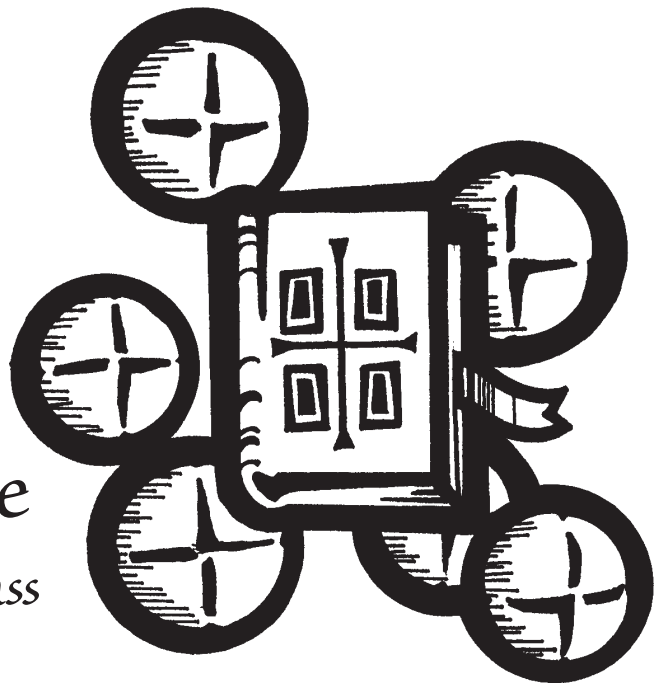


Give Thanks and Praise

A Popular Explanation of the Mass



Part 5

The Liturgy of the Word (c)

Some Catholics appear to believe that they have very little to do during the Liturgy of the Word. “If God wants to speak, then all we have to do is be present and listen. Right?”

Well, yes and no! Certainly our task is one of listening, but of a very *active* listening. This demands that we not only pay careful attention, but that we encourage those who minister to us during the liturgy and that we prepare ourselves long before Mass to listen actively to the scriptures.

Visual Reminders of God's Word: It's often so easy to be distracted during Mass. In spite of the best intentions our attention can easily wander off to our jobs, problems with relatives, financial concerns, and the like. We need all the help we can get to be able to concentrate on what we are about when we gather for prayer together. To help focus our attention during the Liturgy of the Word we have two visual reminders of the importance the community gives to the scriptural proclamations.

The first is the *ambo* (from a Greek word meaning a “platform”). It is also called a pulpit or lectern. What the altar is to the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the ambo is to the Liturgy of the Word. These are focal points, the places around which the Mass is celebrated. Perhaps you have noticed in your parish that the ambo is used only for proclaiming the scriptures, not for the giving of announcements or the leading of the singing. The reason for this is that the ambo is holy in the liturgical life of the community. It is the place reserved for proclaiming God's sacred word.

The second visual reminder of the importance of God's word is the *lectionary* itself. This book containing the scriptural passages is a very special book. In today's culture we have many forms of books. There are the popular paperbacks, usually to be read once and then often discarded. We also have the more

expensive and longer lasting hardbacks which we keep and place on our bookshelves. There are also the very expensive leather-bound volumes which are cherished and say so much about their contents and about those who possess them.

The lectionary is the most important liturgical book the community possesses since it contains the written word of God. Thus it is a book to be handled with reverence. Perhaps your parish uses two books for the scriptures, one a “book of the gospels” and the other a lectionary for the other readings. This is a way of showing the unique importance of the gospels. The book of the gospels is carried in procession, incensed and venerated with a kiss. It is always given a place of honor.

Ministers of God's Word: As important as these visual reminders of God's word are, still more important are the persons who serve or minister to us during the Liturgy of the Word. Just as the Church is a community of persons rendering service to other persons in Christ, so the liturgical assembly is characterized by its members serving one another. Insofar as the Liturgy of the Word is concerned, this means that we need other people so that God's word may readily nourish his community which has gathered in response to that word and which continues to respond to it.

First of all, we need *readers* who approach the public reading of the scriptures with a full awareness of what it means to be a *herald* of the word of God. Their task is to make the word come alive for God's assembled people. We need readers who believe what they read, who are so well prepared that by their voice, attitude, and bearing, they convey the meaning of the words they speak. We need and we have a right to excellent readers, not just good ones.

We need *psalmists* and other *musicians* who not only know the notes and can sing or play well, but who also know how to

draw us into their art so that we want to sing our prayer together.

We need *homilists* who have lived and prayed with the bible texts all week long. We need preachers who know how to speak both to our heads and to our hearts about Jesus and his kingdom. We need preachers who can not only affirm us as God's good and holy people but who also have the courage to challenge us to become more and more like God.

Finally, we need each other. We need to support one another by a shared love for the scriptures, by an attentive listening together, by a living practice of the word proclaimed. We also need to support our ministers for they need us just as much as we need them. Our prayerful attention needs to be so obvious, so intense that it encourages the reader, musician, and preacher to do their ministry well. Our intent listening, our robust singing tells the ministers that we are paying attention. Then they, in turn, read, sing, and preach better. As a result, we can more fully listen to God speaking because their ministry is now more effective. And so it grows: better reading fosters better hearing fosters better reading fosters better....

When each one of us contributes our part to the Liturgy of the Word, then the message of God can penetrate and stir our very being. Simply put, we need one another if God's word is to take root in our hearts.

Preparing to Hear the Word: All of us expect our readers, musicians, and preachers to prepare themselves for their tasks in the Sunday celebration. We would be offended if they did otherwise. And yet all of us share in this necessity of preparation.

For years now the Church has been urging us to reflect and pray with the scriptures long before the Mass begins. How much richer our experience of the Sunday readings would be if we would meditate and pray with the texts beforehand.

Why not make room in your busy life for five or ten minutes of peace and quiet. Tell yourself: "God has something to say to me today. God is speaking to me through this bible passage." Then slowly read one or more of the passages assigned for the following Sunday. Many parishes list the next Sunday's readings in the bulletin. If yours doesn't, why not make a suggestion

that it begin to do so? Or else obtain a hand missal or other printed aid that gives the texts of the readings.

Let God lead you in your reading. He will certainly speak, but we must be patient. You might find it helpful to read around the passage. Or perhaps read the whole chapter. The context will give a better sense of what God is saying.

Many people, in addition to preparing privately, find it helpful to reflect on the scriptures with others. Sometimes this is called "faith sharing." No expert knowledge is required here. The purpose here is to share what God is saying to me and to listen to what God is saying to others. We all share the scriptures, and our individual experience of the scriptures is also shared.

Another step may be to obtain a good scriptural commentary and do some "head work." Such bible study helps us get inside the separate authors to know the intention, audience, and circumstances that each book of the bible addresses. By so doing our understanding of God's word is greatly enhanced and deepened.

If the bible becomes our prayer book outside of the liturgy, then our liturgical experience of the scriptures will profit. Perhaps we might even share our love of for the word with others. Perhaps we have the technical ability (or are willing to obtain it) to be a reader in our parish. Perhaps we can serve as catechists or helpers for those preparing for initiation into the Church. Perhaps we can visit the sick and homebound parishioners who hunger for God's spoken word. It is through sharing our love for the scriptures that we more fully come to understand and appreciate the riches found in the Christian community's sacred book.

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In our next issue we will begin our reflection on the Liturgy of the Eucharist.