

Proposal for a Celebration of the Liturgy of the Word

"Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock." (Mt 7:24)

Introduction

For the Year of the Word celebrated in England and Wales (2019-2020), the following text offers an explanation of the elements that are involved in the Proclamation of the Word (the first part of the Mass). It aims to generate awareness and suggest ways to improve this vital moment where God Himself talks to us. One of the possible ways is to devise a Paraliturgical Word, or formation sessions, where more time can be taken to fine-tune the different elements of the Proclamation. Both Readers and the Faithful can benefit from it leading to a "fruitful participation" in the Liturgy. The grace of God then can work more effectively allowing the Word of God to become alive in us. First, we will look at the different elements of the Liturgy of the Word and then offer some suggestions.

1. Why the Liturgy of the Word?

Jesus' ministry is the unique moment in history where God communicated Himself totally to us. His ministry time, like the Gospel itself is divided into two:

- a- giving to the world the words that are Spirit and Life;
- b- giving Himself to us on the Cross.

The Mass is Jesus' life and the Gospel made alive: it is the privileged moment when we receive Jesus' words and Himself. The first part of the Mass is the Table of the Word, meant to make us relive the unique three years of Jesus' preaching. Here, Jesus, the Risen Lord, comes and teaches us, talks to us personally and invites us to make an effort to listen to his words, assimilate them and keep them faithfully.

In the second part of the Mass we are made present at the Last Supper and at the sacrifice of the Lord on the Cross. We receive Him totally during Communion.

2. Jesus Himself Speaks to Us

In the document on Liturgy of Council Vatican II we find a very deep insight about the Liturgy of the Word: "He [Christ] is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church." (Vatican II, SC7) In other words, every time during a liturgy we hear the proclamation of the holy scriptures, it is our ears hear that the voice of the reader (a reader, a deacon, priest, bishop) proclaiming the Word, while our mind and heart listen to Jesus Himself, the Word of God living among us, speaking to us.

3. Scriptures vs. Word

In the last 60 years at least, Theology has come to acknowledge the difference between the *Sacred Scriptures* and the *Word of God*. By "Scriptures" we mean the Sacred text that we have in a written form such as in Bibles and Lectionaries. The latter are the books we use during the Liturgy of the Word which contains the first Readings and the Gospel. For recent Theology and the Church Magisterium, the "Word of God" is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is Risen, present and active in the Church and in our lives. We can then easily sense the great and sacred dynamism inherent in the expression "Word of God". This is the reason for the Reader, at the end of the Readings, saying: "The Word of the Lord". He or she points out that he wasn't just reading facts recalled from the past, but was being the humble tool of God talking to us at that moment in time.

4. Reading vs. Proclaiming

Theology also points out that during the Liturgy of the Word in the first part of the Mass, we often prefer to use the verb “Proclaim” to underline the huge difference between merely reading a text, even if the text is sacred, and Proclaiming the Word of God. “Reading” is an act of remembrance of events that occurred in the past, while “proclaiming” makes us either contemporaries of the past, i.e. as if we were amongst the crowds listening to Jesus, or allows the actual living Word of God to communicate with us here and now, rather like the Risen Lord appearing to the disciples of Emmaus or appearing to the Apostles gathered in the upper room.

5. Human vs. Sacramental Dimension

Voice vs. Word

More recent liturgical studies began to consider that the Proclamation of the Word has a sacramental dimension. A sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace that God communicates to us. In the case of “Proclamation” the sacramental dimension is as follows: the “visible sign” is the **voice** of the reader. The “invisible grace” communicated is the **Word** of God – Jesus – talking to us in the silence of our mind and heart. We go from **hearing** the scriptures to **listening** to the Word of God.

We need to be aware of the difference between attending a reading of a sacred text and witnessing an amazing event, God present among us and actually communicating Himself to us. Put in a nutshell: absence of communication vs. God communicating Himself, or remembering the past, i.e. no supernatural efficacy, grace wise, vs. a Sacred Act that requires attention and fruitful participation.

The Holy Spirit uses **the words Proclaimed** to reach the deepest parts of our being. The Word is the tip of his Sword. *“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”* (He 4:12) By going deep in us He wants to heal and transform us!

6. Living Tools of the Word

Readers are not just *reading* us a sacred text from the past. They are living instruments of something much bigger than they - they are the living “tools” used by the Lord Jesus Christ, risen and actually present among us, using their voices and the text they are reading to speak to us individually and as a community.

7. The Sacredness of the Presence of Jesus Amongst Us

From time immemorial the Church has understood the Sacredness of the Proclamation of the Word, i.e. that during the Liturgy of the Word Jesus Himself is present, as He was present amongst us 20 centuries ago, walking amongst us, proclaiming the Good news, talking to each one of us, teaching, instructing, shedding his light and love.

