THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

The Church has often used the image of "two tables" to express the continuity between the two main parts of the Mass: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. God's people are nourished first from the table of Holy Scripture, which is proclaimed in the Liturgy of the Word. Then they are fed with the Body of Our Lord at the table of the Eucharist.

While the Eucharist is the very Body and Blood of Jesus, the Scriptures lead us to a deeper communion with Jesus in the Eucharist. Pope Benedict XVI noted how these two parts of the Mass are not merely juxtaposed, but have an inner unity, so much so that, together, they form "one single act of worship":

> From listening to the word of God, faith is born or strengthened (cf. Rom 10:17); in the Eucharist the Word made flesh gives himself to us as our spiritual food. Thus, "from the two tables of the word of God and the Body of Christ, the Church receives and gives to the faithful the bread of life." … Consequently it must constantly be kept in mind that the word of God, read and proclaimed by the Church in the Liturgy, leads to the Eucharist as to its own connatural end.[30]

Sitting attentively at only one of these tables simply will not do. We need both the inspired Word of God in Scripture and the incarnate Word of God present in the Blessed Sacrament. Thomas à Kempis, in his fifteenth-century spiritual classic, *The Imitation of Christ*, expressed how much the soul longs to be nourished from *both* tables:

> Without these two I could not live, for God's Word is the light of my soul, and Your sacrament the Bread of life. These can also be called the two tables placed in the treasury of holy Church. One table is that of the sacred altar on which rests the holy Bread that is Christ's precious Body; the other is that of divine law which contains holy doctrine, teaches the true faith, lifts the veil of the sanctuary and leads us securely to the holy of holies.[31]

God's Word Spoken to You

Let us focus our attention now on the first table, the Liturgy of the Word. The readings from Scripture do a lot more than provide us with moral principles and spiritual insights. They do a lot more than offer lessons for how to follow Jesus as a disciple. Indeed, the Bible does not merely talk *about* God; it is God's own speech. In the Liturgy of the Word, therefore, we encounter the words of God himself spoken personally to each one of us.

This does not mean the Scriptures are not human. They were written by human beings to particular human communities at certain moments in history. Each book of the Bible contains the human author's writing style, personality, theological outlook, and pastoral concerns. But the Scriptures also are inspired by God. "Inspiration" comes from the Greek word *theopneustos*, which means "God-breathed" (see 2 Timothy 3:16). In the inspired books of the Bible, God breathed forth his divine words through the human words of the sacred writers. In this way, Scripture is like Jesus Christ himself—fully human and fully divine. As the Second Vatican Council explains, "To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their own faculties and powers so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more."[32]

To hear the words of God is a serious matter. At Mount Sinai, the people of Israel prepared themselves for three days before God spoke

to them the words of the covenant. In the Mass, we prepare ourselves for this holy encounter with God's Word through the Introductory Rites—the Sign of the Cross, the *Confiteor*, the *Kyrie*, and the *Gloria*. Having marked ourselves with the Sign of the Cross, confessed our unworthiness to be in God's presence, asked for his mercy, and sung his praises, we now sit down to listen carefully to what God wants to speak to us through his own inspired words in the Scriptures. And this is a personal encounter, for as the Second Vatican Council teaches, "In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them."[33]

To appreciate the profound nature of what is really happening in the Liturgy of the Word, consider the amazing role played by the lector who reads the Scriptures to us. The lector is not simply a public reader of the Bible. At Mass, the Lord uses the lector as the instrument through whom he proclaims his Word to the people. Think of this as the lector lending God his human voice so that God's words can be spoken to us at Mass. What an amazing honor and privilege it is to read the Word of God! And what a blessing it is for us to hear it (see Revelation 1:3).[34]

The Greatest Bible Study on Earth

The idea of having a cycle of readings from Scripture for liturgical worship is rooted in ancient Jewish practice. In the first century, the Law and the Prophets were regularly read in the context of synagogue worship (see Luke 4:16-17; Acts 13:14-15; 15:21).[35] And the rabbis of the early third century testify to a regular pattern of readings from the Law and the Prophets for worship in the synagogue, which may reflect what was practiced in Jesus' day. Some rabbinic evidence even points to the possible use of a three-year cycle of readings.[36]

Similarly, the selections from Scripture read at our Sunday Liturgy today are determined by a three-year cycle of readings from the

various parts of the Bible: the Old Testament, the Psalms, the New Testament, and then the Gospel. Even the order of these readings has significance, for it reflects the order of God's redemptive plan. The readings ordinarily move from the Old to the New—from Israel to the Church. The proclamation of the Gospel comes at the climax, reflecting how Jesus is at the center of salvation history with all of Scripture pointing to him.

