

The Liturgy of the Word

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I remember waking up, as the anesthesia wore off, after having gone through craniofacial surgery. For me, surgery is scary, but craniofacial surgery was terrifying. Above me was the surgeon who said with a big smile, “Everything went well. You’ll be fine.” What relief! What comfort! What good news! It made me think of many of the characters in the New Testament to whom Jesus spoke “good news” and conveyed words of comfort. Jesus continues to speak to us, and not just through surgeons, family, friends, and even strangers, but also through his own words during the liturgy. In the Liturgy of the Word, as the General Instruction of the Roman Missal states, “When the Sacred Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his own word, proclaims the Gospel” (GIRM, 29). Let us look at the structure of the Liturgy of the Word.

The Liturgy of the Word begins with the First Reading at the ambo. Typically, this reading is from the Old Testament; during the Easter season, the reading is from the Acts of the Apostles. A period of silence after the reading allows for people to reflect upon the word they just heard proclaimed. In many parishes in the United States, the psalm is sung. Psalms reflect a vast array of emotions as we hear lament, thanksgiving, praise, and petition. These words help us to express our own varied expressions of faith.

The Second Reading is usually an epistle, that is, a letter from the New Testament. Again, a brief period of silence takes place after the Second Reading. During the Gospel procession, “Alleluia” is sung, or during Lent, an acclamation such as “Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ!” In many parishes, the Book of the Gospels is accompanied with candles and, on solemn occasions, with incense. This leads to the climax of the Liturgy of the Word: the proclamation of the Gospel. Most Sundays, these words are the words of Jesus as recorded in the accounts of the Gospel.

The homily should connect the readings to the lives of the assembly. In describing the homily, the GIRM states that it



“is necessary for the nurturing of the Christian life. It should be an exposition of some aspect of the readings from Sacred Scripture or of another text from the Ordinary or from the Proper of the Mass of the day and should take into account both the mystery being celebrated and the particular needs of the listeners” (GIRM, 65). The homily juxtaposes the experiences of the people in the assembly with the texts of the liturgy. The texts may be a prayer that speaks to the needs of the assembly at that time, or it may be a part of the Eucharistic Prayer, or the psalm that speaks to people. God’s words comfort and challenge us. Perhaps, with that in mind, the prayer may challenge us to an aspect of God’s compassion or mercy that will stir us to God’s mission.

After the Creed, the presider invites prayers of petition. The intercessions of the Prayer of the Faithful

flow from the homily and the Word of God. They juxtapose the needs of the Church, the world, the oppressed, and the local community with God’s word proclaimed in the liturgy. These prayers are general, meaning they are not particular for any one person or for any one thing. For instance, instead of praying only for Aunt Joan who is struggling with illness, we pray for all the sick and ill, especially Joan, Jim, Agnes, and Lucy. The closing prayer of the Prayer of the Faithful concludes the Liturgy of the Word. The Liturgy of the Eucharist, then, begins.

Though we cannot see words, their power, especially if they are Christ’s words proclaimed in liturgy, touch us with comfort or challenge us to live Christ’s mission given to the Church.

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