In this light, before its proclamation, the Procession with the book of the Gospel, held aloft, preceded by candles and incense, venerated by the faithful lining His path, reflects Jesus walking amongst us as He did in Galilea and Judea. We stand up, then, for the Proclamation of the Gospel because we acknowledge that Jesus is now present and is about to open His mouth (Matthew 5:2) and to talk to us. Similarly, this is so when He suddenly appeared to the Apostles in the Upper Room through closed doors and said: “Peace be with you”.

We then incense the Gospel in order to venerate Jesus present in His Word about to be proclaimed, while the candles being held at the ambo signify Jesus being the Light of our minds and hearts.

The priest says “[this is] The Gospel of the Lord”, and our reply: “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ” reveals the true identity of what has just happened. The Priest then kisses the Gospel venerating this physical presence of Jesus. We are, truly, no less fortunate than Jesus’ contemporaries, 2000 years ago, for we still have Him, and He still walks amongst us and wants to talk to each one of us.

8. Readiness to Listen

The fruitfulness of listening to the Word of God depends on a number of conditions. We need to ask ourselves if we really hear Him in the silence of our hearts. Or are we absorbed by our distractions? Do we try to remedy our inability today to memorise readings? Do we really receive his light and healing power or we let it pass us by? Does his word reach us and transform us? Is our faith alert and attentive in order to hear? Is our heart ready to listen? Then, are all the “material” conditions for a fruitful proclamation present and in working order, namely: physical silence in the assembly, microphone working properly, microphone directed properly toward the reader, good acoustics of the church, speaking into the microphone, audible voice, clear enunciation, a gentle rhythm, a rather even tone, intelligent reading, recollected silence by the listeners, time for ingesting the word and appropriating it to ourselves...

Intelligent reading on the part of the readers involves a minimum of preparation of the text, understanding the difficult words, and maybe also meditating upon it for a while in order to properly follow its natural rhythms and convey the sense of the text.

9. Combining Many Elements

As we can see from the above, the sacramental moment of the Proclamation depends on the combination of so many minute material and non-material elements both psychological and spiritual, that its fruitfulness is constantly threatened. Consequently, we have to admit that it has more of a chance of failing than succeeding because of human weakness.

Let us not forget also that, in order to achieve its purpose, the **sacramental** moment of the Proclamation of the Word needs to allow the Grace of the Word not only to reach each one of us and touch us, but also to go deeper by our putting it into practice, thus becoming alive in us and through us.

10. Special Grace Given

Although the Lord gives each one of us a special grace during the Mass in order to live it according to its sacredness and importance, we very rarely know about this grace and learn to use it. This general grace is given at all Masses and to all individuals and we need to know about it in order to use it and to do so in a fruitful way.

The Celebration of the Word of God is epicletic, i.e. it involves a coming of the Holy Spirit to take possession of us, elevate us, open our ears, makes us listen...

Listening involves the coming of the Holy Spirit so the Word of God can be heard, and listened to and put into practice: so, He can be born in us by the Holy Spirit.

“Send your Paraclete Spirit into our hearts and make us understand the Scriptures which he has inspired; and grant that I may interpret them worthily, so that the faithful assembled here may profit thereby”. (*Verbum Domini*, 16)

“We also find prayers which, at the end of the homily, again ask God to send the gift of the Spirit upon the faithful: “God our Saviour... we implore you for this people: send upon them the Holy Spirit; may the Lord Jesus come to visit them, speak to the minds of all, dispose their hearts to faith and lead our souls to you, God of mercies”.” (*Verbum Domini*, 16)

It is an extra grace on top of the “General Help of the Grace of God” given always. It helps us dispose ourselves to listen. This needed grace elevates us to the level of Jesus’ “mouth” (Matthew 5:2) so to speak.

11. The Sacrament as a Spring

When a grace is given, it is given. God never repents or takes back his grace. When a sacrament is celebrated, after it, we can always come back to it, like coming back to a fountain of life and draw from it. This of the non-repeatable sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage, Priesthood. The grace is given for us to be able to handle it and use the Main Grace of the Sacrament itself. In fact, any

sacrament comes with two graces: the grace of the sacrament itself (i.e. the main grace), and the grace to help us handle it.

Going back to the sacraments received is important in order to revive, to fan into a flame, what has been received in us and that sometimes is buried too deep to offer up its full fruits.

12. Every Day a Grace

Each day the Word of God is proclaimed. Each day there is a specific grace for the day, given to us in the Word of God Proclaimed in the Liturgy of the Word and each day's Mass. We rightly say about the Word of God that we are supposed to receive it on a daily basis: "give us this day our daily bread".

