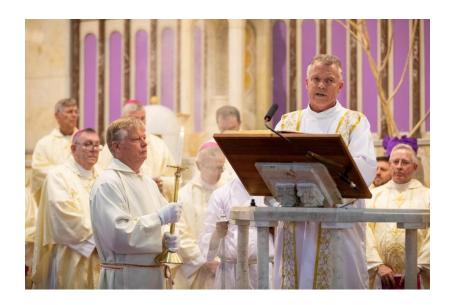


It is the Lord who speaks! An exploration of the Liturgy of the Word

Andrew Doohan BTh MTh MA(Liturgy) 2023





Sacred scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from scripture that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung; the prayers, collects, and liturgical songs are scriptural in their inspiration and their force, and it is from the scriptures that actions and signs derive their meaning. Thus to achieve the restoration, progress, and adaptation of the sacred liturgy, it is essential to promote that warm and living love for scripture to which the venerable tradition of both eastern and western rites gives testimony

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, n.24



This pamphlet is inspired by an eight-part series of articles originally written for and published in the Parish Bulletin of the Catholic Parishes of Dungog & Gresford during May & June 2023.

The content of that series has been redrafted, expanded and edited in the production of this pamphlet.

The photos included in this pamphlet are © 2023, Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

© 2023, Andrew Doohan. All rights reserved.

Introduction

With rare exceptions, the Church does not celebrate any of its liturgy without including the proclamation of the Word of God from the Scriptures. A Liturgy of the Word features in many of the liturgical rites of the Church, e.g., the celebration of Baptism, the various Funeral Rites, Confirmation, etc. And in the celebration of Mass, the Liturgy of the Word is one of the two major divisions that mark what the Church does when it gathers.

One of the significant fruits of the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council is a stronger focus on the place of readings from Scripture during all of our liturgical celebrations, especially during Mass.

The Church's liturgical and sacramental life now features this vital element known as the Liturgy of the Word—and we are richer for it.

The General Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass highlights the significance of the Word of God in the liturgy thus:

The many riches contained in the one word of God are admirably brought out in the different kinds of liturgical celebrations and liturgical assemblies. This takes place as the unfolding mystery of Christ is recalled during the course of the liturgical year, as the Church's sacraments and sacramentals are celebrated, or as the faithful respond individually to the Holy Spirit working within them. For then the liturgical celebration, based primarily on the word of God and sustained by it, becomes a new event and enriches the word itself with new meaning and power. Thus in the liturgy the Church faithfully adheres to the way Christ himself read and explained the Scriptures, beginning with the 'today' of his coming forward in the synagogue and urging all to search the Scriptures. (n.3)

Not only do we now have readings from a broader range of the Scriptures, but we also recognise that the Liturgy of the Word feeds us from the first table around which we gather during the celebration of Mass, the Ambo.

The Liturgy of the Word is focused on the Ambo. The word 'ambo' originates in a Greek word that refers to a raised desk or pulpit. It should

not be confused with the word 'lectern', which usually refers to a more temporary device, such as the one often seen near the Presider's Chair to hold the Roman Missal when necessary. An 'ambo' is a permanent fixture of a church building; a 'lectern' is movable and temporary.

In a well-designed church, the common style of the Ambo and the Altar (the second table) will indicate the close relationship of these two tables, which at times, the documents also refer to as the one table of Word and Sacrament.

The Structure of the Liturgy of the Word

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) outlines the structure of the Liturgy of the Word thus:

The main part of the Liturgy of the Word is made up of the readings from Sacred Scripture together with the chants occurring between them.

As for the Homily, the Profession of Faith and the Universal Prayer, they develop and conclude it. For in the readings, as explained by the Homily, God speaks to his people, opening up to them the mystery of redemption and salvation, and offering spiritual nourishment; and Christ himself is present through his word in the midst of the faithful.

By silence and by singing, the people make this divine word their own, and affirm their adherence to it by means of the Profession of Faith; finally, having been nourished by the divine word, the people pour out their petitions by means of the Universal Prayer for the needs of the whole Church and for the salvation of the whole world. (n.55)

At Sunday Masses, there are three primary readings from Sacred Scripture—the First Reading from the Old Testament (except during the Season of Easter, when it comes from the Acts of the Apostles), the Second Reading from the non-Gospel New Testament, and the Gospel. In between the First Reading and the Second Reading, we have a Responsorial Psalm, ideally sung, but there are always exceptions. Between the Second Reading and the Gospel, we have the Gospel Acclamation, which again is ideally sung. After the Gospel, we quickly move through the Homily, the Profession of Faith, and the Universal Prayer.

