

The Mass

The Parts of the Mass – The Liturgy of the Word

Over the course of history, the Church has used many images to express the continuity between the two main parts of the Mass: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. One of the more traditional images is that of “two tables.” The faithful are nourished first from the table of Scripture, which is proclaimed in the Liturgy of the Word. Then they are nourished by Christ’s body and blood, in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. These two main parts of the Mass can be seen as two sides of the same coin: The proclamation of God’s Word in Scripture draws us into a deeper communion with Christ, as we feed upon His body and blood in the Eucharist.

Pope Benedict XVI beautifully noted how the two parts of the Mass have an inner unity, so much so that, together, they form “one single act of worship”:

“From listening to the word of God, faith is born or strengthened (cf. Romans 10:17); in the Eucharist, the Word made flesh gives himself to us as our spiritual food. Thus, ‘from the two tables of the word of God and the Body of Christ, the Church receives and gives to the faithful the bread of life.’ ...Consequently, it must constantly be kept in mind that the word of God, read and proclaimed by the Church in the liturgy, leads to the Eucharist as to its own connatural end.”
(Sacramentum Caritatis p. 44)

As we examine the Liturgy of the Word, we find that the readings from Scripture do not merely provide us with guidance on moral living and reflections on the spiritual life. The Bible does not just talk about God, but rather it is God’s own speech. In the Liturgy of the Word, therefore, we encounter the words of God Himself spoken personally to every one of us.

This, of course, does not mean that we blindly ignore the human component of the Scriptures. They were written by human beings, to particular human communities, at a certain moment in human history. Each book of the Bible contains the human author’s writing style, personality, theological outlook, and pastoral concerns. But the Scriptures also are inspired by God. The word “inspiration” comes from the Greek word *theopneustos*, which means “God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16). In the inspired books of the Bible, God breathed forth His divine words through the human words of the biblical writers. As the Second Vatican Council fathers wrote in the document *Dei Verbum*:

“To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their own faculties and powers so that, though He acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever He wanted written, and no more.”

To hear the words of God is a serious matter. At Mount Sinai, the people of Israel prepared themselves for three days before God spoke to them the words of the covenant. In the Mass, we prepare ourselves for this holy encounter with God’s Word through the Introductory Rites – the sign of the cross, the Confiteor, the Kyrie, and the Gloria. Having marked ourselves with the sign of the cross, confessed our unworthiness to be in God’s presence, asked for His mercy and sung His praises, we now sit down to listen carefully to what God wants to speak to us through His own inspired words in the Scriptures. This is no impersonal encounter with the Divine. Rather, this is a deeply personal interaction with the Almighty. Again, as the Vatican II fathers taught in *Dei Verbum*, “In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet His children and talks with them.”

Lastly, let us consider the instrument through which the readings are proclaimed: the Lector. In order to appreciate the profound nature of what is really happening in the Liturgy of the Word, we must appreciate the amazing role the Lector plays in proclaiming the Scriptures to us. The Lector is not simply a public reader of the Bible. At Mass, the Lord uses the Lector as the instrument through whom He proclaims His Word to the people. Think of this as the Lector lending God his/her human voice so that God’s words can be spoken to us at Mass. What an amazing honor and privilege it is to read the Word of God! And what a blessing it is for us to hear it (Revelation 1:3).