13. Listening and Putting into Practice

The Gospel reminds us constantly of the need to listen to Jesus' Words and to put them into practice! "everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain fell, the torrents raged, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because its foundation was on the rock." (Matthew 7:24-25)

It is vital to nourish our mind, imagination, feelings and will with Jesus' Words. Otherwise they find food elsewhere: the world's opinions, the flesh's attractions and the subtler lies of the Devil who takes our life bit by bit. Jesus comes at each Mass to give life, healing support and guidance to our faculties. Listening and putting his words into practice is not only a solid way of loving Him, it is also about nourishing ourselves, i.e. loving ourselves, taking care of ourselves. Neglecting the Word of God is the spiritual equivalent of leading an irresponsible life, numbing our senses with material things, escaping from reality.

14. Taking Time to go Back to the Sacrament

Lectio Divina is a type of prayer that allows us to go back to the Liturgy of the Word of the day and its grace and allows it to nourish and transform us. It is about taking time to sit down at home, take the Daily readings into our hands, and invoke the Holy Spirit in order to enable us to listen to Jesus and put His Word into practice. This way, the Liturgy of the Word reaches its completion in us and bears fruits.

Lectio Divina cannot be separated from Liturgy. From Vatican II, the Word of God is at the heart of Liturgy.

15. Formation is Needed

In order to have a proper fruitful ingestion of the Word of God, we need to learn many things. We need to learn how to live the Liturgy of the Word, individually, as ministers and as a community. We need also to know that the sacramentality of the Proclamation every day is never lost and that we can very well come back to it in order to allow it to be fruitful during our day, i.e. to put the Word received into practice. This is why we have *Lectio Divina*. It is the daily process of "digestion" of the ingested Word during the liturgy of the Word. (see n° 17)

But let us first start by making an individual and community effort to improve the way we live and celebrate the Liturgy of the Word!

16. A Liturgy of the Word

A possible practical means to improve the way we celebrated the liturgy of the Word is to take time, out of Mass to have a Paraliturgie of the Word as a separate exercise, led by the Parish Priest, where we would take more time to focus on each of the aspects of our celebration, where we can listen to same Readings of the day more than once, in a more "meditative" way, being attentive to the Working of the Grace of God, allowing a slow pace in reading, repetition, silence.

We can take Adoration as an example. During adoration, we are in fact allowing ourselves more time and attention to focus on the Amazing Gift of the Eucharist, of Communion. We can do the same for the Word of God by giving ourselves a time for the Adoration of the Word of God, where we learn to pay attention to the Word of God. This will drastically improve our spiritual life, our “practice” of the Mass, the fruitfulness of the Liturgy of the Word, as individuals and therefore as a community.

The Paraliturgy is about exploring the liturgical process of “listening to the Word of God”. It can consist in steps like the following:

- 1- Opening prayer.
- 2- Explaining one aspect of the Liturgy of the Word mentioned above in n°8: be it material, theological or spiritual.
- 3- Reading various times the Readings. First Reading 3-4 times. The Gospel 3-4 times. Reading rather slowly, meditatively and taking times of silence.
- 4- Allowing a longer time of silence in order to listen even more deeply to the Lord who speaks through the readings.
- 5- Illustration of the aspect chosen (see n°2), and ways to improve it.
- 6- Closing prayer.

This liturgical spiritual exercise should ideally be mandatory for Readers, and open to the whole Community for its renewal.

17. Digestion of the Word: Lectio Divina

All authors agree that Lectio Divina is tightly linked to Liturgy. From the beginning of the Church Christians had the experience of ruminating the Word of God until it gave up its Grace. A Lectio Divina based on the reading of the Mass may be considered as an excellent way to digest the immense Grace received by Jesus talking to us. It consists in reading various times each reading, and taking time to ask for the Help of the Holy Spirit to make the text come alive and hear Jesus’ Word given personally to us. Taking time to read and listen with the help of the Holy Spirit allows us to understand what Jesus wants to say to us, and again with the help of the Holy Spirit we are called to put into practice what we have understood. This process of deep and real listening is intimately linked to the Liturgy of the Word and is probably the best way of allowing it to be fruitful in our lives. It is of utmost importance to form the faithful in the practice of Lectio Divina, for it will greatly boost their spiritual life and their attitude when attending Mass.

Jean Khoury

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Year of the Word

Readings:

Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, Document on Divine Revelation.
Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Document on Liturgy.
Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation.
Jean Khoury, *Lectio Divina*, CTS. *Spiritual reading of the Bible*. (A Lectio Divina based on the daily readings.)