

The liturgy of the Word and liturgy of the Eucharist together form "one single act of worship"; the Eucharistic table set for us is the table both of the Word of God and of the Body of the Lord.

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deacon or priest first greets us: "The Lord be with you" and we answer: "and also with you". After the announcement "A reading from the holy gospel according to..." we respond with an acclamation of praise: "Glory to you, Lord". Meanwhile we make the sign of the cross on our forehead, lips and heart, as if asking Jesus to open our minds to know him, to open our lips so that we can proclaim him to others, and to open our heart so that we can love him. We remain standing as Jesus speaks to us, as a sign of respect and of readiness to put into practice what we hear.

If we are attentive to the other readings, we should be especially attentive while Jesus himself speaks to us in the Gospel. The Gospel is read "in character", so to speak, by one who sacramentally represents Christ to us – a deacon, priest or bishop. Other signs, such as the carrying of the book of the Gospels in procession and the use of incense and lighted candles to surround the sacred text, highlight the importance of the Gospel reading. They mirror the use of candles and incense at the presence of Christ later in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. At the end of the reading we "applaud" by saying: "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ!"

7. The Homily

Preparing and preaching the homily is the task of the ordained ministers of the Church, but it also gives us work to do. The purpose of the homily is to explain the readings that have been proclaimed, and to relate them to the daily life of the faithful. The word "homily" actually means "explanation" in Greek. We all know that some preachers are better than others, but no priest knows our exact situation. So our listening also needs to be active during the homily, applying what is said to our own circumstances. We should not be discouraged, however, if we find our mind wandering in spiritual directions other than that which is taken by the homilist. The Spirit "blows where it will" and is active in applying God's Word!

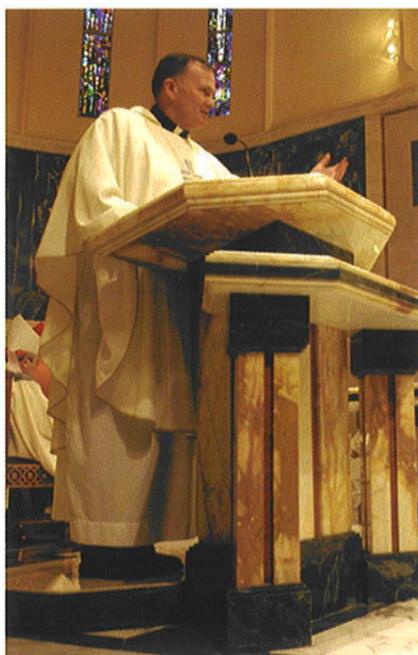
8. The Profession of Faith (The Creed)

Like the Responsorial Psalm and the Gospel Acclamation, the Profession of Faith is a

response of assent, of praise and thanks to the Word of God. We say it standing, ready to put it into practice. In a sense we are like the Israelites under Moses, promising to obey all the commandments they had just been given.

The name Creed comes from the first word in Latin, *Credo*, which means "I believe". The Profession of Faith we use in the Mass is the Nicene Creed, originating from the first Ecumenical Council, held in Nicaea, in modern-day Turkey, almost 1700 years ago. The last part of the Creed, professing our faith in the Holy Spirit, comes from the second Ecumenical Council, held at Constantinople in 381 AD. So we feel ourselves united with the early Church, and with the faithful down the ages, when we profess our faith in the very words they used. It is the faith for which so many thousands of Christians have given their lives over the centuries.

In those early centuries, the Creed was an instrument for uniting the Church during some particularly serious heresies. To this day the Churches of the whole world, both Catholic and Orthodox, and many Protestant churches too, use this Creed to bind themselves to the one Word of God. For this reason also,



the words of the Creed may not be altered – especially for "ideological" reasons – without the authority of the universal Church. Ideally, as a response of praise, the Creed should be sung, but settings that can be sung by a congregation are unfortunately very rare.

9. The Prayer of the Faithful

As the title suggests, the final section of the Liturgy of the Word belongs to the lay faithful. We bring our prayers to the altar of the Lord in response to the faith, hope and love that have grown in us through hearing the Word. The priest celebrant introduces the intercessions, and closes them, with a short prayer. The intentions are then read by a lay reader. The intentions are not prayers in themselves, in the sense that they do not actually address the Lord. Rather they state the intentions for prayer, and ask the congregation to pray for these intentions. The people reply with a vocal response (eg. "Lord, hear our prayer") and/or a silent prayer to God. The intentions generally should include the needs of the Church, public authorities and the salvation of the whole world, those burdened by any kind of difficulty (especially the sick and the dying), the local community and, if opportune, the faithful departed.

