

## Understanding the Mass – The Liturgy of the Word

In the heavenly liturgy there is a constant dialogue of love going on between the Father and the Son – in the Holy Spirit. That dialogue continues in our earthly liturgy of the Mass.

After the conclusion of the Introductory Rites, we enter more fully into this dialogue as we begin the first of the two principle parts of the Mass: the Liturgy of the Word. It includes the readings from the scriptures, the homily, Creed and the Prayers of the Faithful.

The Liturgy of the Word begins at the 2<sup>nd</sup> altar, the ambo. Also, just as the main altar is a table from which we are nourished with the bread of life, the ambo is a table from which we are nourished by God's word. The use of candles when reading the Gospel brings out the connection of the ambo to the altar even more fully.

In the Liturgy of the Word “God speaks to his people and Christ is still proclaiming his Gospel”. On Sundays and major feasts there is always an Old Testament reading, a responsorial psalm, a second reading from an apostolic letter and then the Gospel. The Old Testament reading, responsorial psalm and Gospel are always connected by a common theme whereas the reading from the apostolic letter is a semi-continuous to continuous reading through the letters and not particularly related by theme to the other readings. The Sunday readings follow a 3 year cycle taking us through the Gospels and corresponding Old Testament readings. We hear from the Gospel of Matthew this year, Mark the next and Luke the following year with readings from John interspersed throughout. In this way, we read much of the bible over every three year period.

As the scriptures are proclaimed, we hear, not the voice of the minister, but the voice of God speaking through His human instrument. We first hear this voice in the OT reading which points forward to Christ who reveals himself in the Gospel. What should be our response to God speaking to us? We respond with praise using His words in the responsorial psalm. The Lord responds then to us in the second reading which tells us how to live out what He is revealing to us in the Word.

Up until this point we sit which is a posture of listening and learning in the liturgy. Then comes the Alleluia or Gospel Acclamation. We stand in joyful expectation of what we are going to hear in the Gospel and sing because the Lord is going to speak even more directly to us in the words of Jesus Christ.

Before the Gospel we mark ourselves with the sign of the cross using our thumbs on our forehead, lips and heart saying internally “may the words of the Lord be on my mind, my lips and my heart”. With this gesture and words we are asking the Lord to help us always keep his word in our minds and proclaim it from our lips as it becomes alive in our hearts – so that we may faithfully live according to the words we are about to hear.

After hearing from the Lord, the homily is intended to help us apply the lessons we have just heard in the scriptures to our daily lives. Everyone sits again in this posture of learning.

The Creed follows which summarizes what we have just heard and have come to believe through the scriptures. We stand up to profess our faith using the words of the Church, words carefully chosen to clarify doctrinal issues and refute heresies over the ages.

Finally, knowing what the Lord is asking of us and recognizing what we have come to know as truth, we then approach our loving God with our needs and petitions in the Prayers of the Faithful. These prayers always follow a specific format: the Church, temporal leaders and world and needs, the suffering, and local needs of our community, including those who have died.

We can see in the Liturgy of the Word this beautiful and mysterious dialogue as God speaks and we listen and then we speak and He listens. In this dialogue God fills us with His wisdom and life. In turn, as we speak, our Lord listens with loving concern and He then responds in an abundance of love and generosity in a way that is most clearly seen in the second principle part of the Mass: the Liturgy of the Eucharist.