

The Mass (Part XIII)

by Fr. Tim Church

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

At the conclusion of the collect, we have finished that part of the Mass called the introductory rites. All that we have considered up until now is a preparation for what follows. The Liturgy (or “service”) of the Word is the first of the two principal parts of the Mass. It is directed at hearing God’s Word in Holy Scripture. In our culture it is extremely rare that we share in hearing read to us a passage from an ancient book. For that matter, public reading of any sort is relatively uncommon. Added to this unique experience is the understanding that in hearing these readings we are in fact encountering God’s presence.

In the readings, as explained by the homily, God speaks to his people, opening up to them the mystery of redemption and salvation and offering them spiritual nourishment; and Christ himself is present in the midst of the faithful through his word. By their silence and singing, the people make God’s word their own, and they also affirm their adherence to it by means of the Profession of Faith. Finally, having been nourished by it, they pour out their petitions in the Prayers of the Faithful for the needs of the entire Church and for the salvation of the whole world. (General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 55)

Those of us who were raised in the “Bible Belt” remember the criticism of Catholics that said we did not “believe in the Bible.” Some Catholics actually accepted the idea and remained somewhat nervous about any encouragements to read or study Holy Scripture. They thought that Catholics had the Mass, and Protestants had the Bible. With Vatican II, there has been a pronounced renewal of the place of Holy Scripture in the life of the Church. This can be seen first in the renewal of the understanding of the relationship between the Biblical readings and the celebration of the sacraments.

In the Christian community, the preaching of the word is needed for the very ministering of the sacraments. They are precisely sacraments of faith, a faith which is born of and nourished by the word. This is especially true of the Liturgy of the Word in the celebration of Mass, in which the proclaiming of the death and resurrection of Christ is inseparably joined to the response of the people who hear, and to the very offering whereby Christ ratified the New Testament in his blood. In this offering the faithful are united both by their dispositions and by their discernment of the sacrament. (Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, 4) The second renewal of the use of the Bible is in the arrangement of the readings and the list of passages to be used throughout the year. This list is called a lectionary and assigns a series of Biblical readings to every day and occasion for the Mass.

The history of the lectionary goes back to our Jewish roots and the readings that took place in the synagogue. The synagogue was a local gathering place for the Jews, similar to our parish churches. They gathered many times during the week but especially on the Sabbath. The worship service included at least two readings from parts of the Old Testament. They were usually read as a continuous thread, reading one passage after another from the same Book until it was completed. This practice continued in the Church, sometimes reading four readings or more.

Our modern lectionary includes a three year cycle on Sundays, with three readings and a section from the Psalms placed between the first two. Weekday Masses have two readings with a two-year cycle. This reform of the lectionary has given the Church a tremendously deepened appreciation for the place of Holy Scripture in the life of the Church. It is not surprising that there has been an explosion of study groups focused on the Bible. Where once it was remote and strange to Catholics, the Bible is dramatically at the center of our everyday life.