

## The Liturgy of the Word in General

*The Mass In Slow Motion is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. You are also invited to learn more by attending Sunday School classes for adults which take place in the school cafeteria each Sunday from 9:45 am. to 10:45 am.*

*This series will follow the Mass in order.*



Every now and then it will be claimed that the Catholic Church is not a “Bible Believing Church.” Further, it is said that Catholics do not know the Bible. Both claims register false when we look at the Mass. The Mass is filled with Scripture and Catholics know a lot more Scripture than they think they do. We may not be the sort to quote Chapter and Verse numbers but we know the Scriptures. If I start to tell the story of Zaccheus climbing the tree, or of Lazarus being raised from the dead, or of the “woman at the well”, or the storm at sea, or begin to quote from the Epistles, Catholics know these passages IF they go to Mass regularly. Over the period of three years the whole of the New Testament is read in the Catholic Liturgy and most of the significant passages of the Old Testament. We read A LOT of Scripture in every Mass and Catholics know more of the Bible than we think we do.

**Liturgy of the Word described.** Now that the Congregation is seated, it is time to listen attentively to God’s Word. We do this in a part of the Mass called the Liturgy of the Word which in the current form of the Mass consists of an Old Testament Reading, a Psalm, a reading from a New Testament Epistle, and a reading from the Gospels. Then follows the Homily, the Creed and the prayer response. In effect, readings from scripture and the chants between the readings form the main part of the Liturgy of the Word. The homily, profession of faith, and general intercessions

(or prayer of the faithful) develop and complete it. In the readings, explained in the homily, God speaks to his people of redemption and salvation and nourishes their spirit; Christ is present among the faithful through his Word. Through the chants the people make God’s word their own, and express their adherence to it through the profession of faith. Finally, moved by this Word, they pray in the general intercessions for the needs of the Church and for the world’s salvation.

**History of the liturgy of the word.** The beginnings of this service go back to the synagogue and is therefore pre-Christian in origin. The Apostles attended the synagogue and were thus familiar with it. The synagogue was distinct from the Temple. The Temple was in Jerusalem and it was there alone that blood sacrifices were offered. However, after the exile especially, the Jews undertook the practice of meeting in their local areas to read scripture and praise the Lord. The gatherings (or synagogues) varied in size but tended to be small groups. In fact, as we know from Scripture, Jesus himself faithfully attended the synagogue and his Apostles continued to follow his example. We read in Acts 2:46, “Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and breaking bread in their homes.”

The Jewish synagogue service of the First Century may be described as follows. On appointed days, above all on the Sabbath, the community was assembled. The assembly was opened with the Shema which served as a kind of profession of faith. The Text of the Shema begins as thus: “Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore you shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength...” (Deuteronomy 6:4). There was next a congregational prayer spoken by one of the members of the group appointed by the leader of the synagogue. Passages from Holy Scripture were then sung. There were two readings. The first was from the Law (Torah - the first five books of the Bible) which was read according to a prescribed cycle of three years. Each day readings were thus prescribed much as they are today in our Lectionary. Thus, in a three-year period the whole of the Torah was read. The Second reading was from the Prophets (Nebiim). This reading was selected at will. Then followed a homily also included after the readings. This is indicated in Scripture (see Luke 4:16-20; Acts 12:15ff). The whole assembly concluded with the blessing of a priest (Levite) if one was present otherwise with a prayer.

## The Mass in Slow Motion: The Liturgy of the Word in General

The very early Christians continued to attend the Saturday synagogue service. They celebrated the Eucharist elsewhere, usually in a home or “house-church” on Sundays. Rather quickly however, there was a falling out with the Jews who came to regard the “Nazarenes” as divisive and hence sought to expel them. Upon “leaving” Judaism, the Christians took the synagogue service with them and combined it with the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, we have the beginnings of the form of the Mass we recognize today.

**The Scripture readings in general.** In the readings the treasures of the Bible are opened to the people; this is the table of God’s word. Reading the scriptures is traditionally considered a ministerial, not a presidential function. It is desirable that the Gospel be read by a deacon. The other readings are proclaimed by a reader from among the laity. In the absence of a deacon or another priest, the celebrant reads the Gospel. The reading of the Gospel is done with great reverence; it is distinguished from the other readings by special marks of honor. A special minister is appointed to proclaim it, preparing himself by a blessing or prayer. By standing to hear the reading and by their acclamations the people recognize and acknowledge that Christ is present and speaking to them. Marks of reverence are also given to the Book of Gospels itself. Among these are the kissing of the book, the signing of the page with the sign of the cross, and the use of incense. Likewise, there may also be a special procession to the “place of the gospel” as well as the use of torch bearers to stand near the book during its proclamation. Not to be overlooked is the possibility of singing the Gospel where the skill of the priest or deacon permits it.

**History of the cycle of readings.** In the choice and number of readings in the liturgy a great variety has prevailed and still prevails. The different rites of the Church still have in use different cycles or readings. This is true as well with the revived Traditional Latin Mass which follows its own schedule of readings distinct from the new modern Lectionary. It is interesting to note however, that many protestant churches have been impressed with the new lectionary of the Catholic Church and make use of its schedule in their own services. One general rule seems to have always been that there be at least two readings one of which would always be from the Gospels. Likewise, the readings were always biblical.

The arrangement of the synagogue service, as has been noted, was taken into the Christian Church. It was adapted however. Now a Gospel reading was gradually paired with an Old Testament passage. However, at more festive times of the year such as Eastertide there seems to have been an increasing inclination to replace the Old Testament reading with one from the New Testament. A reading other than from the Gospel. This began to affect Masses at other times of the year as well. At first there seems to have been merely the addition of a third reading resulting in a schema similar to the one we have today. However, for some reason this number dropped to two, leaving the general schema as a reading from a New Testament Epistle and a Gospel reading.

This remained the case until the liturgical changes of the Second Vatican Council which restored the three-reading schema. According to the testimony of the Fathers of the Church, the service of readings stressed reading the books of Holy Scripture straight through in the form of a “lectio continua.”(That is to say, the passage this week picks up right where we left off last week.) However, strict adherence to this setup was not exacting. Just as is the case today, this system was often broken into by feast days whose occasion demanded a special and appropriate passage. These feast days tended to multiply and thus break up the continuous reading. Likewise, liturgical seasons played a role in shaping the lectio continua. Thus, through the centuries this strict lectio continua was eroded and became less recognizable although it still existed. Today, it has been restored to some extent. This is particularly true with regard to the Gospels. However, the first reading is chosen to back the theme of the Gospel and hence its selection is “arbitrary.” The epistles have returned to a rather strict lectio continua both on Sundays and weekdays.

Today, the lectionary provides for a three year cycle for the Sunday readings and a two year cycle for weekdays. The first reading comes from the Old Testament and is chosen to parallel the Gospel passage. The second reading is taken from the epistles of the New Testament and sometimes from the book of Revelation. The third reading of course is taken from the Gospels. Each cycle relies especially on one of the Gospels. Cycle A relies on Matthew. Cycle B on Mark. Cycle C on Luke. All three of the cycles draw on St. John’s Gospel. The weekdays draw from all of the Gospels and Books of the Bible giving special emphasis to passages not covered on Sundays. The lectionary presents a broad sweep of the Scriptures. The Sunday readings alone present to Catholics over 7000 verses of scripture over three years. Nearly the whole of the New Testament is covered in the Lectionary, as well as the most significant portions of the Old Testament.