



## **Celebrating the Sacred Liturgy of the Mass: A Review of New Diocesan Norms—Part III**

From her earliest days, the Church has nourished us with both Christ's Body and Blood and with Sacred Scripture. However, among the many gifts of the Church which flowed from the Second Vatican Council must surely be the increased emphasis on opening Sacred Scripture, the treasury of God's word, to all Catholics.

After the Council, the Lectionary, the official book containing all the readings from Sacred Scripture which are used during celebrations of the Mass, was revised so that we might be more fully nourished by the proclamation of God's word. In addition, the part of the Mass in which we listen to God's word is now called the Liturgy of the Word.

The Lectionary provides three cycles of readings to be used for Sundays and Feasts (as well as two cycles of readings for weekdays), with each Sunday celebrating a particular aspect of the mystery of salvation. The readings from God's word we hear proclaimed each week at the Sacred Liturgy are not intended to inform us about past events but rather to speak to us today and form us in the faith.

### **Fruits of the Liturgy of the Word**

A few simple practices can help us best receive the fruits of the Liturgy of the Word. First, of course, is fostering our own disposition for prayer, based on our preparations for Mass and our participation in the Mass itself. By reading the Scriptures for the coming Sunday as part of our regular spiritual reading, we will better hear and understand the word proclaimed at Mass. (The daily readings for Mass are available on-line at <http://www.usccb.org/nab/>, where you can also sign-up for a podcast.) Likewise, the parish should provide good discernment for selecting and appointing readers and follow up with competent training so that the Scriptures will be proclaimed more effectively.

Immediately following the Collect or Opening Prayer, the priest and people sit

for the beginning of the Liturgy of the Word, and the lector or reader proceeds to the ambo (formerly called a pulpit). At Sunday Mass the first reading is ordinarily taken from the Old Testament. (One regular exception is during the Easter season when the first reading is from the Acts of the Apostles.) This Old Testament passage is one which has been selected for its relation to the Gospel reading for the day. Our active participation in this and all the readings is primarily through our attitude of attentive listening and openness to God's voice. When the reader concludes with the phrase "The Word of the Lord," we can then respond wholeheartedly, "Thanks be to God."

### **Responding in Song**

The first reading is followed by responsorial, which most often comes from the Book of Psalms. The responsorial Psalm in the Lectionary has usually been chosen to complement the first reading. For this reason it is best that the assigned text be sung whenever possible. In order to facilitate our singing the Psalm or canticle, however, the Church does allow seasonal texts to be used. Since the responsorial is, in fact, Sacred Scripture, it is led by the psalmist from the ambo (the table of God's word). Texts of other hymns are not to be substituted for the Psalm.

The second reading is taken from the New Testament epistles. Except in seasons such as Advent and Lent when the second reading was assigned to echo the other readings, we usually hear one letter proclaimed continuously over several Sundays. These letters not only reflect the life of faith in the early Church but also speak to us as we strive to live our own life of faith. Again, we respond, "Thanks be to God" to the reader's

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proclamation “The Word of the Lord.”

The plan of the Lectionary means that over the three year Sunday cycle we hear the majority of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—the synoptic Gospels. John’s Gospel is primarily proclaimed during the seasons of Lent and Easter and to supplement the readings from Mark, the shortest of the Gospels. We know that in the Gospels the fulfillment of God’s promises and the prophecies of the Old Testament (or Hebrew Scriptures) are revealed to us in the person of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. The Gospels are so important as Christ’s presence with us that they are found in a separate book which is treated with special reverence. Of course, parishes which do not have a separate Book of the Gospels, may read the assigned Gospel from the Lectionary.

### **Reverence for the Gospel**

At the beginning of Mass the Book of the Gospels, but never the Lectionary, is carried in procession and placed on the altar. When it is time for the reading of the Gospel for the day, the deacon or priest carries the Book of the Gospels in procession to the ambo. This procession is accompanied by the singing of the Alleluia (or a special gospel acclamation during Lent) and may include incense and candles.

The respect we show to the Book of the Gospels carries on the ancient tradition of special reverence for the Gospels. In this way we demonstrate our veneration of Christ, the Word of God, present and speaking to us. The Gospel reading at Mass is always proclaimed by the deacon, priest celebrant, or another priest, and we remain standing throughout this reading.

On Sundays and special feasts the reading of the Gospel is always followed by a homily. In the homily the priest, or sometimes the deacon, helps us understand and reflect on the readings

from Sacred Scripture or possibly another text from the Mass. During the Jubilee Year of Saint Paul we are now celebrating, homilies may focus more regularly on the readings from Paul’s epistles. The homily is meant to open to us the mysteries of faith and help us apply the message of Scripture to our own lives.

### **Professing Our One Faith**

After a brief period of silent reflection, the priest and people stand and together respond to God’s word by professing our one faith in the singing or recitation of the Nicene Creed. (The Bishop may give permission for the use of the Apostle’s Creed, which is often used for Masses with children.) As a special sign of reverence for the Incarnation of Christ, we all bow at the words “by the power of the Holy Spirit He was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man.” (On the solemnities of Christmas and the Annunciation we genuflect at the words “and became man.”)

As a people who have been baptized into the priesthood of Jesus Christ, we conclude the Liturgy of the Word by praying

for the needs of all in the Prayer of the Faithful. Guidelines for this prayer direct us to include intentions in the following order: for the needs of the Church, for public authorities and the salvation of the world, for those burdened by any kind of difficulty, and for the local community. To these four may be added intercessions to address other urgent needs. We are reminded that these are prayers of petition of the entire community. Although our hearts are filled with gratitude for God’s gifts, these prayers find their source not in gratefulness but in the neediness of the world. The Liturgy of the Word concludes with the priest’s prayer that God will hear our needs and respond to them as He has done so generously throughout the ages.

*“Active participation in the eucharistic liturgy can hardly be expected if one approaches it superficially, without an examination of his or her life. This inner disposition can be fostered, for example, by recollection and silence for at least a few moments before the beginning of the liturgy, by fasting and, when necessary, by sacramental confession. A heart reconciled to God makes genuine participation possible.”*

—Pope Benedict XVI in *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 55.