

God's Word, Our Delight

Scripture's first home is the liturgy. From the earliest days of Christian history, before it had even been decided which books would be included in the Bible as we know it, believers met in their homes to celebrate the Eucharist.

The first part of their gathering, the second-century writer Justin Martyr tells us, was spent reading the Hebrew Scriptures and the memoirs and writings of the Apostles. Then they would celebrate the Eucharist.

THE WORD IS ALL AROUND US

In the Mass, the prayers, instructions, acclamations, and songs constantly draw on our treasure trove of scriptural images, vocabulary, theology, and stories. We sing psalms and scriptural canticles. The inspired words of prophets, evangelists, Apostles, and others ring out in our prayers, hymns, and chants. Images and words from Scripture adorn our sacred space. From floor to rafter, the Word is with us. Even the doors and windows echo the great story of divine revelation, sacred history, and God's promises, that the Word records. We praise, petition, glorify, and lament in the same key as our forebears in faith, who were speaking through these sacred texts.

Many actions, postures, and gestures of the liturgy are likewise rooted in the Bible. Whether we kneel or raise up our hands, break bread or lift a cup of wine, light lamps or lay on hands, anoint with oil or wash with water, you can be sure someone in the Bible did it first. The Scriptures themselves reflect the liturgy of early Christians, as well as liturgical prayers and rituals practiced by God's people throughout the ages. We, as Catholic believers, stand in a

great tradition of Word and worship, and make it our own in each generation, as we celebrate the liturgy today.

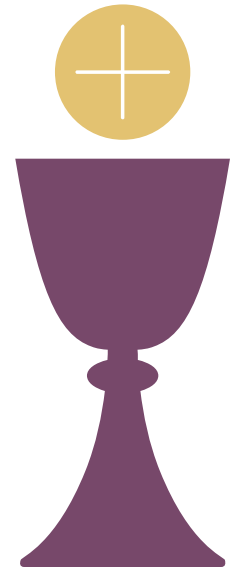
DIALOGUE WITH THE WORD

The Word of God surrounds us in the liturgy, and the "materials" of Scripture make our house of worship noble and simple, beautiful and solid. But that's not all. The Word is also proclaimed within that house—welcomed as an honored guest—with integrity. The event of reading, hearing, and responding to the Word forms the first great portion of the Mass: the Liturgy of the Word.

The Liturgy of the Word is an encounter and a dialogue: an encounter with Christ and a dialogue with him. When the Scriptures are proclaimed, we respond to what we hear. Our outward response is generally in the form of song and acclamation. Yet our inward response is what such outward signs point to—our "yes" to God's revelation and the resolve to live the message we have heard.

Pope John Paul II put it well when he wrote:

"[T]he liturgical proclamation of the word of God, especially in the Eucharistic assembly, is not so much a time for meditation and catechesis as a dialogue between God and his People, a dialogue in which the wonders of salvation are proclaimed and the demands



of the Covenant are continually restated. On their part, the People of God are drawn to respond to this dialogue of love by giving thanks and praise, also by demonstrating their fidelity to the task of continual ‘conversion’” (*On Keeping the Lord’s Day Holy*, 41).

JESUS CHRIST IS GOD’S WORD

Shining through the many words of Scripture is the one Word: Jesus Christ. He is the Incarnate Word of God. As St. John tells us so beautifully at the outset of his gospel account: “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). In the Word, we encounter Jesus himself.

God’s Word, Jesus, speaks to us through both the Old and the New Testaments, unifying their witness. Both attest to the one revelation of God, and both support and instruct us on our journey as disciples. Christ is truly present in the Word. “Christ is still proclaiming His gospel” today in our midst, as the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council affirmed (*The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 33).

LISTENING: DELIGHT AND RESPONSIBILITY

We would be poor hosts indeed if we invited someone to our house, seated them in a place of honor, but then did all the talking ourselves. Yet this is what happens if our minds are filled with distractions and our hearts not prepared to receive the Word of God. We must therefore practice a discipline of hospitality to the Word, giving Christ present in the Word our full attention. We must prepare the ground of our heart for the “good seed” of the Word, through prayer, so that, receiving that Word in faith, our lives will yield a fruitful harvest. When we prepare to hear the Word, the experience of listening becomes a delight. The Liturgy of the Word becomes like a table at which we are fed. Our inner dialogue grows richer.

The Liturgy of the Word presumes some general knowledge of the Bible, and basic orientation to the historical context and literary form of the readings we hear. This knowledge can be acquired through catechesis, Bible study, commentaries, teachers, and other resources. Good preaching whets our appetite for the Word, and makes us eager to spend time with the Scriptures on our own. If our own personal foundation in Scripture has not been strong, however, we need to take responsibility for building it up.

REFLECT

How strong is my own foundation in Scripture?

Consider this question in three dimensions:

intellectual strength (knowledge, understanding),

spiritual strength (prayer, virtue, contemplation),

moral strength (decision-making, guidance for living). Which of these areas would I like to

strengthen during this time of Lenten renewal?

ACT

Make a commitment to read the Sunday readings, either before or after you go to Mass. Take time just to “be” with the Word. Allow your own inner dialogue with God to continue beyond the celebration.

PRAY

Holy Spirit, breath of God, through Sacred Scripture you reveal who you are, and who we are called to be. Breathe on us. You enter the house of our worship, and speak lovingly to each of us. Help me to listen with my whole heart.

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