In a sense, the Mass is the greatest Bible study on earth. Simply by going to Mass on Sunday, Catholics are taken on a grand tour of the Sacred Scriptures that often highlights the connections between the Old and New Testaments. Weekday Masses follow a two-year cycle of readings that provide an even broader range of the Scriptures in the Liturgy. These readings are not selected from among a pastor's or congregation's favorite parts of the Bible. Rather, priest and people are challenged with more of the totality of the Word of God, covering all major parts of the Bible in a way that is not dependent on people's preferences or expertise.

The Liturgical Year

The readings from Scripture also correspond to the various seasons and feasts of the Church. On one level, the Church walks us through the life and mission of Jesus through the seasons of the liturgical year. In the four weeks of Advent, we recall the Old Testament period of humanity's longing for the Savior. In the Christmas season, we rejoice in the birth of the Son of God who came to dwell among us. In the forty days of Lent, we participate in Jesus' prayer and fasting in the desert as we prepare to enter Christ's passion in Holy Week. In the fifty days of the Easter season, we celebrate Jesus' triumphant resurrection and ascension into heaven, culminating on the fiftieth day with his sending of the Spirit on Pentecost. The rest of the liturgical year—known as Ordinary Time—focuses our attention on the public ministry of Jesus.

Throughout the year, the Church also draws our attention to the various mysteries of faith. The feast of *Corpus Christi* (literally, "Body of Christ"), for example, celebrates the gift of the Eucharist. The feast of the Holy Trinity focuses on the mystery of the Godhead as three divine Persons. The feast of All Saints praises God for the supernatural work he has accomplished in transforming weak, sinful human beings into saints, and reminds us of our own call to sanctity. Scattered throughout the year also are the feasts and memorials of the many saints who serve as models for us to follow in our own imitation of Christ. The Blessed Virgin Mary is chief among them, the saint most often commemorated in the liturgical year, as we celebrate her immaculate conception, her nativity, her assumption, and other aspects of her role in God's saving plan.

Certainly, we should praise the Lord for every aspect of his life, especially his death and resurrection, every day of the year. And we should be constantly thankful for the mysteries of faith and the saints he has given us. But we are human and cannot fully grasp the *entire* mystery of Christ at once. This is one reason why the Church marks off special days to give attention, thanks, and praise for a particular aspect of Jesus' life or a specific aspect of the Catholic Faith. As one liturgical scholar puts it,

> Each year [the Church] again sees him an infant in the manger, fasting in the desert, offering himself on the Cross, rising from the grave, founding his Church, instituting the sacraments, ascending to the right hand of his Father, and sending the Holy Ghost upon men. The graces of all these divine mysteries are renewed in her.[37]

Journeying through the Church year over and over throughout our lives also helps us appreciate Christ and his work of salvation all the more. It is similar to the way families celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and other important dates and events. In my family, for example, we thank God each day for the blessing of each other's lives in a general way. But we also celebrate birthdays, which help the family

rally together to honor a particular child and give special thanks for the gift of that person's life. Similarly, although I pray for my wife and my marriage every day of the year, celebrating our anniversary is an annual opportunity to thank God in a more particular way for the blessing of each other's lives and the sacramental bond we share.

As the family of God, the Church fittingly marks off special days to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and other key aspects of God's plan of salvation. But in this supernatural family, it is Christ himself who is present in the various yearly celebrations. As Pius XII teaches,

> The liturgical year, devotedly fostered and accompanied by the Church, is not a cold and lifeless representation of the events of the past, or a simple and bare record of a former age. It is rather Christ Himself who is ever living in his Church. Here He continues that journey of immense mercy which He lovingly began in his mortal life, going about doing good, with the design of bringing men to know His mysteries and in a way live by them. These mysteries are ever present and active.[38]

7. The First Reading

The first reading is usually from the ancient Jewish Scriptures known as the Old Testament (except during Easter Season, when it is from the Acts of the Apostles, following an ancient practice). But just because it's called the *Old* Testament does not mean we should think of its message as old in the sense of being outdated, out of touch, or not relevant anymore.