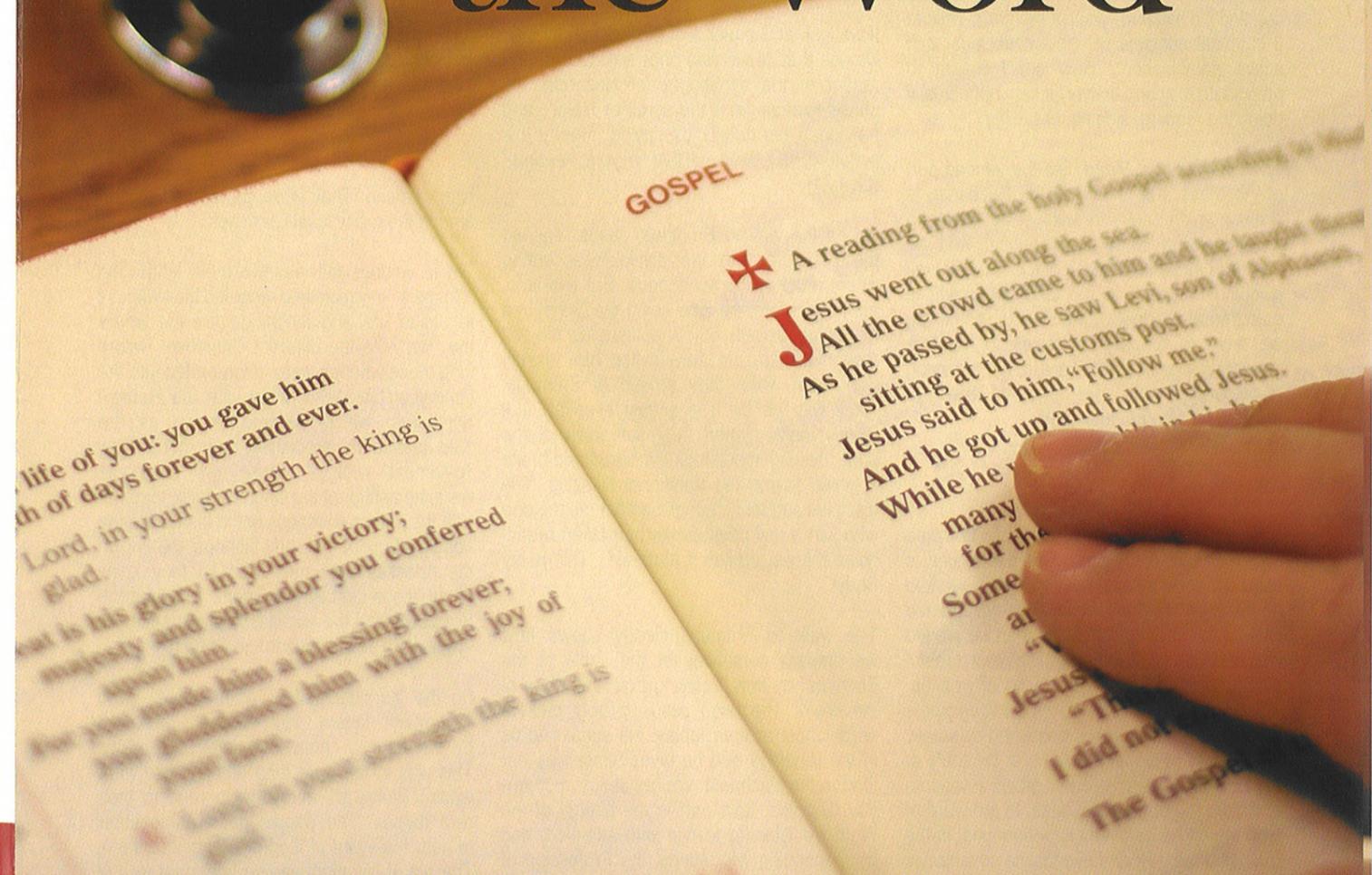
Thus concludes the Table of the Word. If we have switched on and tuned in, we are now well prepared for the main part of the Mass, the Table of the Eucharist.

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Questions for discussion

1. "It is hard work to listen attentively to the Word of God". Do you agree? What can be done to increase your attention?
2. The writer recommends reading the texts of the Liturgy of the Word before going to Mass. Have you ever done this, or even more, have you prayed about the readings before or after Mass? Does it help?
3. The article says: "We have almost lost the skill of listening in our day and age." Do you think this is true in ordinary life, in marriage, in the work place, etc.?
4. What aspect of this article did you find the most interesting or new? Comment on your thoughts.

The Liturgy of the Word





“Switching on” and “tuning in”

The opening hymn of the Mass has been sung. The priest has led us through the Penitential Rite and the Gloria, and he has said the Opening Prayer. Now we sit down and switch off. Right? No! Now it is all just beginning!

The Liturgy of the Word is the first main “business” part of the liturgy. Up to this point we have had only the “Introductory Rites”.

