

INTRODUCTION TO THE ROMAN MISSAL

FEASTING ON THE WORD OF GOD

Monsignor Murray Kroetsch

- Pope Benedict XVI, in his post synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God, observes, echoing the words of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, that “Christianity is not a religion of the Book, but the religion of the word of God, not of a “written and mute word, but of the incarnate and living Word.”
- It is this word, which the fathers of the Second Vatican Council said, “the Church has venerated just as she venerates the Body and Blood of the Lord.” (*Dei Verbum* –The Constitution on Divine Revelation, 21)
- It is the word that was in the beginning, was with God and was God and became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, whose glory we have seen, that lives forever in the Church.
- So often, when we think of the Word of God, our comprehension is limited to the contents of a message or instruction or story and we miss the person whom we are called to encounter. Just consider how we listen to the word of God at Mass – do we not most often listen for more information about God or for deeper insight into how we ought to live? And when we listen to the homily, do we encounter a person (Jesus Christ) or do we receive instruction on the path to holiness? Is our response to the Word of God a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ or is it simply a matter of words and actions in keeping with his message to us?
- It is important for us to recall that the word of God proclaimed in the scriptures is, in the Hebrew expression, DABAR. It is the manifestation, the self-communication of God to us, and for us Christians, it is the manifestation or self-communication of the Risen and ever-living Lord, Jesus Christ.
- The word of God proclaimed in the Scriptures is a dynamic, powerful and saving word that transforms lives. As Jesus Christ brought salvation to all who believe, his word, too offers salvation to all. The word of God is a sacrament of Jesus Christ – an effective revelation of God to us.
- It is our engagement with this word of God in dialogue that is at the heart of our liturgical experience of the word of God.

- Pope Benedict, in his post-synodal exhortation speaks of the Church as the “home of the word”. .. the place where the word of God dwells. (#52) And we can rightly say that the liturgy is the first home of the word... the principal place where we encounter the word and enter into relationship with Jesus Christ.
- The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (#24) declared:

Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from Scripture that the lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung; the prayers and 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 the Scripture to which the venerable tradition of both Eastern and Western rites give testimony.

- Our liturgical celebrations – all of them - are permeated by the Word of God, which reveals the Incarnate Word and renders him visibly present to us.
- Mindful of this truth, the Church has made great strides in recent decades to draw us to an encounter with the living Word of God, especially in the liturgy.
- One of the first steps, of course was to permit us to hear the Scripture readings at Mass in our own language – not only the Scripture readings, but eventually all the prayers and songs, steeped in biblical language.
- Recall paragraph 51 of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*:

The treasures of the bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word. In this way a more representative portion of the holy Scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years.

As a result of this conciliar mandate, we now have a series of three biblical readings plus the responsorial psalm proclaimed at Sunday Mass and on other solemnities. This same pattern is quite common at ritual Masses, such as weddings and funerals and ordinations.

In addition to the New Testament readings, we now have (with the exception of the Easter Season) Old Testament readings proclaimed at Sunday Mass. This was not the case prior to 1969.

And of course, we have a three year cycle of readings for Sundays and a two year cycle of readings for week days throughout the year... A lot more Scripture proclaimed!

- In addition to the quantity of Scripture proclaimed, the church has taken great care since the Council to ensure good and effective (that is, fruitful) proclamation of the Word of God.
- In the *General Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass*, we read:

Whenever, therefore, the Church, gathered by the Holy Spirit for liturgical celebration, announces and proclaims the word of God, she is aware of being a new people in whom the covenant made in the past is perfected and fulfilled. GILM, #7

The proclamation of the Word is directed to the establishment of a deep covenant relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

The celebration of the word of God is placed on an equal footing with the celebration of the Eucharist. We are fed at two tables:

The Church is nourished spiritually at the twofold table of God's word and of the Eucharist: from the one it grows in wisdom and from the other in holiness. In the word of God the divine covenant is announced; in the Eucharist the new and everlasting covenant is renewed. GILM, #10

At both tables we are fed; at both tables we encounter the Risen Lord.(refer to Luke 24, the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus)

Our liturgical assemblies have been trained (and are still being trained) to listen attentively to the Word of God proclaimed and to observe silence following the proclamation so as to take the word to heart and respond generously to it.

The liturgy of the word must be celebrated in a way that fosters meditation; clearly, any sort of haste that hinders recollection must be avoided. The dialogue between God and his people taking place through the Holy Spirit demands short intervals of silence, suited to the assembled congregation, as an opportunity to take the word of God to heart and to prepare a response to it in prayer. GILM, #28

This text is repeated in the GIRM, n. 56.

The presider has been reminded of his special responsibility to make sure the Word of God is heard and bears fruit.

The first requirement for one who is to preside over the celebration is a thorough knowledge of the structure of the Order of Readings, so that he will know how to work a fruitful effect in the hearts of the faithful. Through study and prayer he must also develop a full understanding of the coordination and connection of the various texts in the liturgy of the word, so that the Order of Readings will become the source of a sound understanding of the mystery of Christ and his saving work. GILM, #39

In addition, the homily has been restored (as distinct from a sermon) and is required at every Sunday celebration of the Eucharist.

