

The Mass (Part XV)

by Fr. Tim Church

THE GOSPEL READING

The reading of the Gospel is the high point of the liturgy of the word. "When the Sacred Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his own word, proclaims the Gospel." (General Instructions of the Roman Missal, 29)

Many accompanying ceremonies have been associated with the proclamation of the Gospel. Today only a deacon (if one is present) or priest may read the Gospel, but in times past it was limited to the priest alone, and in some places it was limited to the bishop. On Christmas the emperor read the Gospel, dressed in his public regalia, as he proclaimed the opening of the second chapter of Luke's Gospel: " *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled.*" Great processions of the Gospel book were also associated with its reading. There was even the notion at one time that the Gospel was too sacred to be heard by those who were unbaptized and so, even if they were studying the faith to become Christians, until they were, they were dismissed before the reading took place.

Even the book itself is treated with a surprising respect, even from the earliest centuries of the Church's life. These books have been encased in precious metals, filled with valuable miniatures wonderfully reflecting the scenes of the Gospel and adorned with precious stones. Even touching the book has been highly sought by the faithful. Old manuscripts of the Gospel of John are soiled at the first words of the text from those who were moved to touch the dramatic beginning of the Gospel: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*"

In the contemporary liturgy, we surround the reading of the Gospel with many customs rooted in history. We may use incense to mark the solemnity of the reading, and candles to help form a procession of the altar book to the ambo. At our Sunday Masses, the Gospel book is processed into the Church and placed on the altar, then taken to the ambo in this little procession. If a deacon reads the Gospel, he first seeks the blessing of the priest or bishop who responds: "The Lord be in your heart and on your lips that you may worthily proclaim his gospel. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

During the procession to the altar, the people sing the "Alleluia" which further adds to the solemnity, and acts as wonderfully joyous welcome of the Lord, who comes to speak to his people. Because of the penitential character of the Lenten season, and as a sign of our sorrow for our sins, the "alleluia" is not used during Lent. Another chant is substituted that is still a song of praise to God, but acts as a replacement for a word that has, from even the time of our Jewish ancestors, been a solemn proclamation of joy and of the Lord's victory. At weekday Masses the Alleluia or chant is oftentimes omitted if it is not sung.

The whole congregation stands and follows the procession to the ambo, facing there as the Gospel is read. The deacon or priest greets the people, announcing the Lord's presence ("The Lord be with you.") and then announces the Gospel, citing the particular Gospel from which this portion comes. He traces a cross on the Gospel book and then on his forehead, lips and chest. The people join in this gesture of dedication of our thought, words and deeds to the words of life contained in the Gospel. As the priest or deacon kisses the book he says privately: "May the words of the Gospel wipe away our sins." The gesture of kissing the book is very ancient and at one time the book was handed throughout the congregation so that they could share in this gesture.

All of this may seem excessive, or the result of the motives of simple people. And yet, to esteem the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus in this manner is almost expected, once a person realizes the value of the words that are spoken. As we hold the book up in honor and proclaim, "The Gospel of the Lord," all respond "Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ." Truly these words have given us life.