The overall structure of the Liturgy of the Word, then, is as follows:

Silence First Reading Silence Responsorial Psalm Second Reading Silence Gospel Acclamation Gospel Reading Homily Silence The Creed (or Symbol of Faith) The Universal Prayer

What often gets overlooked in the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word is silence.

The Significance of Silence

As can be seen from the overall structure, periods of silence play an essential role in the Liturgy of the Word. Silence allows us to truly savour what we have heard proclaimed and then reflect on God speaking to us through the Scriptures.

The GIRM has this to say about the role of silence during the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word:

The Liturgy of the Word is to be celebrated in such a way as to favour meditation, and so any kind of haste such as hinders recollection is clearly to be avoided. In the course of it, brief periods of silence are also appropriate, accommodated to the assembled congregation; by means of these, under the action of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response through prayer may be prepared. It may be appropriate to observe such periods of silence, for example, before the Liturgy of the Word begins, after the First and Second Reading, and lastly at the conclusion of the Homily. (n.56)

Silence also allows us to avoid "undue haste" so that the whole of the Liturgy of the Word is an opportunity for prayer and nourishment rather than something that needs to be done before we move on to the next part of our Mass or liturgy. Silence allows the Word of God to take root in us, sometimes piercing us like a double-edged sword (q.v., Hebrews 4:12).

A few simple changes can achieve such brief silences.

For example, the silence before the Liturgy of the Word begins can easily be achieved by the first reader waiting until everyone is seated before moving from their own seat to the Ambo. It's a small change but allows for silence to be observed.

And yet, it is often not done. We often see people moving from their seats before the Presider has finished the Collect prayer—something that is a definite 'no-no'. When we pray, we do not move on to the next part of the Mass before the previous part is complete. Nor do we move while we are praying, as this can distract the liturgical assembly from its primary task at the moment of being an assembly of prayer.

When the first reader waits, the intended short silence is achieved, and the rest of the assembly has prepared themselves to sit and listen to God's word.

The silence after the First Reading can be achieved by inserting a short pause (perhaps a slow count to ten by way of example) before the Responsorial Psalm begins. When the Psalm is sung, in part or in full, the musicians can likewise insert a short pause before beginning. A similar practice can be adopted by the reader proclaiming the Second Reader. When the Gospel Acclamation is being sung, in part or in full, the Second Reader does not need to stay at the Ambo; and the musicians can insert the pause before they begin the Gospel Acclamation.

Another way of avoiding undue haste during the Liturgy of the Word, particularly when two different readers are involved, is for them to move to the Ambo separately rather than together, with the second reader not moving from their own seat until the Responsorial Psalm is finished and any subsequent movement is complete. These are minor changes, but ones that are in keeping with the nature of the Liturgy of the Word and our need to be nourished from this first table before we move on to the second.

How long should these silences last? That will always depend on the particular circumstances of each liturgy, and the nature of the assembly gathered to celebrate it. What is appropriate one Sunday in one place might differ from what is appropriate the next Sunday or on the same Sunday in another place.

Of course, we're unfamiliar with silence in the broader society in which the Church exists. Silences are to be avoided or filled rather than embraced as an opportunity to prepare to listen or reflect on what has been heard. Church practice is counter-cultural. In its attentiveness to silence, the liturgy teaches us how to bring silence into our daily lives and encounters with others.

Pause to reflect on what we have read.

Mystagogical Reflection ...

- 1. What did you notice? What stood out for you?
- 2. What is God revealing to you? To us?
- 3. What are we learning about our Catholic understanding of The Liturgy of the Word?
- 4. What is God inviting us to consider about the way we celebrate the Liturgy of the Word in our parish?

Contemplate – rest in the presence of God.

Note anything you'd like to remember from your reflection and conversation.

The Proclamation of Scripture

Christ is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church.