The homily is part of the Liturgy and is strongly recommended, since 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 take into account the mystery being celebrated or the particular needs of the listeners. (GIRM #65)

... There must be a homily on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation at all Masses that are celebrated with a congregation; it may not be omitted without a serious reason. It is recommended on other days, especially on the weekdays during Advent, Lent, and the Season of Easter, as well as on other Feasts and occasions when the people come to church in greater numbers. (GIRM, #66)

The General Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass also reminds us that those who proclaim the Word of God in the assembly must be well formed for their ministry.

"It is necessary that those who exercise the ministry of reader, even if they have not received institution, be truly suited and carefully prepared, so that the faithful may develop a warm and living love for Sacred Scripture from listening to the sacred readings. Their preparation must above all be spiritual, but what may be called a technical preparation is also needed. The spiritual preparation presupposes at least a biblical and liturgical formation. The purpose of their biblical formation is to give readers the ability to understand the readings in context and to perceive by the light of faith the central point of the revealed message. The liturgical formation ought to equip the readers to have some grasp of the meaning and structure of the liturgy of the word and of the significance of its connection with the liturgy of the Eucharist. The technical preparation should make the readers more skilled in the art of reading publicly, either with the power of their own voice or with the help of sound equipment. GILM, #55

Think of the thousands of workshops and courses in which ministers of the Word have participated in recent decades and the marked improvement that has been made in the quality of proclamation in our communities during the past forty-plus years!

Consider also, the role of the psalmist or cantor which has emerged since the Council and the work that has been done to assist them in proclaiming God's word. Consider too, the work that has been done by many pastors and liturgists to ensure that the responsorial psalm is sung in a prayerful way that fosters meditation instead of rattled off hurriedly on the tail of the words "Thanks be to God" following the first reading.

It is preferable that the Responsorial Psalm be sung, at least as far as the people's response is concerned. Hence, the psalmist, or the cantor of the psalm, sings the verses of the psalm at the ambo or another suitable place. The entire congregation remains seated and listens, but, as a rule, takes part by singing the response ... (GIRM #61)

The psalmist's role is to proclaim the psalm or other biblical canticle that comes between the readings. To fulfill this function correctly, it is necessary that the psalmist be capable of singing and have facility in correct pronunciation and diction. (GIRM, #102)

Four additional observations:

- In the reform of the liturgy following the Second Vatican Council, each of the sacramental rites and sacramentals (including blessings) contain a proclamation of Scripture, and for many of the rites a wide collection of possible Scripture passages are proposed for proclamation.
- In Canada, and elsewhere, great strides have been made to have beautiful and dignified liturgical books from which are used to proclaim the Word of God. With the exception of a few school communities and the occasional funeral or wedding, it is rare to see anyone proclaiming the word of God from a tattered piece of paper or throw-away leaflet.
- I have noticed also, that it is becoming increasingly rare to see people wandering around the church or being seated during the liturgy of the Word. It has been my experience that a profound silence descends on the community when the Scriptures are read and the homily is given (crying babies notwithstanding). The assembly's hunger for the Word of God is palpable.
- Finally, we need to note the thousands of Bible study programs that have been offered and the keen interest among our Catholic people to become friends with the Scriptures and to be nourished by the Word of God.
- Looking back over the past forty-plus years, we can say with certainty, that the Church has made great strides towards drawing us to an encounter with the living Word of God, especially in the liturgy.

- We really have been feasting at the table of the Word. We have encountered the living word of God, Jesus Christ in our liturgical celebrations. And we have grown in our knowledge of and friendship with the Scriptures.
- The revised English edition of the Roman Missal, which we will begin to use on the first Sunday of Advent this year, will afford us with yet another opportunity encounter the living word of god and be drawn into a deep covenant relationship with Jesus Christ.

As I noted a few moments ago, quoting the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council: *the prayers and 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.*

In recent months, as I have been studying the revised translations, it has become increasingly clear to me just how true the statement in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy is. The liturgy is essentially biblical.

All of us in this room have heard opinions, pro and con, about the new translation, and about the process which brought us to the final approved texts. Without question, all of us will discover texts in the revised Missal that we absolutely dislike ... and others that will hold us in awe! (Not unlike the present Sacramentary texts).

However, one thing is for sure. We will not be able to miss the biblical richness of the new translations. And, for my money, the single greatest gift of the new translations will be an increased awareness of the Word of God throughout the entire liturgy (not just during the Liturgy of the Word) and the possibility of a more intimate encounter with the living Word of God, Jesus Christ, whose presence will be made more clearly manifest in both the Scriptures proclaimed and in the prayers on our lips.

And so, for the time remaining today, I would like to highlight for you some of the biblical roots of some of the texts of the liturgy. My hope is that as we pray the new texts our ears might be attentive to the living word revealed in the prayers.

NEW WORDS ON OUR LIPS

As we approach the date for the implementation of the Revised English edition of the Roman Missal on November 27, 2011, it is fitting to look carefully at the changes in the words spoken by the assembly at Mass. In this article we will consider the changes in the Introductory Rites and the Liturgy of the Word.