It's true that the Old Testament is not the full story. It awaits the fullness of divine revelation in Jesus Christ. But it is still accepted by the Church with veneration as "authentic divine teaching."[39] In fact, one cannot adequately understand Jesus and the New Testament Scriptures without knowing the story of Israel in the Old. For the story of Jesus is like the last chapter of a great book or the climactic scene in a great movie. The more one grasps the many dramatic twists and turns in the story that went before—the Old Testament story of Israel—the more one is able to understand the climax of the story of Jesus Christ and his kingdom in the New.

The inclusion of the Old Testament reading at Mass helps us to enter into that story of Israel and see the unity of the Bible more clearly.[40] For as the Second Vatican Council teaches, echoing St. Augustine,

> [God] brought it about that the New should be hidden in the Old and that the Old should be made manifest in the New. For, although Christ founded the new Covenant in his Blood, still the books of the Old Testament, all of them caught up into the Gospel message, attain and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament and, in their turn, shed light on it and explain it.[41]

The First Reading at Sunday Masses and on solemnities generally corresponds to the Gospel reading for the day. Sometimes, the correspondence is thematic, illustrating continuity or contrast between the Old Testament story and the Gospel. At other times, the reading underscores how the Old Testament prefigures Christ and the Church. Images of Passover are associated with readings about the Eucharist. The Exodus story is linked with baptism. The first woman, Eve, prefigures Jesus' mother, Mary. The office of the steward in the Davidic kingdom is shown to be prefiguring the role of Peter and the papacy. Through this beautiful interplay between the Old and the New, between the First Reading and the Gospel, the symphony of Scripture resounds in the Liturgy of the Word.

Thanks Be to God

At the end of the First Reading, the lector says, "The Word of the Lord." One theologian has noted that this announcement is like a great shout or a trumpet call, reminding us how marvelous it is for human beings to hear God speak to us through the Scriptures:

> The declaration should be heard with absolute amazement. How absurd it would be to take for granted that God should speak in our midst. We are expressing our amazement, and we are saying that we do not take it for granted when we cry out from the depths of our hearts, "Thanks be to God."[42]

Thanksgiving is gratitude to God for his goodness and his acts in history. It is a common facet of worship in the Bible from the Old

Testament (see 1 Chronicles 16:4; Psalms 42:4; 95:2) to the New (Colossians 2:7; 4:2). The specific words, "Thanks be to God," were used by St. Paul to thank the Lord for delivering him from sin and death (see Romans 7:25; 1 Corinthians 15:57; 2 Corinthians 2:14). Since the whole of the Bible ultimately points to Christ's work of salvation, it is fitting that we respond to the Scriptures proclaimed in the Liturgy with the same expression of gratitude St. Paul used in his joyful thanksgiving for Christ's victory on the Cross: "Thanks be to God!"

Let our response, therefore, not be a bored, mumbled, half-hearted "Thanks … be … to … God … kind of … I guess." Let us respond like men and women sitting before the throne of our great King—men and women who are in awe that we have been so blessed to have our King personally speak to us. May our hearts resound with true gratitude and amazement for his Word as we fervently say, "Thanks be to God!"

Our response is then followed by a moment of silence as we sit in awe and adoration of the God who just spoke to us. Silence is part of the heavenly liturgy in the book of Revelation (see 8:1), and it gives us time to reflect on the words we just heard—to become like Mary, who "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). Though some leaders of worship might feel a need to fill every moment in the Liturgy with some music, some action, some response, or some announcement, it is biblical and very pleasing to God to offer people at Mass interior space and silence in their hearts, to let the Word of God take root in their souls, trusting that God's inspired Word and the Holy Spirit stirring in people's hearts is more powerful than any human production we might want to offer.

8. The Responsorial Psalm

After hearing God's Word proclaimed in the first reading, we respond next not with our own meager, human words but with God's own inspired words of praise and thanksgiving from the book of Psalms. Indeed, that is what the Responsorial Psalm is all about: lovingly conversing with God using his own inspired words of praise and thanksgiving. What a perfect way to talk to God and to respond to his Word in the Liturgy!

The recitation—or, even better, the singing—of the psalms helps to create an atmosphere of prayer conducive for meditation on the reading. Using the psalms in our worship of God is quite natural. St. Paul exhorted his followers to sing psalms (see Colossians 3:16). And the tradition of using psalms for liturgical worship goes back even further.

