

IV. “The Gospel of the Lord”

Proclaiming the Good News

The proclamation of the Gospel at Sunday Mass is replete with rich and significant ritual gestures: the cantor intones the Alleluia; the choir and people join in with gusto; the presider blesses the deacon who carries the Book of Gospels in procession to the ambo; the proclamations / responses: “The Lord be with you” / “And also with you.” “A reading from the holy Gospel...” / “Glory to you, O Lord.” The faithful sign their foreheads, lips, and breast.

The congregation thus acclaim Christ who speaks to his people through the proclamation of the Gospel. And, we prepare to receive his Word.

Let us reflect for a moment on these several gestures proper to the proclamation of the Gospel...

The Opening Dialogue:

The first dialogue between the minister and the assembly manifests the church present. “A reading from the holy Gospel...” prepares us to attend to the gospel and receive it in faith. The faithful acclaim Christ present in the gospel, “Glory to you, Lord.”

Recall that the Liturgy of the Word includes:

The First Reading

(Usually taken from the O.T. or the Acts of the Apostles)

The Responsorial Psalm

The Second Reading

(Usually taken from the N.T. Epistles or Revelation)

The Gospel Acclamation

The Gospel

The Homily

The Profession of Faith

The General Intercessions

Standing for the Proclamation of the Gospel:

The community stands at the singing of the *Alleluia*. Very significant. No longer seated as disciples, as those ready to hear and be taught by God, now the faithful stand to receive the Good News as *the Body of Christ in the world*. Certainly, someone important comes into our presence we stand as a sign of respect or honor. Notice, however, that when the faithful stand during Mass, we do so to reveal the Church as the Body of Christ – at the Entrance Procession, the *Alleluia*, the beginning of the Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer, and at the Communion Procession. In one sense, like speaks to like – the Word of the risen Christ addresses the Body of Christ in the World.

The Signs of the Cross

Making the triple signs of the cross on forehead, lips, and heart is a ritual gesture that can easily become rote. Two suggestions might enliven our practice of this simple gesture.

First, the faithful could recite a similar prayer to the one the priest prays or the deacon is blessed with prior to proclaiming the Gospel. “May the Lord be in our minds, on our lips and in our hearts as the words of the holy gospel are proclaimed to us.”

Second, in the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, the sponsors of the inquirers claim the new Catechumens for Christ by signing the five senses of the person, as well as their shoulders, hands, and feet. In a like manner, hearing the Gospel claims us anew for Christ in mind, speech, and heart.

The Book of Gospels

The Book of Gospels?

In many places the Book of Gospels has been used only in cathedrals when the bishop presides at ceremonies. Since 2003, the revised *General Instruction* has mandated a Book of Gospels be used at every Sunday Mass.

The Book of Gospels differs from the Lectionary because it contains *only* the gospel readings for the liturgy, while the Lectionary contains the First and Second Readings as well as the Responsorial Psalms. This use of the Book of Gospels at liturgy ritually demonstrates the primacy of the Gospel of Christ, the lens through which Christians interpret all Scripture. It signifies the Church’s faith that Christ speaks directly to us through the Gospel.

Various signs of honor attend the use of the Book of Gospels: processions, incense, candles, showing reverence to the Book following the proclamation of the Gospel. Some parishes enthrone the Book at the conclusion of the reading. Recall that the only other thing kissed in the liturgy is the Altar, which, because it has been anointed with chrism, reveals Christ, our salvation.

The Four Evangelists and their symbols

Christian art has associated the four evangelists with “the four living creatures,” found in the prophet Ezekiel, the book of Daniel, and the book of Revelation. Each creature in Ezekiel has one face with four aspects. This suggests *One gospel; four sayings*. We read in the prophet:

“As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a **human being**, the face of a **lion** on the right side, the face of an **ox** on the left side, and the face of an **eagle**...”
(Ezekiel, 1:10)

St. Matthew the Evangelist:



St. Irenaeus (in *Adversus Haereses* 3.11.8 (in *ANF* 1.854-55) seems to have been the earliest Church theologian who identified the four evangelists with the four living creatures.

He wrote that “the third [living creature] had, as it were, the face as of a *man*,’ -- an evident description of His advent as a human being.” Matthew is depicted as human, because he begins his gospel with Jesus’ genealogy and strongly focuses on his humanity.

St. Mark the Evangelist:



St. Irenaeus described the significance of the lion: “The first living creature was like a *lion*,” symbolizing His effectual working, His leadership, and royal power.” Mark’s gospel begins with the words spoken about John the Baptist, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness,” suggesting the roar of the lion.

St. Luke the Evangelist:



St. Irenaeus saw the “the second [living creature] was like an *ox*, signifying [His] sacrificial and sacerdotal order.” Luke the evangelist is symbolized by the winged ox, because he deals with the sacrificial aspects of Christ’s life. Luke begins his gospel begins with Mary and Joseph presenting Jesus in the Temple at Jerusalem.

St. John the Evangelist:



St. Irenaeus refers to the eagle: “the fourth [living creature] was like a flying *eagle*, pointing out the gift of the Spirit hovering with His wings over the Church. And therefore the Gospels are in accord with these things, among which Christ Jesus is seated. For that according to John relates His original, effectual, and glorious generation from the Father, thus declaring, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’”

Thus, John the evangelist is symbolized by the rising eagle, since his gaze pierces so far into the mysteries of heaven and because his Gospel begins with a lofty prologue, a hymn to the Word made flesh.

For discussion/reflection:

- What did you learn from this article?
- Do you experience the proclamation of the Gospel as the highpoint of the Liturgy of the Word in your Sunday worship?
- Might the signs of the sign of the cross that we make on our foreheads, lips, and hearts become more meaningful now?
- Does your worshipping community use a Book of Gospels? What might the ritual use of such a book mean to me?
- There are a number of online services for helping Catholics prepare to receive the Word on Sunday. The *Sunday Website at SLU* supports my preparation.
 - <http://liturgy.slu.edu/index.html>

This is the fourth in a series of articles about the liturgy. Article #5 will present *Preparing Gifts and Hearts*.