

The Mass Deconstructed
A Liturgical Catechesis
Understanding the Liturgy of the Word

St. Jerome:

- 1st person to translate the Bible into the language of the people.
- “Not to know the scriptures is not to know Christ.”
- Hearing the scriptures proclaimed is hearing Christ.

Our reading, proclaiming, and hearing the Word of God, then, is an intimate encounter between God and his people: it is the Father, speaking his Eternal Word, made flesh in our time, reaching down from heaven into our earthly existence and speaking with us, teaching us the mysteries of life.

We come to Mass to be fed, first from the table of God’s Word, and then from the table of sacrifice from which we receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

What Happens in the Liturgy of the Word

- The 1st part is made up of readings from Sacred Scripture, interspersed with chants.
- The 2nd part is the Homily, the Creed and the Universal Prayer (Prayer of the Faithful).

“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21)

The Lector or Deacon walks to the ambo, opens the Lectionary and begins to read the scriptures to us. When they conclude the readings, they announce that what we have heard is God speaking to us!

The Ambo

A slightly raised platform on which a lectern, or reading desk, is placed so that all can hear the Lector, Deacon, or Priest proclaims the Word of God. Only the Word of God and certain prayers may be prayed from the ambo.

The 1st and 2nd Readings

- The 1st Reading is usually taken from the Old Testament (These readings foreshadow the birth of Jesus and are fully understood in light of his Gospel.
- The 2nd Reading is usually taken from the New Testament epistles, Acts of the Apostles, or Book of revelation (These were written after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and continue the teaching of Jesus' apostles in those first years.

The Word of the Lord.

- After each reading the Lector announces, "The Word of the Lord!" and we respond, "Thanks be to God!"
- These acclamations are unambiguous and in the present tense.
- The Lord is present and active and speaking to us in his word proclaimed. Christ is standing in our midst, and we can clearly hear him as the disciples did when he walked with them.
- It is the Lector's voice, but God's own words.
- Too often, the Liturgy of the Word becomes repetitive or perfunctory, even for the lectors who are proclaiming the scriptures. Imagine if Jesus were to appear at our ball park down the street. How the crowds would rush to hear him! Yet he is truly present, and he can be truly heard speaking a word for this people in this time and place at every celebration of the Mass.

- Perhaps we think of listening as passive or benign. There is nothing benign about God revealing to us the meaning of life. There is nothing passive in hearing the message of the one who made us, died and rose for us, and speaks to us still through the Word proclaimed.

The Responsorial Psalm

A sung response of a psalm was not uncommon in the synagogues of Jesus' day. In the earliest days, the Psalm was often sung from the first step (gradus) of the ambo, rather than from the reading table. Thus did the name come to be known simply as the *Gradual*.

The Gospel

- At the high point of the Liturgy of the Word, the Gospels, containing the very words of Christ are proclaimed.
- The Book of the Gospels is, along with the altar, a primary sign of the presence of Christ in the liturgical assembly. This is why we kiss the Book of the Gospels and why it is carried in procession from the altar to the ambo. .

The Gospel Procession and Acclamation

- The proclamation of the Gospel begins with a procession accompanied by our most joyous chant, the *Alleluia* (meaning *Praise YHWH* or *Praise the Lord!*).
- In this procession we see Christ entering into our midst, not unlike the children who lined his way with palm branches when he gloriously entered Jerusalem before his saving Passion and Death.
- We sing Alleluias to welcome the King of Glory as he comes to speak to us in the words of his Holy Gospel.

The Proclamation of the Gospel

- The Deacon (or the Priest) greets the people, “The Lord be with you.”
- As the people respond, “And with your spirit,” he makes the Sign of the Cross on the Gospel and proclaims, “A reading from the Holy Gospel According to (Evangelist).”
- As all respond, “Glory to you, O Lord!” all make the Sign of the Cross on their forehead, their lips and their heart in a silent prayer “that the Word might enlighten their minds, cleanse their hearts, and open their lips, to proclaim the praise of the Lord.”

The Homily

- In the homily, the Priest (sometimes the Deacon) gives nourishment to our lives by explaining some aspect of the readings we have heard, the particular mystery we are celebrating, or one of the parts of the Mass.

Creed

- We respond to God’s Word by professing our belief in the great mysteries of our faith reciting together “the rule of faith.”
- The Apostles’ Creed was once attributed to the Apostles themselves and has its origins in the professions of the Rite of Baptism. It is particularly appropriate during the Easter season, when we recall our Baptism. It forms the outline for the summary of the Church’s belief in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.
- The Nicene Creed has its origins with the Council of Nicaea in the 4th century and took its final form after another 100 years. It contains the most succinct summary of what we believe as Catholics.
- While many of its teachings are hard, at first, to understand, Catholics should strive throughout their lives to open their hearts and minds to the revealed truth it contains.

- We bow during the profession of both Creeds, we bow at the mention of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Universal Prayer of Prayer of the Faithful

- The Prayer of the Faithful has been a part of the Liturgy for a long time.
- St. Augustine would end his homilies by saying: “Turning to the Lord, let us pray to him for ourselves and for all of his people who are here with us in this house, that we may deign to guard and protect them.”
- So do we respond to God’s word, by making our needs known to him such as the needs of the Church, the salvation of the world, for civil authorities, for those oppressed by any burden, and for the local community, particularly those who are sick or who have died.
- After the Priest has called everyone to prayer, intentions are announced and responded to for the Church, civil authorities, those in need, and for the salvation of the whole world. The prayers are concluded with a prayer by the priest, asking God to look on the needs that have been proclaimed.

Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss the acclamation at the end of the readings: “The Word of the Lord.”
2. What does it mean that the New Testament can help us to understand the Old Testament?
3. How is the ministry of the lector today similar to what Jesus did when he read from the scrolls in the synagogue in Capernaum?
4. What does it mean that the altar and the ambo are two tables?
5. How is the proclamation of the Gospel different from the proclamation of the other biblical readings?
6. When is it usually more appropriate to use the Apostles’ Creed rather than the Nicene Creed?
7. How is the Prayer of the Faithful a “universal prayer”?