The book of Psalms represents a collection of one hundred and fifty sacred hymns used for private devotion and public worship in the Temple liturgy. In the Temple, the verses of the psalms would be sung by two alternating groups, with a common refrain (the antiphon) that was sung before and after the psalm itself. We see some indications of this in the book of Psalms itself. Some psalms, for example, include the aside "Let Israel now say …" (Psalms 124:1; 129:1), which seems to be a rubric inviting the assembly to respond. We see this also in Psalm 136. This psalm starts with the call to "Give thanks to the Lord,

for he is good," and the subsequent verses list various reasons for being thankful to God. Each of those verses begins with an opening line such as "to him who alone does great wonders" or "to him who led his people through the wilderness." And each ends with the same repeated refrain: "for his mercy endures forever." This calling back and forth between motive and response points to a kind of liturgical dialogue, with the opening words being recited by a leader and the refrain serving as the response given by the people. This back-and-forth or "antiphonal" movement is found not only in the Responsorial Psalm but throughout the Mass: "The Lord be with you … And with your spirit." "The Word of the Lord … Thanks be to God." "Lift up your hearts … We lift them up to the Lord."

And this way of praying to God is so biblical! Moses, in the covenant ceremony at Sinai, proclaims the words of the Lord to the people, and they all answer liturgically, in one voice, saying, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8). When Ezra reads the book of the Law to the people, he blesses the Lord and the people respond "Amen, Amen" (Nehemiah 8:6). When St. John, in the book of Revelation, has a vision of the liturgy in heaven, he sees thousands of angels praising the Lord, saying, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" Then all the creatures reply, "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!" And the angelic four living creatures answer back, "Amen!" (Revelation 5:11-14).

These heavenly shouts of praise and affirming replies express the awe-filled joy of the angels and saints in the presence of God. Thomas Howard comments that it is similar to the excitement we experience when we find someone who shares one of our deep convictions—when we hear that person say something with which we wholeheartedly agree, something we are passionate about, maybe even something that expresses a sentiment or belief that we could not

have expressed better ourselves. When someone says something that strikes a deep chord within us, we cannot help but express our joyful agreement. We feel the need to join in the conversation and affirm the statement: "Yes! That's exactly right!"

Indeed, there is great joy in being in the company of others who agree on the matters that are most important to us. The angels and saints in heaven possess this kind of joyful agreement to an even greater degree. Standing in the presence of the goodness and love of God, they cannot help but praise and thank him. And they seem to have the need to affirm and echo each other's words of praise and thanksgiving. Some begin glorifying God, saying, "Worthy is the Lamb … to receive … honor and glory and blessing!" Others in wholehearted agreement answer with resounding praise: "To the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory." And still others don't want to be left out. They too must declare that they share these sentiments as they cry out "Amen!" Howard envisions this back-and-forth praise of God by all the angels, saints, and creatures in the book of Revelation as "a dance," which we are invited to join during the Mass.

> The universe, all creatures and things, all angels and saints, invite us, "Come, join the Dance." The antiphons of the Mass are early training in the great choreography, in the great ringing antiphon before the eternal *perichoresis*, the "Dance" of the Persons of the Trinity. The seraphim know this; and in the Liturgy we begin to be introduced into this blissful antiphonality. When we respond to the Psalm, we are taking our first steps in the Dance.[43]

Clearly, the liturgical dialogue in the Mass follows a biblical model for worship—even more, a heavenly model for worship. It is no wonder, therefore, that the early Christians picked up on this pattern and incorporated it into their worship of God. At least as early as the third century, psalms were being recited at Mass, with cantors singing the psalms and the people giving a response, often repeating the first

line of the psalm[44]—a practice that likely reflects the way the psalms were used in ancient Israelite worship. All of this serves as the basis for our Responsorial Psalm today.

9. The Second Reading

A second reading is found at Masses on Sundays and solemnities. This reading comes from a New Testament book that is not one of the four Gospels: one of the letters of the Apostles, the Acts of the Apostles, or the book of Revelation. Though usually selected independently of the First Reading and the Gospel, the passage is sometimes chosen in certain seasons of the Liturgical Year to correspond to the mystery being celebrated. The Christmas season, for example, fittingly features passages from the first letter of John, which focuses on the mystery of God's love made incarnate in Jesus Christ.

