

Why We Do What We Do III: The Liturgy of the Word, Part 1

“Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart.”

Hebrews 4:12

“For 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 their 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 Prayer of the Faithful for the needs of the entire Church and the salvation of the whole world.”

(General Instruction of the Roman Missal)

We continue to reflect on why we do what we do at Mass. Last week we reflected on the Introductory Rites. This week I want to begin the first of a two – part article on the Liturgy of the Word. The Mass has two distinct Liturgies within it: The Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. During the Liturgy of the Word, we experience Christ present at the Table of the Word, which we call the Ambo; and during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we experience Christ present at the Table of Sacrifice, the Altar.

During the Liturgy of the Word, it isn’t just that we hear stories about God. That’s true, but more than that we actually experience God, revealing himself to us in the words of Sacred Scripture. And so we proclaim the Word – we don’t just read it – in a dignified way, from a beautiful Ambo, from a beautiful book, because this is Christ, this is God’s revelation to us.

As we hear the word proclaimed, we absorb it in silence, and we observe sacred silence after each reading. We never hurry through the proclamation of the Word. The purpose of silence is to provide a space “in which, at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response through prayer may be prepared.” The presence of Christ in the Words of Scripture is too precious to hurry through it and not let it soak in.

The function of proclaiming the Word of God is one that the Church tells us is ministerial, not presidential. That is, it is not up to the presider to proclaim the readings.

The first and second readings are proclaimed by a lector, the Psalm response is proclaimed by a psalmist or cantor, and the Gospel is proclaimed by the deacon, when a deacon is present. If a deacon is not present, only then does the priest proclaim the Gospel.

The Psalm response is indeed a reading from Sacred Scripture – the book of Psalms, specifically. Thus, we all make the Psalm a true response of our heart to the Word of God by joining in singing the response. We don’t get to choose not to sing it. Even if our voices aren’t the best, they are beautiful to God who gave them to us.

The proclamation of the Gospel is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. Here, Christ’s story and commandments have been revealed to us and a response is called for. Thus we make the Gospel proclamation as beautiful as possible, using a special book – The Book of the Gospels, which is often covering with gold beautifully. On some occasions, the book is incensed to underscore the holy revelation of the Gospel. And so the Word of God begins to work into our minds and hearts. A response is called for, and we will look at that more next week. For now, it is good to end with the prayer of the deacon as he kisses the book after the proclamation of the Gospel: “Through the words of the Gospel, may our sins be wiped away.”