

Reflections on the Mass

Reflection 4: The Liturgy of the Word, Part I



In his writings on the Eucharist, Saint Pope John Paul II often spoke of two tables that are involved in the celebration of Mass – the Table of the Word of God, where the scriptures are broken open for us, and the Table of the Bread of the Lord, on which the bread and wine are consecrated. It is from the Table of the Word of God that we receive the life-giving Word of God that sparks a burning hunger for Christ and prepares us to receive the life-giving Body and Blood of Christ.

The life-giving Word comes to us in readings from the Old and New Testaments, from the responsorial psalm, and from the gospel. The first reading is almost always from the Old Testament, a sign that our roots are firmly planted in the Jewish tradition where the reading of the Law and the Prophets was a part of the synagogue service. Only during the Easter Season does this change, for then the first reading is from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. The Old Testament reading is usually chosen to prepare for the theme of the gospel to be read that day.

The person who proclaims the Old Testament reading is called a lector or reader, and the book used for the reading is called the lectionary. We sit while the lector proclaims the reading from the ambo, or lectern, listening attentively until we hear the lector say: “The Word of the Lord,” to which we respond, “Thanks be to God,” signifying our assent to what has been read.

Our connection to the ancient form of worship in the Jewish synagogue continues when next we sing (or recite) together a responsorial psalm. Ideally, the psalm is led by a cantor who sings the verse, while we sing the response. In the absence of a cantor, the psalm may be recited, although singing is preferred. Singing the psalm is a wonderful way of praying. The more familiar we are with

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these ancient texts, the more aware we become of the Word of God speaking to us through them.

The Word of God nourishes us as well in the second reading, taken from the New Testament. During certain seasons - Christmas, for example - the second reading may correspond with the mystery being celebrated. During other times of the liturgical year, the second reading may have no direct connection to the gospel but still can have great meaning, if we listen attentively.

Once the lector or reader finishes the second reading, we prepare to welcome the Lord who is about to speak the good news expressed in the Sunday Gospel. The Alleluia is once again grounded in Jewish tradition, for “Hallelujah,” meaning, “Praise Yahweh” was used at the beginning and end of psalms intended for use in the Temple.

The Alleluia is used throughout the liturgical year, except during Lent when it is replaced with an equivalent acclamation of praise. It is always sung, never recited, by everyone standing. The deacon (or the priest when there is no deacon present) elevates the Book of the Gospels and prepares to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel.

Before the gospel is proclaimed from the ambo, it is shown further marks of respect by the signing of the cross on the text. We make the sign of the cross on our forehead, mouth and heart, signifying a readiness to open our minds to the word, to confess it with our mouths, and to safeguard it in our hearts. At the end of the reading of the Gospel, the deacon or priest reverences the text by a kiss. When the bishop is present this sign of reverence is reserved for him. These visual signs tell us that the Gospel is a special part of God’s word to be proclaimed and broken open for us at the Table of the Word of God.