But throughout the year, it is fitting that we read these sacred texts at Mass, for many of them were originally intended to be read formally in a liturgical gathering of the Christian community. The book of Revelation, for example, opens with words that pronounce a blessing on the lector who reads the divine message and a blessing on the congregation that hears it: "Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear" (Revelation 1:3). Similarly, at the end of one of St. Paul's letters, he writes, "I adjure you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brethren" (1 Thessalonians 5:27). These New Testament writings reflect on the mystery of Jesus Christ, his saving work, and the meaning it has for our lives. They also draw out the practical applications of our life in Christ and exhort us ever more to "put on Christ" and turn away from sin.

They also put us in touch with the Church of the apostles. We see the struggles they faced living in a non-Christian culture. We see the challenges they experienced living in community as brothers and sisters in Christ. We see how they revered Baptism, the Eucharist, marriage, and the priesthood. We also see how they struggled with sin. We see what they believed about the things that matter most in life: God, love, truth, virtue, mercy, holiness, and heaven. Most of all, through these letters we encounter the faith of the apostles and how they were striving to conform their entire lives to the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

This is why the Second Reading is so important. We find our own story in their story. For the Church we encounter in the Second Reading is the same Church today. We are living in the same Church that was built on the apostles. We are living in the same story, with the same plot, the same challenges disciples have faced for two thousand years of Christian history, and the same hope that led them to persevere in faith. Through the Second Reading, God calls us to be faithful like those apostles and conform our lives ever more to Jesus Christ.

10. The Gospel

Suddenly, everything changes in the Liturgy. Notice how at this moment, for this particular reading at Mass—the reading of the Gospel—everything is different. The priests, deacons, and people show additional reverence for this reading that they did not show for the other readings from Scripture.

This extra reverence for the Gospel reading makes sense. Though all Scripture is inspired, the Gospels have a special place "because they are the principal witness for the life and teaching of the incarnate word, our Savior."[45] The Mass reflects this preeminence and shows special reverence for the Gospels in several ways.

Standing. The people stand to welcome the Lord Jesus, who is about to be proclaimed in the Gospel reading. Standing was the reverent posture of the assembled Jews when Ezra read from the book of the Law (see Nehemiah 8:5). We do not stand for the First Reading, the Responsorial Psalm, or the Second Reading. But now, as we prepare to hear Jesus speak to us in the Gospel, we rise to our feet to honor him. It is fitting that we welcome Jesus in this way, expressing our reverence and our readiness to listen to him.

Alleluia. The people say or sing "Alleluia," which is from the Hebrew expression of joy meaning, "Praise Yahweh!" or "Praise the LORD!"[46] It

is found at the beginning or end of many psalms (see Psalms 104–106, 111–113, 115–117, 146–150), and it was used by the angels in heaven to praise God for his work of salvation and to announce the coming of Christ to his people in the wedding supper of the Lamb (see Revelation 19:1-9). This joyful praise is a fitting way to welcome Jesus who will come to us in the Gospel.

Procession. During the Alleluia, the deacon or priest begins to process into the sanctuary, taking the book of the Gospels from the altar to the lectern where the reading will be proclaimed. Altar servers carrying candles and incense accompany the book of the Gospels in this procession, further underscoring the solemnity of what is about to happen. They did not do this for the First or Second Reading or for the Responsorial Psalm. But this procession leading up to this reading helps prepare us to encounter Christ in the Gospel.

Priest's Prayer. To prepare himself for the sacred task of reading the Gospel, the priest quietly prays at the altar: "Cleanse my heart and my lips, almighty God, that I may worthily proclaim your holy Gospel." (If a deacon reads the Gospel, the priest recites a similar prayer for him at the beginning of the procession.) This prayer recalls how the prophet Isaiah's lips needed to be purified before he proclaimed the Word of the Lord to Israel. When an angel touched his mouth with a burning coal, Isaiah's sin was forgiven, and he was then called to begin his prophetic ministry (see Isaiah 6:1-9). Again, no one does this for the other readings, but the priest or deacon recites this prayer before he reads the words of Our Lord in the Gospel.

Sign of the Cross. After another greeting dialogue ("The Lord be with you … And with your spirit"), the priest or deacon announces the Gospel reading ("A reading from the holy Gospel according to John"). He then traces the Sign of the Cross on his forehead, mouth, and breast and on the book. The people also make the three-fold Sign of the Cross over themselves, a ritual by which we consecrate our

thoughts, words, and actions to the Lord, asking that his Word in the Gospel be always on our minds, on our lips, and in our hearts.