(CSL, a.7)

While we refer to the various passages from Scripture that are used during the Liturgy of the Word as "readings", we don't read the Scriptures during the liturgy. Scripture passages are proclaimed, which is a completely different approach to reading.

The proclamation of Scripture is a ritual action—words are spoken, and words are heard. This means that during the Liturgy of the Word, we need to listen and hear what is being proclaimed, an act that brings into question the use of personal missals during the Liturgy of the Word for anyone other than those hard of hearing.

Proclamation also requires advance preparation, which will always be a preferred option to being asked to "do the readings" five minutes before Mass commences. While that happens from time to time from necessity, it will always be better for those who will proclaim the readings from Scripture to know *in advance* so they can prayerfully prepare to exercise this important ministry.

The Ritual Nature of the Liturgy of the Word

It is important to note that the Liturgy of the Word and its elements are ritual actions. Because they are ritual actions, care is needed to ensure that we honour the way in which they are put together and not add anything that is not required. It is of the very nature of ritual—the language of liturgy—that there is a consistent application of what the liturgy requires rather than turning any part of the liturgy into a 'personal project'.

The words we use to introduce and conclude the various readings from Scripture are fixed in the Lectionary and are to be followed so that we keep to the ritual nature of not only the proclamation of Scripture but of the liturgy itself.

This means that personal preferences or leanings need to be avoided so that we celebrate the liturgy of the Church as it has been handed to us. Significantly, this is one of the promises made by priests at their ordination. We do not have the option of changing things just because we don't like them.

Fr Paul Turner, a liturgical scholar of renown, has a pithy statement mostly directed towards his fellow priests but also applicable to other liturgical ministers—that we do what is written in the missal, and we don't do what is not there. It's a good saying to remember!

The Nature of the Liturgy of the Word as Dialogue

The other important element of understanding the ritual nature of the Liturgy of the Word is to understand the nature of this action as a dialogue, not between the reader and Assembly so much, but rather between God and the Assembly. We listen, and *then* we respond. And we cannot respond until we have had sufficient time to 'chew' on what we have heard. Thus, the importance of silence we have already mentioned above and the imperative to avoid any undue haste (q.v., *GIRM*, n.56).

Being constantly formed by the Liturgy of the Word as *dialogue* helps to prepare us for taking up the mantle of discipleship that we are called to through baptism. Not only does this dialogue continue throughout the Liturgy of the Word, particularly during the Universal Prayer, but it also assists in our Christian life. As we see and listen to what we encounter in the world around us, we 'chew' on that in light of what we have heard proclaimed from the Word of God, and then respond in a way that is in keeping with what the Word of God is asking of us.

Like all liturgy, the Liturgy of the Word is formational for the Christian life. But only if we grasp the ritual nature of this action as dialogue.

Pause to reflect on what we have read.

Mystagogical Reflection ...

- 1. What did you notice? What stood out for you?
- 2. What is God revealing to you? To us?
- 3. What are we learning about our Catholic understanding of The Liturgy of the Word?
- 4. What is God inviting us to consider about the way we celebrate the Liturgy of the Word in our parish?

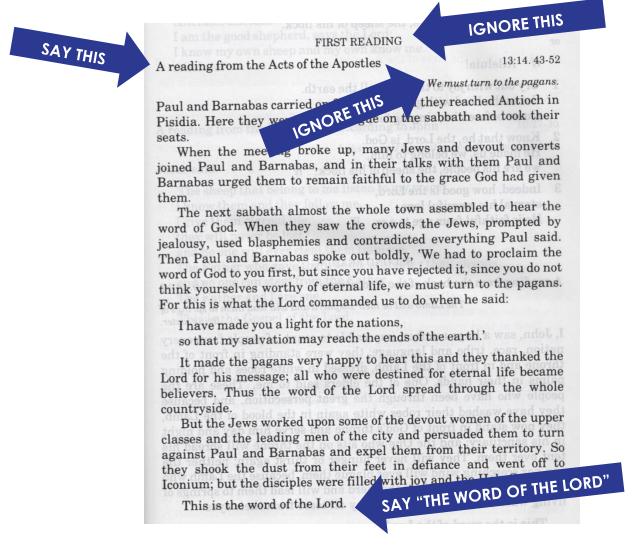
Contemplate – rest in the presence of God.

