

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

Study Guide, Part 4

SCRIPTURE IN THE CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY

The Intimate Connection Between Word and Rite in the Liturgy

Among the most crucial principles the Second Vatican Council established for the reform of the Church's liturgy was the fundamental, one could even say authoritative, role of Sacred Scripture in the content and structure of the rites. This is made clear in paragraph 24: "Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from Scripture that the readings are given and explained in the homily and that psalms are sung; the prayers, collects, and liturgical songs are scriptural in their inspiration; it is from the Scriptures that actions and signs derive their meaning. Thus to achieve the reform, progress, and adaptation of the 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." This statement shows the integral relationship between Word and sacrament in the life of the Church.

THE LAVISH TABLE OF THE WORD

If asked, most people would probably mention the use of the local language (in the words of the *Constitution*, "the mother tongue") as the most obvious difference between the post-Second Vatican Council liturgy and the previous post-Tridentine rites. While on the surface this switch to the vernacular made elements of the ritual more comprehensible to the people. Among the reasons given for that change, first and foremost, is the content of the readings to be proclaimed in not only the Mass but also the administration of every sacrament (see CSL, 36.2). The pastoral and theological impact of the Council's mandate that the "treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that a richer share in God's word may be provided for the faithful" (CSL, 51), has given rise to a profound transformation in the content, tenor, and length of our sacramental celebrations, especially the Mass.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Church had a one-year cycle of epistle and Gospel passages in the Mass (meaning that each year, the same readings would be repeated), with minimal preaching and no Prayer of the Faithful. In our post-Second Vatican Council liturgy, we now have a three-year cycle of Lectionary readings for

Sundays, that include a First Reading that usually comes from the Old Testament or Acts of the Apostles during Easter Time, a Responsorial Psalm, a Second Reading usually from one of the epistles, and a Gospel reading. We focus on a different synoptic Gospel account in each of the cycles, hearing readings from Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Our weekday readings follow a two-year cycle. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Mass's opening with the priest's prayers at the foot of the altar followed by the Kyrie and Gloria was, in terms of duration and drama, more significant than the usually cursory reading of two biblical texts with the *graduale* in between.

The Council Fathers took the "intimate connection" (CSL, 35) between Word and sacrament to a theologically deeper and pastorally more nourishing level by raising the role of the proclaimed Word in Scripture to a balanced relationship (rather than supporting role) with the Eucharistic rite. Thus, the *Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum*, teaches: "The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body" (21). The Word of God is venerated by the liturgical ministers' effectively proclaiming the readings, chanting the psalm, and preaching the Gospel, along with the people's fervent desire to make the Gospel's mission their own for the life of the world. Thus, the intentions of the Universal Prayer are not to be announced by the priest but rather by a "cantor, the reader, or another person" (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 138), who leads the faithful in their response to the Word.

The Christian dynamic of revelation comes full circle as the faithful raise up in prayer a Church and world ever in need of God's grace. For believers engaged in the Liturgy of the Word, the wealth of Old and New Testament literature, especially the Gospel accounts of Jesus's words and actions, contribute to an image of the Christ who becomes present in the sacramental ritual. When done with even a modicum of



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care (that is, well-paced reading, pastoral preaching, opportunity for silent reflection), the proclamation of the Word prevents sacramental celebration from devolving into mere ritualism. In the Mass, the dialogue of divine proclamation and human response shapes the thoughts and emotions of the faithful as they turn to the table of Christ's Body, well disposed to respond not mechanically but actively to the Preface's call, "Lift up your hearts."

For Discussion

- ▶ Why do you think it matters that lectors, readers, and cantors prepare themselves to proclaim the Word of God effectively? What kinds of preparation do you think a lector, reader, or cantor must undertake in order to be truly prepared?
- ▶ What do you listen for in a Homily? Can you recall a particular homilist who you found enriched your participation in the celebration? If so, how was your participation enriched?

