



# Understanding the Mass

## Part 2

### *The Liturgy of the Word*

#### **The Lectionary**

At the Second Vatican Council, the Lectionary was developed based on studies that had been made of the early Church. Christians, in the first centuries after Christ, adapted the Jewish synagogue service for the celebration of the Eucharist. Like their Jewish elders, the Church chose continuous readings from the Law and the Prophets, adding them to the letters of Saint Paul and the stories of Jesus found in the Gospels.

Certain readings were assigned to particular festive celebrations or to places of pilgrimage commemorating the life of Christ.

The current Lectionary provides a continuous reading of the Sacred Scriptures – a three-year cycle for Sundays and a two-year cycle for weekdays. Each year of the Sunday cycle focuses on a particular Gospel (Matthew – A; Mark – B; and Luke – C). Passages from the Gospel of John appear at different times in all three years.

You may realize that the first readings and responsorial psalms were selected to highlight some aspect of the Gospel for the day. The second readings are generally a continuous reading from a particular letter of Saint Paul or another of the Pastoral Letters. During the Easter Season, the first reading comes from the Acts of the Apostles and the second reading sometimes comes from the Book of Revelation.

#### **The Ministry of Lector**

The Lector or Reader has a vital role in the Liturgy of the Word. He or she is charged with the responsibility of proclaiming the Word of God. As such, they must be excellent readers who study the Scriptural texts and prepare them by practicing. Since the Church teaches that it is Jesus Christ who speaks to us in the Word, all in the assembly should be able to hear and understand the readings when proclaimed without having to rely on reading the written text.

#### **What is the Ambo?**

The ambo is the place from which the readings, the responsorial psalm, the Gospel, and the homily are proclaimed. The Ambo is the *Altar of the Word*. It is to be substantial in nature and similar in design to the Altar and Sanctuary furniture and distinguished from a lectern or podium from which the announcements are made or songs are led.

#### **Silence is Key**

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal encourages moments of silence after each reading so as to promote prayer and meditation through which each listener may hear the voice of the Lord. We must remember that we are not listening to “historical” narratives – the Lord is speaking to us *today* and *now* in this very moment.

#### **The First Reading**

As noted earlier, the first reading is taken from the Jewish Scriptures – the Law, Prophets, Wisdom Literature, or the Historical Books. This reading usually foreshadows in some way the text of the Gospel to be read at the same Mass. In this way, the assembly comes to know that God has worked His salvation through history – in real people, like us.

During the Easter Season, the first reading is taken from continuous reading of the *Acts of the Apostles* so that we recall how the Holy Spirit gathered people of many languages and backgrounds into the community of the Church.

#### **The Responsorial Psalm**

The Psalms are the Hymn Book of the Church and in them are expressed the full spectrum of human emotions. They are used in the context of the Liturgy of the Word to help us realize that, through generations, believers have sung these words making of them their own prayer to God ... i.e., *the Lord is my Shepherd, there is nothing I shall want.*



## The Second Reading

The second reading is usually taken from one of the Letters of Saint Paul or another of the Pastoral Letters of the New Testament. While the second reading does not intentionally connect to the first reading or the Gospel, it describes for us the wisdom offered by the Church's early Pastors to their communities, which, like ours today, struggled to understand how to apply Christian teachings to daily life. The response to both the first and second reading is: *Thanks be to God* – as we praise and thank God for speaking to us.

## The Gospel Acclamation

The "Alleluia" which is sung during most of the liturgical year is not just a song – it is an action of the assembly by which we stand to welcome Christ, present in the Good News, with great joy. This acclamation is so important that the Roman Missal requires that it must always be sung, not recited.

During the Season of Lent, the Alleluia is not sung in anticipation of announcing the Resurrection at Easter when of necessity the Alleluia is sung repeatedly. In Lent, a phrase praising Christ present in the Gospel, "*Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ, King of endless glory!*" or something similar is sung.



## The Proclamation of the Gospel

So important is the Proclamation of the Gospel that it is surrounded by rituals which are outlined below:

**Change in Posture** – with the singing of the Gospel Acclamation, the assembly stands. Standing is always a sign of the Resurrection and invites us to actively listen to the Words of the Gospel.

**The Opening Dialogue** – the Deacon or Priest proclaiming the Gospel informs us that it is Christ who speaks to us directly. *The Lord be with you. And with your spirit (words addressed to Christ). A reading from the holy Gospel according to (name). Glory to You, O Lord (notice the You is likewise addressed to Christ).* Christ then speaks to us *today* and *now*.

**The Sign of the Cross** – the act of making the Sign of the Cross three times (forehead, lips, and breast) is a ritual

gesture that we don't think about, but it imitates what the Deacon or Priest does as they pray: "*May the Lord be in my mind, on my lips, and in my heart that I may worthily proclaim the holy Gospel.*" Proclaim it in Word and deed through the week.

**The Book of the Gospels** – The Gospels are so precious that they are collected in a book separate from the other readings. The Gospels are of primary importance in the life of a Christian and are the lens through which we interpret all of the Sacred Scriptures. The Book of the Gospels may be highly decorated or be encased in a decorative cover.

**The Gospel Procession** – so important is the proclamation of the Gospel that the Book itself is carried with honor and dignity from the altar to the ambo. Like all processions, this is a moment for the assembly to be unified in its focus.

**Other Reverences at the Gospel** – the Book of the Gospel and proclamation of the Gospel are revered by being accompanied with candles, and on special occasions, by the use of incense. In addition, the page on which the Gospel is recorded is reverently kissed by the Deacon, Priest, or Bishop. And when the Bishop presides at liturgy, he may bless the assembly with the book of the Gospels after the proclamation of the Gospel.

**The Proclamation** – the Words of Christ spoken to the assembly are generally proclaimed in spoken word. However, on special occasions, the words are sung to highlight their importance and to encourage attentive listening by the assembly.

## The Homily

After the proclamation of the Gospel, the Presider is charged with the responsibility of addressing the assembly – connecting the Word proclaimed to the Christian life. Homilies require preparation but the faithful need to remember that not all Deacons and Priests are gifted orators. The homily is not intended to be entertainment. It is a serious call to believers, encouraging them to live the Gospel.

## The Profession of Faith

Again, the Church proclaims its unity by together stating what we believe in common.

## The Prayer of the Faithful

The most immediate response to hearing the Word of God proclaimed and restating the tenets of our Faith is through the action of prayer. These Universal Prayers are not announcements. They are prayers offered for the Church in general, civil authorities, for common needs, for the poor, the sick, and for those who have died.