Response to the Greetings

Every celebration of Mass begins with the priest extending a biblical greeting to the assembly. These greetings are, for the most part, taken from the letters of St. Paul. To each of these greetings, the people will respond: *And with your spirit*. The reason for the change is to accurately reflect the Latin response: *Et cum spiritu tuo*. In making this response, we acknowledge the gift of the Spirit bestowed upon the priest at his ordination to preside at the Eucharist and transform the gifts of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. At the same time, we acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit in all the baptized who have gathered to offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving to God in union with Christ.

Penitential Act

In the first form of the Penitential Act, often referred to as the *Confiteor*, we will notice several changes. At the present time we say: *I have sinned through my own fault*. In the revised text we will say: *I have sinned greatly*. This accurately translates the Latin: *peccavi nimis*. These words were once on the lips of King David as he came before God to acknowledge his sin (see 1 Chronicles 21.8).

Later in the prayer we will say: *through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault*. This corresponds to the Latin: *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. As we say these words we will strike our breasts once. For Catholics who remember the initial changes in the liturgy after the Second Vatican Council, these words will be familiar. They were used in the provisional texts before the approved texts were finalized in 1969.

One other small change will be found in the *Confiteor*. At present we say: *and I ask blessed Mary, ever virgin...* The new text reads: *therefore I ask blessed Mary ever-Virgin...* This more accurately translates the Latin and makes clear the reason for invoking the intercession of Mary and the saints. It is because we have sinned, that we rely on the prayers of the saints and our brothers and sisters.

The words of the second form of the Penitential Act have been completely recast to match the Latin text and evoke the words of the Scriptures. The priest says the first sentence and all respond with the second.

Have mercy on us, O Lord. / For we have sinned against you. (Baruch 3.2)

Show us, O Lord, your mercy. / And grant us your salvation. (Psalm 85.8)

Glory to God

One of the biggest changes we will notice is in the words of the Glory to God. Prior to the final publication of the Roman Missal in English in 1970, efforts were made to have a common version of this and other prayers which could be used ecumenically. Following the rules for translation at that time, fidelity to the Latin text was sacrificed in order to have texts which were agreeable to all the major Christian denominations. The new translation more faithfully translates the Latin. Hence, the first part of the hymn is noticeably different:

*Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to people of good will.*

We praise you,

we bless you,

we adore you,

we glorify you,

we give you thanks for your great glory,

Lord God, heavenly King,

O God, almighty Father...

The new text poses a great challenge and opportunity for composers as they set these words to new music.

Apostles' Creed

The changes in the Apostles' Creed are few but significant. First of all, the nine sentences in English have been reduced to three as in the Latin. Secondly, the words: *He descended to the dead* have been changed to: *he descended into hell*. These words translate the Latin: *descendit ad inferos*. Older Catholics will recognize these words as the ones they learned in their childhood.

The word 'hell' used in this context does not refer to the place of the damned or to the abode of Satan. Rather, it refers to the place of the dead, the underworld of the just, where those righteous persons who died before Christ were awaiting resurrection. The action described in

the Creed is the action of Christ going to that place to bring those righteous persons to share in his victory over sin and death. It expresses the truth that Christ died, not only for those who came after him, but, indeed, for all people of every time and place. The action of Christ, in which we profess our faith, is beautifully depicted in many icons of the Eastern Church where we see the Risen Lord reaching down to bring Adam and Eve from hell to share in his victory.

Nicene Creed

The most notable change in the Nicene Creed is the first word. Instead of saying: *We believe*, we will say: *I believe*. This is consistent with the Latin text: *Credo*. In its original form, the Nicene Creed began with the words: *We believe*. However, when used in the liturgy, it has always begun with the words: *I believe*. St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us that when we make this profession of faith in the liturgy, we are speaking and acting as one body. Therefore, we say: *I believe*.

Other words have been incorporated into the Nicene Creed. In speaking of Jesus Christ, we will say he is the *Only-Begotten Son of the Father*. This translates the Latin: *Filium Dei Unigenitum*, and highlights the unique sonship of Christ. We are adopted sons and daughters of God by virtue of our baptism. Jesus Christ is the only-begotten Son of the Father. Professing our belief in the birth of Christ, we will say: *and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary*. The word “incarnate” refers to the Son of God taking on human flesh, becoming truly human. It echoes the words of St. John in the prologue to his gospel: *and the Word became flesh and lived among us*. (John 1.14) Finally, at the conclusion of the profession of faith, we say: *I confess one baptism ...*

This phrase replaces: *We acknowledge one baptism...* and more accurately translates the Latin: *Confiteor unum baptismum*. Confession here has nothing to do with confessing sin, but rather professing our faith by the witness of our lives.

In the next and final article in this series, we will consider the changes in the Liturgy of the Eucharist and the Dismissal Rite of the Mass.

Monsignor Murray Kroetsch

Vicar General, Diocese of Hamilton, ON, Pastor of Holy Rosary Parish in Burlington, ON, Chair of the National Council for Liturgical Music, and a past Director of the National Office of Liturgy, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.