

THE PARTS OF THE MASS

Part Two: The Liturgy of the Word

The Liturgy of the Word consists of everything from the 1st reading to the Creed and the Prayer of the Faithful. The Liturgy of the Word doesn't just prepare us to receive the presence of Christ at communion time; the Liturgy of the Word is already an encounter with the presence of Christ. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (G.I.R.M.)* states: **"For in the readings, as explained by the homily, God speaks to his people, opening up to 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" [#55].**

Because Christ is the Word of God made flesh, then the Liturgy of the Word is a very real and tangible encounter with Christ. This lectern is the table of Christ's presence in the Word just as the altar is the table of Christ's presence in the Eucharistic species.

The Liturgy of the Word formally begins when the lector comes to the lectern and reverently breaks open the lectionary. This signifies that the Word of God is about to be broken open so that it may enter our lives. The readings that we hear follow a 3-year cycle. Year A, which we are currently in, focuses on Matthew's gospel; Year B Mark's, and Year C Luke's. Each year begins with the first Sunday of Advent. John's gospel is used every year throughout the Easter Season. Over the 3-year cycle we will hear all of the New Testament and the major parts of the Old Testament.

The first reading from the Old Testament is always chosen to connect with the gospel. The second reading follows a sequential reading of all the letters in the New Testament, and often does not match the other two readings. The Responsorial Psalm, which is meant to be sung, always connects with the 1st reading.

While we sit for the first two readings and psalm, it is an ancient custom in the church to stand for the *alleluia* and the gospel. When we stand and sing the *alleluia* (except during Lent when we sing a more subdued acclamation), we are welcoming and greeting the Lord who is about to speak to us in a special way through the gospel. We even use a special Book of the Gospels for this reading. That book is processed in at the beginning of liturgy and placed on the altar as a sign that it is a true form of the presence of Christ. On special occasions the Book of the Gospel is incensed as are the bread and wine on the altar and the congregation later in the Mass. Again, this indicates our reverence for the ways we experience the presence of Christ.

Before the gospel is read, the priest says "The Lord be with you." You will soon be responding "And with your spirit." The priest then announces "A reading from the holy gospel according to _____" and you respond "Glory to you, O Lord." At this point many people are in the habit of tracing the sign of the cross on their forehead, their lips, and their heart. This signifies that we are letting what Christ speaks to us claim every part of who we are: what we think, say, desire, and do.

After the gospel comes the homily. Unlike a sermon that focuses on a message and then looks for scripture passages to support it, a homily focuses on the scripture passages that were proclaimed and then seeks to uncover their implications for our lives as disciples of Christ. Most priests that I know who take preaching seriously begin to prepare their homilies early in the week, researching the original meaning of the texts and then praying about how that meaning might apply in people's lives today, including their own.

After each of the first 2 readings and also after the homily, the G.I.R.M. calls for periods of silence **“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.”** Furthermore, the Liturgy of the Word should **“promote meditation, and so any sort of haste that hinders recollection must clearly be avoided”** [#56].

These moments of silence are very important. They call us to hold onto some word, phrase, or image that speaks to us and tuck them into our hearts and minds so that we can further pray about them and reflect on them during the week. The silence is also part of how Christ is speaking to us very personally in the Liturgy of the Word. Therefore, we really need to be attentive to the readings. Furthermore, we ought to read and pray over the readings well before Mass during the week so that they can stir something in us. Our bulletin always lists the readings for the coming week.

Next comes the Profession of Faith or the Creed, which will be examined next week.

The last part of the Liturgy of the Word is the Prayer of the Faithful, which consists of petitions, not just for us, but for the whole Church, public and civic leaders, those burdened by any kind of difficulty, and for our local needs as well. The wording and content of these petitions are to come from the scripture readings for that day. The priest ends the Prayer of the Faithful with a collect, in which he collects all of our petitions and offers them to God. These prayers remind us that the Word of God forms us into a sacred Communion, and as a Communion, our relationship with God is never separate from our responsibility to God's People who are in need.