

II. Hearing the Word

The Lectionary – History

History and Usage of the Lectionary

Quite early, Jewish Christians adapted the proclamation of the Word of God from their synagogue service for the celebration of the Eucharist. This practice of reading the Law and the Prophets, as well as letters of Paul and stories about Jesus at liturgy, ultimately resulted in the formation of the New and Old Testament canons.

“And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, *as long as time permits*; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.”
(ca. 150 CE: Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chapter 67)

The above suggests that the early Church practiced a continuous reading of Scripture at liturgy from week to week. And, it also selected portions of scripture related specifically the feast or the place where Eucharist was being celebrated. For example, St. Luke’s account of the birth of Christ was chosen for Midnight Mass on Christmas because it was celebrated in the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome. Or, the gospel for Mass of Christmas day was chosen from the prologue of the Gospel of John because it was celebrated in St. John Lateran, the cathedral church of Rome.

Though the proclamation of the Word had become a fixed part of the liturgy quite early, by the 11th century the public proclamation had ceased as the priest read all readings, silently, and in Latin.

The Liturgical Movement’s study of ancient texts led scholars to promote the pastoral renewal of the liturgy. (1832-present) Which, in turn, influenced the bishops at Vatican II who instituted our three-year cycle of readings for Sundays and the two-year cycle for weekdays. They collected the first readings and responsorial psalms (and second readings for solemnities) into the *Lectionary* and gave the ministry to proclaim these to lay lectors.

GIRM2003 called for use of a Book of Gospels, separate from the lectionary: Matthew (Year A), Mark (Year B), and Luke (Year C). Selections from the Gospel of John appear at different times in all the three yearly cycles.

The semi-continuous reading of, say, Matthew (A) during Ordinary Time shapes the choice of *first* readings from the Hebrew Bible. Epistles and Acts of the Apostles appear semi-continuously as our *second* readings. All three readings in Lent, Advent, Easter season and Christmastide cohere. In sum...

The Liturgy of the Word includes:
The First Reading
(Usually taken from the Hebrew Bible or the Acts of the Apostles)
The Responsorial Psalm
The Second Reading
(Usually taken from the New Testament Epistles or the Book of Revelation)
The Gospel Acclamation
The Gospel
The Homily
The Profession of Faith
The General Intercessions
(also known as *The Prayer of the Faithful*)

Proclaiming and Responding to the Word

The primary parts of the Liturgy of the Word are the readings from Scripture and the Responsorial Psalm. The homily, profession of faith, and general intercessions “develop and conclude this part of the Mass.” (GIRM 55) So that these concluding parts of the Word seem less disjointed and unrelated to what has gone before, it helps to understand the rhythm of ‘*proclamation and response*’ in the liturgy.

The lector proclaims the Word, the faithful respond in the Responsorial Psalm. The lector proclaims the Second Reading, the faithful respond with silence. The deacon or priest proclaims the gospel, and the homily, creed, and intercessions respond to the entire Word that day.

Christ speaks in the Word Proclaimed

Christ speaks through the Word proclaimed:

“For in the readings, explained by the homily, God is *speaking* to his people, *opening up to them* the mystery of redemption and salvation, and *nourishing* their spirit; and Christ himself *is present* in the midst of the faithful through his word...” (GIRM 55)

Proclamation and response comes alive here with GIRM’s directions for meditative proclamation of the Word and the “full, conscious” reception of it.

The liturgy of the word must be celebrated in such a way as to promote meditation...
During the liturgy of the word, it is also appropriate to include brief periods of silence, accommodated to the assembly gathered together, in which, by the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, the word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response may be prepared through prayer. (GIRM 55)

GIRM, then, calls the faithful to grow spiritually in our capacity to hear the Word and respond to the One who speaks. Again, every aspect of liturgical praying is affected by proclamation and response:

"By their silence and singing the people make God's word their own and they also affirm their adherence to it by the profession of faith. Finally, having been nourished by this word, they pour out their petitions in the general intercessions for the needs of the entire Church and for the salvation of the whole world."
[GIRM 55 (Italics added)]

Practical notes I – Responding to the Word

The Word announces salvation *today*. Christ addresses us as we are *now*. As events of in lives shift, the Word comforts and challenges us *in our depths*. Great. So, when the Church is tempted to domesticate the Word, we remember...

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it *divides soul from spirit*, joints from marrow; it is able to *judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart*. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. (Heb 4:12f)

What might meditative engagement with the above Word look like?

- 1) *What words, phrases, or images stand out?*
- 2) *What attracts me in the Word?*
- 3) *What do I want to hold at arm's length?*

Since discipleship always involves the journey from 'where we are now' to where the Word calls us (this is the path of conversion and repentance as well), we grow in clarity about *where we are* before God by this exercise. And by recognizing Christ always present to us 'there', we get to walk the walk to become more Christ-like.

Engaging the Word, encountering Christ in the readings, therefore is as central to our discipleship as it is to our worship.

"The Mass is made up as it were of two parts: the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. *These two parts are so closely interconnected that they form but one single act of worship.* For in the Mass the table both of God's word and of Christ's Body is laid, from which the faithful may be instructed and refreshed."
(GIRM 28; refers to CSL 48, 51, & 56)

Practical notes II – At the Ambo

GIRM2003 introduced a distinction between the *lectern* (place for announcements) and the *ambo* (The "ambo" is the name given to the podium or lectern in the church that is *reserved for proclaiming*

Scripture.) Everything to be read at liturgy that is *not* from the Word should be delivered from another place. GIRM also underlines the fact that the proclamation of the first and second readings is a lay, not a clerical, ministry.

"By tradition the function of proclaiming the readings is *ministerial, not presidential*. Therefore, a lector should proclaim the readings..." (GIRM 59)

Since the ambo is the place from which the Word is proclaimed, it is also the proper place for the *cantor* to lead the *responsorial psalm*, the *homilist* to deliver his homily, and the *leader* of the *Prayer of the Faithful* to offer the General Intercessions. Again, song leading, announcements, and so forth, are to be done from another location.

"The priest, standing at the *chair* or at the *ambo* itself, or, when appropriate, *in another suitable place*, gives the homily." (GIRM 136)

So, why all this fuss about the ambo? Once we acknowledge that the ambo is the *Altar of the Word* (as the *Introduction to the Lectionary* tells us) we can then see it as an analogy to the *Altar of the Eucharist*. We show reverence, therefore, to those actions done at the ambo. For example, the simple proclamation and response – "The Word of the Lord" / "Thanks be to God" – parallels "The Body of Christ" / "Amen." We respond in a similar manner at the Gospel because Christ speaks directly to us in and through his Word proclaimed.

Unlike the *ambo*, however, the altar has been consecrated with sacred chrism. It is Christ in an analogous way to those whom the bishop confirms with chrism. No one bows to the ambo, rather to the Book of Gospels from which Christ speaks in the Word.

For discussion/reflection:

- What new things did you learn about the Liturgy of the Word? Why is it important?
- What is my experience of the Word? How did it comfort me? How did it challenge me?
- What is my experience of silence? How does my assembly respond to the call for more silence?
- How might I use periods of silence profitably for my spiritual life?
- What could help me prepare to receive more deeply the Word proclaimed?

This is the second in a series of articles about the liturgy. Article #3 is entitled, *The Lord Upholds My Life*.