

Other Considerations of the Liturgy of the Word

The Mass In Slow Motion is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. You are also invited to learn more by attending Sunday School classes for adults which take place in the school cafeteria each Sunday from 9:45 am. to 10:45 am.

This series will follow the Mass in order.



In the last post in this series we focused on the Responsorial Psalm. This post will consider several matters related to the Liturgy of the Word.

The Place for the proclamation of the readings – This might seem obvious to you: the pulpit! But actually the place where the readings are proclaimed has wandered about, as we shall see.

In the earliest days, the place for the proclamation of the readings is not specified. However, by the Third and Fourth Centuries there is growing mention of an elevated place where the reader stood. Presumably this was so that the reader could more easily be heard and seen. Whether or not there was a desk or bookstand upon the platform varied. Later on, however this developed into the common form of an ambo or pulpit as we know it today, and, as a general rule, it was placed in the most convenient and suitable spot between the sanctuary and the nave or body of the church. It was from this spot that the readings were proclaimed for almost a thousand years.

However, the practice began to end, especially by the 10th century. The exact reason for this is somewhat obscure. However, the following factors seem to have played a role.

1. There was a long tradition of having the altar face east. Thus the priest, who faced the altar and the people who also faced the altar all faced east. There developed however a notion that the north was the region of the devil. (Some of the imagery evoked here is that the North at the time had a predominance of paganism, for this is where the Barbarian tribes lived. Likewise an imagery of the “coldness of unbelief” implied the North...and so forth).
2. Hence the Word of God was directed against the North. This meant that the deacon would face to his left (i.e. to the north) when singing the Gospel. In Low Mass the priest did not leave the altar but moved to the left side of the altar, (i.e. the north side of the altar) and angled a little bit to the left (to the north) and read the Gospel.
3. There was also the influence of the Low Masses said without a congregation. These sorts of Masses became common in monasteries where each priest was required to say his own Mass, with a server. Since there were many priests in a monastery there were often dozens of private Masses said at side altars, all at the same time. In these Masses, the celebrant whispered the Mass to avoid distracting other priests and did not leave the altar once he began his Mass. Thus, the readings were done at the altar, rather than a pulpit. This practice eventually seems to have been taken over into Masses with a congregation as well, for there was great admiration for the way things were done in monasteries.
4. Nevertheless, all of this meant that the readings were no longer proclaimed, facing the people. Thus, the use of the lectern or ambo fades out in the early Middle Ages. Increasingly, pulpits were used merely for preaching. Thus, pulpits begin to move further out into the nave, sometimes halfway down the aisle. This permitted people to huddle in close around the pulpit to hear better.

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5. Likewise, since Latin became less and less understood by the people, the proclamation of the readings, still in Latin, was seen less and less as a vital communication and now was more of a ritual reading by the celebrant. The readings were paraphrased in the vernacular at the beginning of the homily. Since the assembly was no longer vitally involved with the hearing of the actual, proclaimed word in Latin, facing them was not seen as a central concern. Thus, the raised pulpit decreased in importance for the liturgical proclamation of the readings.

6. One last factor is the emergence of an “epistle side.” At first both the Gospel and Epistle were read on one side. However, later on it became more common to give the Gospel special dignity and this led to its place of proclamation being considered special. The Epistle ended up being proclaimed to other side of the altar or sanctuary (i.e. the right side) out of reverence for the Gospel.

Today the readings have returned to the ambo, or lectern (also called a pulpit.) Of this lectern, the General instructions specify the following: *“The dignity of the word of God requires that the church have a place that is suitable for the proclamation of the word and toward which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns during the Liturgy of the Word. It is appropriate that this place be ordinarily a stationary ambo and not simply a movable lectern. The ambo must be located in keeping with the design of each church in such a way that the ordained ministers and lectors may be clearly seen and heard by the faithful. From the ambo only, the readings, the Responsorial Psalm, and the Easter Proclamation (Exsultet) are to be proclaimed; it may be used also for giving the homily and for announcing the intentions of the Prayer of the Faithful. The dignity of the ambo requires that only a minister of the word should go up to it.”* (GIRM 309)

The Lector. According to the Fathers of the Church a special reader was appointed distinct from the celebrant of the Mass. By the Second Century the position of lector was seen as a special position. It should be noted that special training was necessary for the lector in an age where far fewer were able to read. Further, reading ancient manuscripts were a lot harder since modern punctuation was not yet in use. You’ve got to really know what you’re doing when there are no periods, commas, quotation marks and the like!

It is interesting to note that young boys were often used for this office. In many places they lived in special communities or schools and received special training. It was a common sentiment that the innocence of youth was well suited to the proclamation of God’s Word. Nevertheless, the Gospel, due to its special prominence, was still proclaimed by someone in higher orders. Over time, however, the reading of the Epistle began to fall more and more to the sub-deacon during a High (sung) Mass. Nevertheless, over time this task transferred to the celebrant at Low (recited) Mass although it was still done by the sub-deacon at High Mass.

Today, the readings, except the Gospel, have once again been returned to the laity. The General Instruction has the following to say about the reader: *By tradition, the function of proclaiming the readings is ministerial, not presidential. The readings, therefore, should be proclaimed by a lector, (and the Gospel by a deacon or, in his absence, a priest other than the celebrant). In the absence of an instituted lector, other laypersons may be commissioned to proclaim the readings from Sacred Scripture. They should be truly suited to perform this function and should receive careful preparation, so that the faithful by listening to the readings from the sacred texts may develop in their hearts a warm and living love for Sacred Scripture* (GIRM 59)

Pastoral Note: Are you listening? We are supposed to listen attentively to the Word of God as it is proclaimed! Our attention spans today are very poor, however, and it is easy for the mind to wander. Nevertheless, pay attention! God is speaking when the Word is proclaimed! It is obvious too that Lectors and Deacons require special training and preparation so as to proclaim well. After all, God is speaking through them!

For those who read: If God is using you to speak, you had better prayerfully prepare. For those who listen: Are you listening? God is speaking.