Note anything you'd like to remember from your reflection and conversation.

The First Reading

Much of what is about to be said concerning the First Reading can be applied equally to both the Second Reading and the Gospel.

The first reading begins with the ritual introduction specified in the lectionary: "A reading from ...". This ritual introduction is important because it reminds those who hear it that what is about to be spoken is the Word of God, not a mere human invention.



It is important, therefore, that we honour this ritual introduction and not add anything to it. We do not say, "The first reading is a reading from ..." or announce, "First Reading", and then make the introduction. We simply and confidently say, "A reading from ..."; any addition is unnecessary and superfluous.

Likewise, we do not proclaim the Heading of the reading, that part just under the introduction that is in italics. These are included in the

Lectionary as a guide only and are not part of what is to be proclaimed publicly during the celebration of Mass.



And lastly, at the end of the reading, we announce "The word of the Lord". This ending has been part of the Missal since the last translation in 2010, and we need to be aware of the change and implement it accordingly. When we eventually get a new Lectionary, a project that has been ongoing since before 2010, the updated ending will appear in it. Until then, we must ignore "This is the word of the Lord" and stick to "The word of the Lord".

The shift to the 'new' ending represents a better translation of the Latin text ("Verbum Domini"). Also, it aligns the proclamation with the phrases used during Communion, i.e., "The Body of Christ" and "The Blood of Christ". This was a deliberate move in the current translation to bring out more explicitly the unity of the two tables from which we are nourished at the celebration of Mass. The previously mentioned maxim of Fr Paul Turner is relevant here. We must adapt to do what the Missal requires of us. And after the rest of the assembly has answered, "Thanks be to God", another short pause comes immediately as an opportunity for meditation and reflection on what has been spoken to us.

At this point, on those occasions when the Responsorial Psalm is being sung in its entirety, the first reader is free to move away from the Ambo and back towards their seat. If the reader is going to lead all or part of the Psalm in spoken form, then they simply step back from the microphone and wait.

The Responsorial Psalm

Several observations can be made concerning the Responsorial Psalm, each of which is significant given that it "has great liturgical and pastoral importance, since it fosters meditation on the Word of God" (*GIRM*, n.61).

The first observation has to do with the very nature of the Responsorial Psalm itself. The text of the Psalm is drawn from the Book of Psalms, part of the Word of God. We respond to the Word of God we have heard proclaimed during the First Reading by using the Word of God itself. Not only do we hear God speak to us, but we then use God's own words to respond.

This recognition is important to avoid the temptation to replace the Responsorial Psalm with a hymn, something that would be contrary to the very nature of how we are called to respond at this point during the Liturgy of the Word.

Secondly, recognising the text of the Responsorial Psalm comes from the Hebrew Scriptures, it is important to recognise that it is of the genre of psalmody or song, and thus, as the *GIRM* reminds us, "It is preferable for the Responsorial Psalm to be sung, at least as far as the people's response is concerned" (n.61). Only when it is not possible for any part of the Responsorial Psalm should it be spoken in its entirety.

When the Psalm is sung in part or whole, the cantor or psalmist introduces the response by singing it. There is no need to announce "The Responsorial Psalm"; it simply emerges from the silence that preceded it.

The whole assembly then repeats the sung response as it will do after each verse sung by the cantor or spoken by the reader. Thus, the whole of the Responsorial Psalm set down for that day is proclaimed and meditated upon.

On those occasions when the Responsorial Psalm is entirely spoken, the *GIRM* reminds us "that it should be recited in a way that is particularly suited to fostering meditation on the Word of God" (n.61).

There are several things that can be observed in this light. Firstly, the reader does not need to say, "The Responsorial Psalm". Nor is there a need to say something like "The response is ...". If there has been a short period of silence before the Responsorial Psalm begins, everyone will know that the first words spoken or sung are going to be the response that the assembly will take up.

Secondly, we proclaim poetry when we proclaim a psalm in any context. Proclaiming a psalm, including the Responsorial Psalm, is different to reading one of Paul's letters, one of the Prophets, or, indeed, one of the Gospels. Even when not being sung, we need to honour the nature of what we are proclaiming and, in so doing, honour the Word of God that is being proclaimed.