SACRAMENTAL GRACE: ENCOUNTERING CHRIST'S PRESENCE

While the faithful may well draw consolation from the doctrine that sacramental grace is assured in the validly performed rites of the Church, the tradition has much more to offer than just a conceptually held belief. The recovered and enhanced tradition of the proclaimed Word in all of the Church's rites offers an encounter with the person of Jesus the Christ, who comes to confront and console with his revelation of who God is, what God has done, what God desires, and how we are invited into God's reign. This amounts to a deepened experience and understanding of grace.

What distinguishes Sacred Scripture as proclaimed Word in liturgy from all other ways whereby believers might engage biblical texts is the Church's belief that Christ is truly speaking in the present moment amidst his assembled body: "[Christ] is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church" (CSL, 7). In liturgy, the scriptural passages are not merely read, studied, or personally reflected upon but rather, the Word comes alive amidst a people, making present a living encounter with the Lord Jesus. Christ is present in the liturgy, through the power of the Holy Spirit, because of the Paschal Mystery that every celebration of the rites enacts, affording all the opportunity to recognize that mystery as "ever present and active within us" (CSL, 35.2).

In the Liturgy of the Word, the members of the assembly are not left to speculate, "What would Jesus do?" On the contrary, they respond to the personal offer of grace the living Jesus gives in this particular event. The assembled faithful do not hear about God; rather, they hear God speak to

them. God does not communicate by mental or spiritual telepathy, but through the activity of the liturgical assembly and its ministers, whose faithful pastoral practices of the rites serve the reception and appropriation of the Word in thoughts, experiences, and emotions.

For Discussion

- ▶ How do you understand the proclamation of the Word at liturgy as a living encounter with Jesus Christ?
- ▶ Can you recall times at Mass when you heard a certain passage or a sentence that struck you so powerfully that you had the sense that God was speaking to you in those words? How did that affect your experience of the liturgy? How did it affect your life?

SOUND TRADITION STANDING ON SACRED SCRIPTURE

In recent years, the third edition of the Roman Missal has attested to the claim made by the Council that the Scriptures provide the "inspiration and force" for the prayers, Collects, hymns, actions, and signs of the liturgy. The new English edition is a more literal rendering of the Latin typical edition and clearly shows the scriptural roots from which the text and actions have developed.

The Invitation to Communion comes from two biblical passages. "Behold the Lamb of God, / behold him who takes away the sins of the world. / Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb." The first half of the invitation quotes John the Baptist at the beginning of the Gospel according to John (1:29), while the second echoes the Book of Revelation: "Write this: Blessed are those who have been called to the wedding feast of the Lamb" (19:9). The wedding banquet imagery draws even more broadly and deeply from the parables of Jesus in the synoptic accounts of the Gospel, attesting to the historical importance of wedding, banquet, and supper in Jesus's description of the kingdom of God.

The dialogue following the breaking of the bread, when all gathered respond "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed" is another instance of liturgical prayer coming from a biblical passage. This response evokes a passage from the Gospel according to Luke (7:6–7) and inspires us to return to the account, making the humble words of the centurion our own.

For Discussion

- ▶ Look up the following passages in the Bible: Luke 1:28; Galatians 6:18; Luke 2:14; Isaiah 6:3; Matthew 6:9–13. Where in the Mass do you hear words from each of these Scripture passages?

► Do you think that your parish church has realized the vision of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, making Sacred Scripture “of the greatest importance” and promoting a “warm and lively appreciation of sacred scripture”? Why or why not?

PRIOR TO THE NEXT SESSION:

► Read the parts of the *Constitution* that speak of the members of the laity, especially paragraphs 11, 14, 26–31.

► Reflect on the following questions:

- What words does the *Constitution* use to speak of the lay faithful? How do those words make you feel?
- Do you currently participate in a ministerial role in your parish (such as singing in the choir, serving as an usher or greeter, proclaiming the Word as a reader, serving as a catechist, and so on)? If so, what made you decide to undertake that particular ministry? If not, are there any ministries that you have ever contemplated joining? What draws your interest to those particular ministries?

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