

Hearing the Word of God



The words of Sacred Scripture are unlike any other that we ever hear. God reveals himself to us through the Scriptures. We believe that all of Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit and must be revered as truly being God's Word. In hearing God's Word, we come to know the depth of his love for us and our responsibilities as followers of Jesus.

There are three Scripture readings at Sunday Mass, taken from both the Old and New Testaments.

The **first reading**, for most of the year, is from the Old Testament, which reminds us that throughout history God has been at work saving his people. During the Easter Season, the first reading is taken from the Acts of the Apostles, which recalls the growth and mission work of the early Church.

The **second reading**, always from the New Testament, is taken from a letter from one of the Apostles or from the Book of Revelation.

The **third reading**, from one of the four Gospels, is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. The Gospels are the fullest expression of God's revelation in Christ. The Gospel reading is so central, in fact, that it is proclaimed from a different book than the other readings.

This book — the **Book of the Gospels** — is the one that is solemnly carried in procession at the start of the Mass, not the Lectionary that is used for the other readings. The book is placed flat on the altar until the Gospel is proclaimed by the priest or deacon; the deacon who reads the Gospel asks a blessing by way of preparation; the priest celebrant who reads the

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Gospel bows before the altar praying to be worthy to proclaim it.

We may surround the Gospel with candles and incense. We stand to hear the Gospel. We sign our foreheads, lips, and hearts with the cross, praying that the Gospel will remain in our minds, on our lips, and in our hearts. The priest or deacon kisses the Gospel book after proclaiming the text.

Through these gestures and signs of respect, the Church pays homage to Christ who is present when his Word is proclaimed. The proclamation of the Scriptures in the Mass calls us to respond in faith.

Through Hearing the Word of God

When the Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself is speaking to his people and Christ, present in his own word, is proclaiming the Gospel. (General Instruction, #29) *In the hearing of God's word the Church is built up and grows*

In the hearing of God's word the Church is built up and grows, and in the signs of the liturgical celebration God's wonderful past works in the history of salvation are presented anew as mysterious realities. (Introduction to the Lectionary, #7)

In speech and song, posture and gesture, in silent meditation and, most important of all, by listening attentively to the Scriptures as they are proclaimed, we open our lives to God's Word. We pray that the

Holy Spirit may make God's Word effective in our lives so that we will "Be doers of the word and not hearers only." (James 1:22)

Our full, conscious, and active participation is required if the Word of God is to find a home in us. We make the ritual responses, "Thanks be to God," and "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ." We respond to the first reading by singing the Responsorial Psalm, and we sing the acclamation before the proclamation of the Gospel. We listen attentively as the reader, priest, or deacon proclaims God's Word. We listen as if Christ himself were standing at the ambo, for in fact it is God who speaks when the Scriptures are proclaimed.

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It is beneficial to prepare ourselves for a fruitful hearing of the Scriptures. In his instruction, *Dies Domini*, Pope John Paul II encourages "those who take part in the Eucharist, priest, ministers, and faithful . . . to prepare the Sunday liturgy, reflecting beforehand upon the Word of God which will be proclaimed." The Holy Father adds that if we do not, "it is difficult for the liturgical proclamation of the Word of God alone to produce the fruit we might expect" (#40).

The Liturgy of the Word also includes the **homily**, which helps us understand the meaning of the Scriptures and other Mass texts, more closely connecting God's Word and the texts to our daily lives. Because the homily is a liturgical action and is given by the priest or deacon, it may not be omitted on Sundays and Holy Days.

After we recite the **Creed** together, the **Prayers of the Faithful** conclude the Liturgy of the Word as the community, moved by the inspired Word of God, prays for the needs of the whole Church, the world, and the local community.

The twofold table of God's Word and Eucharist continues to spiritually nourish the Church. "In the word of God the divine covenant is announced; in the Eucharist the new and everlasting covenant is renewed." (Introduction to the Lectionary, #10) God's Word leads us to the Eucharistic table where we enter the mighty deeds of God and especially the saving death and resurrection of Jesus. By uniting ourselves to Jesus in his self-offering to the Father, we are drawn more deeply into the life of God.

Meditative Silence

The General Instruction calls for periods of meditative silence in the Mass, especially in the Liturgy of the Word: The Liturgy of the Word is to be celebrated in such a way as to promote meditation, and so any sort of haste that hinders recollection must clearly be avoided . . . it is also appropriate to include brief periods of silence . . . in which, at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response through prayer may be prepared. (#56)