Lastly and perhaps most controversially, we need to remember the *responsorial* nature of this part of the Liturgy of the Word: the reader who proclaims the verses of the Responsorial Psalm should not speak the response of the assembly. The nature of the Responsorial Psalm, particularly when spoken, is that of a dialogue, one voice interacting with the many, that needs to be honoured. It can be tempting to want to ensure the assembly says their part by saying it with or for them. A better option is to use pace and tone of voice to signal when it is time for the assembly to respond.

The GIRM reminds us that the verses of the Responsorial Psalm should be led "at the ambo or another suitable place" (n.61) when being sung. It follows that the same places would be appropriate when the verses are not being sung. Any time a list is given like this in the GIRM, it is to be read in terms of preference: the premier place for leading the Responsorial Psalm is clearly the ambo. And that is the Responsorial Psalm. At the end of the Psalm, whether it has been sung or said, the reader returns to their seat—but only after the Psalm is concluded, not during the last response of the assembly. We have plenty of time, and one way to avoid undue haste during the Liturgy Word (see *GIRM*, n.56) is for the reader or psalmist who leads the Psalm to stay in place until the Psalm is entirely finished before leaving the Ambo.

The Second Reading

Only when the person who led the Responsorial Psalm has returned to the seat does the second reader move from their seat towards the Ambo, ready to proclaim the Second Reading, which is customarily taken from the non-Gospel part of the New Testament. There is no need to hurry, and there is no need to coordinate the movements of the two readers so that they meet at the foot of the sanctuary; one departs, and then the other arrives.

As indicated in our discussion on the First Reading, the Second Reading begins with a ritual introduction, i.e., "A reading from ...". We do not say, "The second reading is a reading from ..." or announce, "Second Reading" and then make the introduction. We simply and confidently say, "A reading from ..."; any addition remains unnecessary and superfluous.

Again, we do not proclaim the Heading of the reading or those words under the introduction in italics. And, at the end of the reading, we announce "The word of the Lord", avoiding what currently appears in our Lectionary until we get new ones.

And, similar to what happened after the First Reading, we then observe another short pause as an opportunity for meditation and reflection on what has been spoken to us and what we have heard.

And once again, depending on how the next element will be proclaimed, the second reader might be free to leave the Ambo or simply step back from the microphone and wait. It all depends on whether the Gospel Acclamation is going to be musically proclaimed or not.

Pause to reflect on what we have read.

Mystagogical Reflection ...

- 1. What did you notice? What stood out for you?
- 2. What is God revealing to you? To us?
- 3. What are we learning about our Catholic understanding of The Liturgy of the Word?
- 4. What is God inviting us to consider about the way we celebrate the Liturgy of the Word in our parish?

Contemplate – rest in the presence of God.

Note anything you'd like to remember from your reflection and conversation.

The Gospel Acclamation

The Gospel Acclamation, sometimes erroneously referred to simply as the Alleluia verse, which is the form it takes outside the Lenten season, has a very specific purpose:

An acclamation of this kind constitutes a rite or act in itself, by which the gathering of the faithful welcomes and greets the Lord who is about to speak to them in the Gospel and profess their faith by means of the chant (GIRM, n.62).

Thus, the Gospel Acclamation looks forward to what is about to come and is not a response to what has already been heard. This is slightly different to the purpose of the Responsorial Psalm, and accordingly, the two should not be equated. Each has its unique purpose within the Liturgy of the Word, and each has its own mode of proclamation.

And so, a couple of observations.

There is no need to announce "The Gospel Acclamation"—the acclamation simply emerges from the silence that followed the Second Reading or the Responsorial Psalm when there is no Second Reading.

The reader does not need to say something like "Please stand for the Gospel Acclamation". We don't stand for the acclamation; we stand for the Gospel. Nor is it necessary to say, "Please stand for the Gospel", since the acclamation itself is our invitation to stand.

The *GIRM* clearly prefers the Gospel Acclamation to be sung "by everyone", with the verses sung by a choir or cantor. The option of having everyone say the verse while singing the "Alleluia", while not envisaged by the *GIRM*, is generally seen as a pastorally acceptable alternative when a choir or cantor is not present or not able to sing the verse.