The Liturgy of the Word may seem a little unexciting. It consists of reading, listening, talking and some singing. Young children find it especially hard to remain attentive during this part of the Mass. Perhaps that is why many parishes choose to send the children out to a special “Children’s Liturgy” at this point (more on this later). But older folks don’t often find it much easier. This is the point where some will take out their parish bulletins and read the notices for the week ahead.

This is the one section of the liturgy where we can find it difficult to practise the great Vatican II liturgical principle of “full, conscious, and active participation”. How am I meant to participate fully and actively if I am not actually doing the reading, singing, or talking?

The Liturgy of the Word, like the second part of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, is a ritual which seeks to involve us. We need to understand what is happening and be prepared for what is taking place. God himself is going to speak to us. Like the Israelites gathered at the foot of Mt Sinai (Exodus 19), we need to prepare ourselves for such a momentous occasion. Like a radio, we need to be “switched on” and “tuned in” if we are going to receive the message.

“The Table of the Word”

Sometimes the Liturgy of the Word is called “The Table of the Word”. This expression is used to explain that we receive a two-fold nourishment in the Liturgy. First we are fed with the Word of the Lord, and then we are fed with his Body and Blood. Both spiritual “tables” belong together as one single act of worship. The *General Introduction to the Lectionary* puts it like this: “The Church is nourished spiritually at the table of God’s word and at the table of the Eucharist: from the one it grows in wisdom and from the other in holiness. In the word of God the divine covenant is announced; in the Eucharist the new and everlasting covenant is renewed.” (GIL 10)

Right from the beginning Jesus wanted us to be fed with his Word before we came to the Table of his Eucharist. We see this in the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus on that first Easter Sunday (Luke 24). The disciples do not yet know that Jesus has risen, yet he appears to them as they walk along. Something keeps them from recognising him as he talks to them about his suffering and death. We are told that “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures.” (Lk 24:27)

That phrase “beginning with Moses and all the prophets” reflects what used to happen in the Jewish synagogue liturgy. The congregation would listen while someone read from the most important and oldest scroll, the scroll of Moses, also known as the Torah. Then another reader would read from one of the scrolls of the Prophets, and perhaps another reading would come from one of the other scrolls, known as “The Writings”. In between these readings, the people sang Psalms, and after the readings there was a homily explaining the texts.

If we look at Chapter 4 of the Gospel of Luke, we see that Jesus was once asked to be the reader in the synagogue of Nazareth. He chose to read from the scroll of Isaiah, and he began his homily by saying: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Lk 4:21)

So on the way to Emmaus, Jesus “opened the Scriptures” to the disciples according to the ritual of the synagogue. But this time, as in Nazareth, he was using the Scriptures to reveal himself! Still, the disciples did not recognise him, but they invited him to stay with them when they arrived at Emmaus: “Stay with us for it is almost evening.” (Lk 24:29) Inside, when they sat down at the table, Jesus himself took the bread and broke it, while saying the traditional blessing. The disciples suddenly recognised him as the one who just a few days earlier had taken bread, given thanks, broken it and said: “This is my Body!”

The walk to Emmaus clearly shows how we prepare ourselves for the Table of the Eucharist by first receiving from the Table of the Word. The risen Jesus is truly present as our host at both tables. He speaks to us in the readings and he gives himself as our food in the Eucharist. We, as Jesus’ modern-day disciples, take part in the Liturgy of the Word by listening to him with attention, and by responding with songs, the Profession of Faith, and prayer.

The “Art of Listening”

As the story of the walk to Emmaus indicates, the ritual of the Liturgy of the Word is similar to the one that the early Jewish Christians knew from the synagogue. The first Christians, who were almost all Jews, continued to read the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) when they met together. In the earliest assemblies, the Apostles themselves would have given their testimony of Jesus in the homily. But as the years went by and the Church expanded, it was not always possible for a living Apostle to be present at the gatherings. So the letters and other writings of the Apostles came into

The Liturgy of the Word includes “the writings of the prophets”, that is, the Old Testament, and “the memoirs of the apostles” (their letters and the Gospels). After the homily, which is an exhortation to accept this Word as what it truly is, the Word of God, and to put it into practice, come the intercessions for all men, according to the Apostle’s words: “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings, and all who are in high positions.” (1 Tim 2:1-2)

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high demand. They were copied and shared among the many local Churches.

These writings fell into two main kinds: the “Gospels”, in which they recorded their witness to Jesus’ life and teaching, and the letters they wrote to the different Churches. Before long these writings were incorporated into the Liturgy of the Word along with the Hebrew Scriptures, which became known as the “Old Testament” as distinct from these “New Testament” writings. These new Scriptures were the anchor of the Church’s faith, together with the personal witness of the bishops in the homily. Many of the early bishops had known the Apostles personally and so they knew about Jesus directly from them. Together, the Scriptures and the homilies kept the Apostolic Tradition of Jesus alive in the Church.

