

Reflections on the Mass

Reflection 5: The Liturgy of the Word, Part II

Having proclaimed the Gospel, the priest or, in some cases, the deacon, takes up the important task of breaking open i.e. applying the Scriptures we have just heard. The Sunday homily is an integral part of the liturgy and “may not be omitted without a grave reason.” It is through the homily that the mysteries of faith and the guiding principles of Christian life are shared. A good homily is faithful both to the mystery being celebrated and the needs of the listeners. It should lead those present to celebrate the Eucharist actively. The best homilies are the result of prayerful meditation on the texts, careful selection of ideas and images, and a joyful presentation that is neither too long, nor too short. It is concluded with a moment of shared silence during which all present may reflect on what they have heard.

This brief sharing of silent reflection prepares us for the sincere response that follows, the Profession of Faith, or Creed. By this profession we agree to what we have heard in the homily and will experience in the Eucharist. This response of faith by the community of believers begins with the words, “I believe” in Latin, Credo, whose root words mean to give your heart to something. The Creed is more than an intellectual assent to the mysteries of the faith expressed by Church councils many centuries ago; it is also our deepest expression of faith in the mystery of which we are a part. The Creed may be sung or recited by the priest standing together with the people. At the words, “and by the Holy Spirit ... and became man...” we make a profound bow; at the Solemnities of the Annunciation and Nativity of the Lord we genuflect. Either the Nicene or the Apostles’ Creed may be used.

Our response to the Word of God is further expressed in the Prayers of the Faithful. These prayers have their roots in the ancient Jewish synagogue

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service when a series of blessings for individuals and universal needs were expressed. It is likely that Jesus joined in these prayers. They became a fixed part of the Mass during the mid-second century. They are spoken of as “Universal Prayers” or “General Intercessions” since they go beyond the needs of the local community.

The Prayers of the Faithful begin with the celebrant addressing the people and relating the prayers to the particular mystery being celebrated or some particular aspect of the Scriptures. The deacon (or in his absence another minister) announces a series of intentions to which the people respond. After a brief moment of silence, the celebrant summarizes the intentions and asks God to look favorably upon the prayers that have been expressed. The people stand during the presentation of the intentions and respond at the end, “Amen.”

Since the Church is both local and universal, the intentions usually include prayers for the needs of the Church, for public authorities, for the salvation of the world, for those oppressed by any need, and for the needs of the local community. The presentation of the intercessions is traditionally given to the deacon who by his particular ministry is focused upon the sick, the poor and those in need. The dead may also be included in the Prayers of the Faithful.