What is clearly not envisaged by the *GIRM* is the often-seen practice of the entire Gospel Acclamation being said. When no part of the Gospel Acclamation can be sung, it may be omitted, especially on weekday Masses. In other words, there is a clear preference for it to be sung.

We sing rather than say the Gospel Acclamation for the same reason that we sing rather than say "Happy Birthday". It is of the nature of what we do that saying it makes less sense than singing it.

So, what does this mean for the Reader? It means that after the conclusion of the Second Reading, or the Responsorial Psalm, when there is no Second Reading, the Reader can leave the Ambo and return to their seat. The Gospel Acclamation will either emerge from the silence when we sing it, or it can be omitted if we cannot sing it.

The Gospel Acclamation also covers a number of actions, all depending on the particular solemnity of the occasion. In the most basic form, the Presider will move to the Altar, where he bows and says a most wonderful prayer:

Cleanse my heart and my lips, almighty God, that I may worthily proclaim your holy Gospel.

If a Deacon is present, he will ask the Presider (be that a Priest or a Bishop) for a blessing. If there is no Deacon present, a Priest will ask for a similar blessing if a Bishop is presiding.

If incense is being used, the thurible is brought to the Presider, who adds incense to the burning coals and blesses it.

If a Book of the Gospels is being used, it will be collected from the Altar where it was placed during the Entrance Procession (or before Mass begins if necessary) and processed to the Ambo.

The Priest or Deacon who will proclaim the Gospel reading will eventually end up at the Ambo, ready to proclaim the appointed passage from the Gospel.

The Gospel Reading

When the Deacon or Priest has reached the Ambo, they proclaim the appointed passage from one of the Gospels, drawing in part from the same ritual format as the First and Second Readings that have preceded it.

The GIRM has this to say about the particular significance of the Gospel:

The reading of the Gospel constitutes the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. The Liturgy itself teaches the great reverence that is to be shown to this reading by setting it off from the other readings with special marks of honour, by the fact of which minister is appointed to proclaim it and by the blessing or prayer with which he prepares himself; and also by the fact that through their acclamations the faithful acknowledge and confess that Christ is present and is speaking to them and stand as they listen to the reading; and by the mere fact of marks of reverence that are given to the Book of the Gospels. (n.60)

Perhaps the first thing to note is that the proclamation of the Gospel properly belongs to a Deacon. Therefore, if a Deacon is present, they will always proclaim the Gospel. Only if a Deacon is not present should a priest proclaim the Gospel, and then the preference is that the Presider does not proclaim the Gospel unless no other option is available.

We encounter this case in most parishes, but it is not the practice envisaged by the GIRM. This is because the proclamation of the Gospel is a *ministerial* act, not a *presidential* act, i.e., it is not something that is attached to the role of the Presider.

The second thing to note is that the proclamation of the Gospel begins with the greeting "The Lord be with you", but without the extending of the hands. Again, this distinguishes the action as ministerial rather than presidential. Following the announcement of where the passage comes from, there is a response from the Assembly, which is not present for the First or Second Readings. This response highlights the particular significance of the reading coming from the Gospel.

During the response, everyone signs themselves with a cross on the forehead, lips, and heart.

At the conclusion of the Gospel's proclamation, there is a similar ending to what we have seen with the First and Second Readings, i.e., "The Gospel of the Lord", though the book is no longer held up to the Assembly when the Deacon or Priest says this. This older habit misplaced the focus from the verbal proclamation of the Gospel to the book itself, which is not the focus.

After the Assembly's response, the Deacon or Priest kisses the book from which the Gospel has been proclaimed. Strictly speaking, only the Book of the Gospels should be reverenced in such a way, but the dearth of such books, particularly in smaller parishes, means that kissing the

Lectionary has grown to be an acceptable adaption at this point of the liturgy.

Kissing the Book of the Gospels, or the Lectionary, is only the second item that an ordained minister reverences with a kiss during the liturgy. The other is the Altar at the beginning and end of Mass. Both the Altar and the Book of the Gospels are intimately connected with Christ, which is the reason they are honoured in such a way.

Pause to reflect on what we have read

Mystagogical Reflection ...

- 1. What did you notice? What stood out for you?
- 2. What is God revealing to you? To us?
- 3. What are we learning about our Catholic understanding of The Liturgy of the Word?
- 4. What is God inviting us to consider about the way we celebrate the Liturgy of the Word in our parish?

