

The Mass (Part XIV)

by Fr. Tim Church

MORE ON THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

Perhaps it will be helpful to step through the manner of presenting the three readings at a Sunday Mass. We will cover the first two this week, and the Gospel next.

Following the collect (or opening prayer) the people are seated to listen to the first reading. This posture is generally more relaxed and allows us to listen more attentively. In ancient times there was little provision for seating in the church. By the middle ages, pews had become common, and the custom of squatting to listen had begun to pass in the European culture. It is still common in the Orient or Middle East for people to squat or sit on the floor to listen.

It is important for us to recognize that the uniformity of posture is oftentimes interpreted as a sign of unity in the congregation. We may prefer another posture (standing to listen) but the parish joining in a common posture is an important sign of our unity as a community. Experimentations with diverse postures and practices following Vatican II and its call for liturgical reform has apparently come to an end, and the Catholic Church is returning to an understanding of the dignity and importance of common, shared practices in our liturgy.

Before the Mass begins, the book from which the first and second readings are taken is placed on the ambo, the lectern from which the readings are proclaimed. This book is usually called a lectionary. The Gospel book is carried in procession and placed on the altar. The ambo as a liturgical furnishing has a long history. There were times when this “reading desk” was greatly elevated in the Church. The reader had to ascend sometimes as many as a dozen steps. Canopies were erected over the ambo, originally to improve the projection of the reader’s voice. Over time, the altar itself became the place for proclaiming all the readings and there were even directions in the liturgical books that the priest or deacon faces the altar for the reading. This meant that he was actually turned away from the people! The liturgical reform has returned the readings to their proper importance by requiring that the ambo be prominently placed.

The reading is announced according to a particular form, which indicates only the book from which the reading comes. There is no response to this announcement, but there is at the conclusion when the lector announces “The word of the Lord.” and the people respond “Thanks be to God.” While the text of this response seems to be an expression of appreciation (for being able to hear God’s word) it is more likely an acclamation of approval or agreement. (Sort of like saying, “Right on!”)

The Psalm that follows is usually sung on Sundays and festivals. The 150 Psalms of the Old Testament were originally the hymns of the Jewish liturgy. In many ways they are very passionate responses to the events and circumstances of life and our experience of faith and spiritual trial. They form the substantial framework for the Liturgy of the Hours, the common prayer of the clergy and others within the church.

In the Mass the responsorial singing of the Psalm is very ancient. St. Augustine, in the fourth century, mentions it. In terms of its effect, the Psalm response is intended as a joyous response to hearing God's word. There was a time when only clergy could lead the singing. Later it was given to others who would ascend the steps of the ambo, but not to the top. He would sing from a lower step (gradus). From this the psalm and the sung response came to be known as the "gradual."

The second reading is proclaimed like the first. This reading is generally taken from the letters of the New Testament. Some argue that the inclusion of this additional reading makes it more difficult to focus, or attempt to discern a theme. It is somewhat surprising to discover that the readings are not always thematically linked. There is a particular mystery concerning the proclamation of God's word, in which the Spirit opens the gathered people to receive the very presence of God, the consolation of divine wisdom guiding us through the vicissitudes of life.