So the liturgical pattern of readings – Old Testament, letters and Gospel – followed by the homily, came into being very early. This was in the days long before there were written Bibles for everyone to read in their own homes. The people gathered together to hear the Word of God proclaimed to them. The act of listening was so important for the early Christians that St Paul wrote in one of his letters: “Faith comes from hearing” (Rom

10:17); that is, from hearing the Word of Christ.

Listening to something read aloud is quite a different process from reading it alone to yourself. For a start, it is something we do *together*, rather than on our own. Think about when your parents or a school teacher would read you stories. As you listened with your brothers and sisters or your classmates, you were all drawn together in the act of listening to the reader. In the same way, listening to God’s Word being read at Mass draws the people together.

readings. Like a “tuned in” radio, or like the disciples from Emmaus who felt their “hearts burn within them” while Jesus was talking to them on the road (Lk 24:32), we will be warmed by God’s Word.

If you are chosen to participate in the Liturgy of the Word as a reader, you will need some extra preparation. Your parish priest will help prepare you for this special ministry, because he is ultimately in charge of the Liturgy and of proclaiming God’s Word in your parish. You should do your best to make the task of listening to the Word as pleasant and as pain-free for the listeners as possible! A clear, audible voice is required, and you need to understand what you are reading. The reading needs to be “proclaimed”, but without being overly theatrical – that can sometimes be even more off-putting than a monotone reader. Primary school teachers are often very good at reading aloud, and they make good voice coaches for readers.

The best way for both reader and listener to prepare is to read the texts before going to Mass. This will begin the listening process and give you a “running start” toward hearing the Word in the Liturgy itself. It is like digging the soil before planting the seed. As a follow-up, it is good to read the readings once again in your prayers after Mass. This way, the Word has a chance to live in your daily life.

What actually happens in the Liturgy of the Word?

1. The First Reading

The first reading usually comes from the Old Testament – that is, from the Hebrew Scriptures of the Jewish people. During Easter we read from the Acts of the Apostles, which reminds us of the Church’s own “early history”. We are not the first People of God to hear his Word. We share an ancient and common tradition with the Jewish people. In the first reading, we hear how God has addressed himself to his people through his prophets, starting with Moses and continuing right up to the time of John the Baptist. This reading is usually chosen to reflect the theme of the Gospel for the day, showing that there is a basic unity to God’s Word. At the conclusion of the reading we are reminded that “This is the Word of the Lord” and we respond: “Thanks be to God”.

2. The Responsorial Psalm

The Responsorial Psalm is not a reading, but a response of the people to the Word that was proclaimed in the first reading. For this reason, it usually picks up on a focus from that reading. At the same time, a psalm is a

song from Scripture; that is, it is also God’s Word to us. So we have the great privilege of praising God with words he has given us to sing. And sing we must, for the word touches our hearts. The very name “psalm” means a “song” and “He who sings, prays twice,” says St Augustine. The Book of Psalms was, as it were, the first hymnbook of the early Church. Already at the beginning of the third century, St Hippolytus and Tertullian speak of the recitation or singing of the psalms in the liturgy. In those days a trained cantor would sing the psalm while the people joined in the response, just as we do today. If the psalms are to continue to have the privileged place in our spiritual life that they deserve, we must make every effort to sing them. Many collections of simple responsorial settings are available.

3. The Second Reading

On Sundays and other important feast days we have a second reading from one of the letters of the Apostles. This connects us directly with the early Church, for whom the witness and tradition of the Apostles was an essential element of being “catholic”. Most of the letters were written by St Paul, but we also have letters by St Peter, St James, St John and St Jude. As with the first reading, the faithful respond “Thanks be to God” after the reading.

4. The Sequence

A Sequence is a liturgical hymn used after the second reading on special occasions. There are four of them, for the feasts of Easter, Pentecost, Corpus Christi and Our Lady of Sorrows. (September 15). Only those for Easter and Pentecost are obligatory.

5. The Gospel Acclamation

Jesus comes to us very personally in the proclamation of the Gospel, just as he gives himself to us personally, in his very flesh, in the Eucharist. For this reason we welcome his coming by standing and singing “Alleluia!” (a Hebrew word urging us to praise the Lord). All parishes should be able to sing a simple Alleluia, even without accompaniment. Although some parishes have the reader read the verse after the people sing the “Alleluia”, it is always preferable to have the cantor sing the verse as well. Alternatively, the verse can be left out altogether if there is no one to sing it. In Lent the “Alleluia” is omitted, replaced with a simple verse, or another response.

6. The Gospel

The reading of the Gospel is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. In it Jesus speaks to us in his own flesh so we treat the Gospel differently from the other readings. The

“God himself is going to speak to us.”