Contemplate – rest in the presence of God.

Note anything you'd like to remember from your reflection and conversation.



The Homily

The Homily immediately follows the proclamation of the Gospel.

The GIRM has this to say about the particular significance of the Homily:

The Homily is part of the Liturgy and is highly recommended, for it is necessary for the nurturing of the Christian life. It should be an explanation of some aspect of the readings from Sacred Scripture or of another text from the Ordinary or 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. (n.65)

There's plenty of scope, therefore, from which the preacher can draw inspiration for their homily, but it's important to also note what is not included: the homily must draw from texts used during the Mass, which essentially rules out the older notion of the "sermon" based on dogmatic or thematic sources. Such a practice must now be seen as contrary to the *GIRM* regardless of how often some people demand it.

The Homily properly belongs to the ministry of the Presider, although

there is the possibility of another priest or a deacon doing so on occasion, and by invitation of the Presider. The nature of the Homily is *presidential*, not *ministerial*; this is the opposite of what we have already said above about the proclamation of the Gospel.

The Homily should be given from "the chair or at the ambo itself or, if appropriate, in another worthy place" (*GIRM*, n.136). As we have seen above, the existence of a list in the *GIRM* indicates preference: the place for the Homily is thus clearly outlined.

At the conclusion of the Homily, it is appropriate for a period of silence to be observed (*GIRM*, n.56, 136), again to allow the opportunity for reflection on what has been said under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The Dismissal of the Catechumens

At the conclusion of the period of silence following the Homily, if there are any catechumens present, i.e., those who are unbaptised and are participating in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, it is preferable for them to be invited forward and gently dismissed to go and continue reflecting on the Word of God they have heard with the help of a catechist (q.v., *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, n.75.3).

This is done because the Profession of Faith, and the Universal Prayer that immediately follow the Creed, are expressions of our identity as the Church. In response to the Word of God that has been heard, the Assembly expresses its common faith via the Profession of Faith and then exercises its baptismal responsibility to pray for others via the Universal Prayer.

This dismissal should not be seen as contrary to basic hospitality but as a recognition that catechumens have a primary duty to continue reflecting on the Word of God until such time as they are fully initiated into the life of the Church.

The Creed, or Profession of Faith

After the catechumens have been dismissed, or after the post-Homily silence if there are no catechumens, the Assembly moves to the proclamation or profession of the Creed, which is also referred to as the Symbol or Profession of Faith. There are two versions, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan or the Apostles', either of which can be used when the Creed is required, as it is on Sundays, Solemnities and other particular celebrations of a more solemn nature.

The Order of Mass expresses a firm preference for the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed as the default version, except during Lent and Easter when the Apostles' Creed is preferred. Both versions of the Creed should be used often enough that the Assembly is familiar with them.

During the Creed—whichever one is professed—there is a moment when the Assembly bows in honour of the Incarnation. On the Solemnity of the Annunciation and at Christmas, we genuflect rather than bow because of the significance of those particular feast days.

It should also be noted that occasionally, the Creed is not professed when it ordinarily would be. On those occasions when one of the sacramental rites is joined to Mass, the sacramental action takes the place of the Creed, our celebration of the sacramental life of the Church being itself a proclamation of faith.

The Universal Prayer

The last element of the Liturgy of the Word is known by a number of names: the Universal Prayer, the Prayer of the Faithful, and the Bidding Prayer, to name but a few.

Notice, however, that the title implies the singular, not the plural. This is one prayer, not many prayers, even though the prayer may contain many petitions. The singular description is important to remind us that this is the prayer of the whole Assembly gathered in one place to praise the God who has drawn us together.

In the Universal Prayer the Assembly exercises its baptismal responsibility to pray for the world and others in response to what they have heard from the Word of God. The *GIRM* has this to say about this particular element of the Liturgy of the Word:

In the Universal Prayer or Prayer of the Faithful, the people respond in some sense to the Word of God which they have received in faith and, exercising the office of their baptismal priesthood, offer prayers to God for the salvation of all. It is desirable that there usually be such a form of prayer in Masses celebrated with the people, so that petitions may be offered for holy Church, for those who govern with authority over us, for those weighed down by various needs, for all humanity, and for the salvation of the whole world. (n.69)

The purpose of this Prayer, then, is not about making announcements but about petitioning for God's assistance for those for whom we pray.

The GIRM continues:

The series of intentions is usually to be:

a) for the needs of the Church;

b) for public authorities and the salvation of the whole world;

c) for those burdened by any kind of difficulty;

d) for the local community.

Nevertheless, in any particular celebration, such as a Confirmation, a Marriage, or at a Funeral, the series of intentions may be concerned more closely with the particular occasion. (n.70).

It's easy to see how we can readily come up with any number of petitions on a particular Sunday, yet the Prayer is not to be exhaustive. As we see above, the Prayer stems from our response to the Word of God we have heard proclaimed, so the number of petitions on any particular occasion is limited by that. Generally speaking, somewhere between five and seven petitions are considered sufficient, though, on some occasions, more may be needed.

Notice, too, in the list of what and whom we are called to pray for, there is no mention of praying for the sick or the dead. As Paul Turner, whom I've mentioned before, remarks, we pray for the dead during the Eucharistic Prayer, while the sick more than likely falls into the "for the local community" category.

The text of each petition "should be sober, be composed with a wise liberty and in few words, and they should be expressive of the prayer of the whole community" (*GIRM*, n.71). They are not meant to be lengthy or directive as to God's actions; they are meant to express those things that we, the Assembly, believe are worthy of our prayer in light of what we have heard proclaimed from the Scriptures. Someone wise once said that we should have the Scriptures in one hand and the newspaper in the other when composing the petitions.



The Universal Prayer is prayed while we stand, the petitions are proclaimed (preferably) from the Ambo, and there should be a common invocation after each petition. There is also the option for silence to replace such an invocation, although this seems to be a rarity in Australia.

The Universal Prayer is introduced by the Presider once the reader has reached the Ambo and is concluded by a prayer prayed on behalf of the Assembly by the Presider. After this is concluded, we sit and prepare ourselves to move into the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

Pause to reflect on what we have read.

Mystagogical Reflection ...

- 1. What did you notice? What stood out for you?
- 2. What is God revealing to you? To us?
- 3. What are we learning about our Catholic understanding of The Liturgy of the Word?
- 4. What is God inviting us to consider about the way we celebrate the Liturgy of the Word in our parish?

Contemplate – rest in the presence of God.

Note anything you'd like to remember from your reflection and conversation.

Conclusion

The Liturgy of the Word leads us in multiple ways through a dynamic of proclamation and response, of divine offer and human reply. The Word of God seeks a receptive heart, and [the liturgy] calls for moments of silence to interiorize this word. We then respond with psalmody and Alleluia or Lenten verse. After the homily we make our faith response in the creed and stay standing for the prayer of the faithful, the prayer of a priestly people, itself a response to the word. Shaped and fed by the Word of God, we turn to the eucharistic table to be fed richly in new and sacramental ways.¹

Every time we, the People of God, gather to celebrate the Church's liturgy, we encounter the God who has called us together. The Liturgy of the Word is one of those privileged moments during the celebration of that liturgy when God's self-revelation is communicated to us, which then invites us to a response both within the liturgy and in our developing Christian life.

The Liturgy of the Word, therefore, requires a careful celebration, one that is guided by an understanding of the Liturgy of the Word itself as well as an appreciation of its significance for the Church's liturgy and the life of Christian discipleship the Church is called to. Continuing reflection on the Liturgy of the Word is a necessary part of the careful celebration of this significant part of the Church's liturgy.

It is hoped that this small contribution to the journey of understanding the Liturgy of the Word might be of some benefit to the reader who wishes to begin the journey of reflection on its place in the life of the Church.

¹ Catherine Vincie, "The Mystagogical Implications", in A Commentary on the Order of Mass of the Roman Missal, Edward Foley, Gen. Ed. (Collegeville, MN: A Pueblo Book, an imprint of the Liturgical Press, 2011), 194.

Take time to gather in your time of reflection and sharing.

What insights have you received from this exploration of the Liturgy of the Word?

What will you continue to ponder?

What implications are emerging for the parish celebration of the Liturgy of the Word?

To what change are you feeling called in the way you participate in the Liturgy of the Word?

How are you becoming a living Word of God?