Encountering Jesus

All this ceremony—standing, alleluia, procession, candles, incense, and the three-fold Sign of the Cross—shouts out to us that we are approaching a most sacred moment in the Mass. And that moment finally arrives when the Gospel is read. The Gospel accounts are not simply stories from the past, a distant record of memories about Jesus. Since Scripture is inspired by God, the Gospels consist of God's own words about Christ's life. As the Church has taught, "When the Sacred Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his word, proclaims the Gospel."[47]

The proclamation of the Gospel, therefore, makes Jesus' life present to us in a profound way. We are not spectators in the pew hearing about what Jesus once said and did a long time ago in Palestine. We are not listening to a news report about Jesus or to a lecture about a famous religious figure from the first century. Christ speaks personally to each one of us through the divinely inspired words in the Gospel.

For example, we do not merely hear *about* Jesus calling people to repent and follow him; we hear Jesus himself say *to us,* "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). We do not simply hear *about* Jesus forgiving a woman who was caught in adultery. It is as if we hear Jesus say *to us* in our sorrow over our own sins, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again" (John 8:11).

The Gospel is truly the high point of the Liturgy of the Word and deserves our special attention. We have seen how the Liturgy gives extra reverence in preparation for reading the Gospel. We should do the same in our personal lives. Taking time to pray with the Gospel outside of Mass is a wonderful way to allow the story of Jesus to shape the story of our own lives. We can do this in many ways: Show up to

Mass early and read the Gospel before Mass starts. Use the Gospel reading in our prayer time each day. Talk about the Gospel stories with friends and family. Have a family member read the Gospel for the day in the car on the way to Mass so that Jesus' words are already filling your soul. These are just a few ways we can prepare our hearts to encounter Jesus more profoundly in the Gospel at Mass.

But one of the most important ways to apply the Gospel (and all the readings from Scripture) to our lives is through the next part of the Liturgy: the homily.

11. The Homily

From the earliest days of Christian liturgy, the Word of God was not read on its own. It was accompanied by a homily that explained the meaning of the scriptural readings and drew out the application for people's lives. The word *homily* means "explanation" in Greek. In the early Church, the bishop typically was the one who celebrated Sunday Mass and gave the homily. From this primitive practice came the homilies of St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, St. John Chrysostom, and many other celebrated teachers of the early Church.

Yet the liturgical practice of explaining Scripture readings did not start with Christianity. It is rooted in ancient Jewish custom. In the book of Ezra, for example, the book of the Law was not merely read to the people. The Levites "helped the people to understand the law" (Nehemiah 8:7). They read from God's law "and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading" (Nehemiah 8:8).

The Jewish synagogues followed a similar practice. Readings from Scripture were accompanied by explanations by the rabbis. Jesus himself participated in this custom. He expounded on a reading from Scripture in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth (see Luke 4:18-30), and regularly taught in the synagogues throughout Galilee (see Mark 1:21; Luke 4:15).

The homily is crucial for the instruction of the faithful, so that they can understand the readings and apply them to their lives. So important is the homily for passing on the faith that the Second Vatican Council taught that the homily should hold "the foremost place" among the various forms of Christian instruction.[48]

The Painful Homily?

Though there are good preachers who deliver very good homilies, Pope Francis once noted that, unfortunately, some homilies can be painful—painful for the clergy preparing them and painful for the people listening![49] To encourage preachers to develop good homilies, he reminded them of a key principle from St. Thomas Aquinas: "communicating to others what one has contemplated."[50]

The homily should not be a long lecture or abstract teaching, but rather a heart-to-heart communication between the preacher and the people. Nor should the homily devolve into a form of entertainment—the Lord needs to be the center of attention in the homily, not the preacher. So the homily must flow from the preacher's own personal encounter with God in the sacred text. A key starting point for the preacher should be prayerfully considering how the text has challenged him personally, asking, for example,

> Lord, what does this text say *to me*? What is it about my life that you want to change by this text? What troubles me about this text? Why am I not interested in this? Or perhaps: What do I find pleasant in this text? What is it about this word that moves me? What attracts me? Why does it attract me?[51]

If the preacher is prayerfully talking to God about the biblical passage and allowing God to speak into his own life through these sacred words, then the homily will be more about God's Word radiating through the preacher's human words and touching the people's souls.

As Pope Francis explains, "The Sunday readings will resonate in all their brilliance in the hearts of the faithful if they have first done so in the heart of their pastor."[52] But if the homily does not flow from a prayerful encounter with God's Word, it will end up being more about the preacher—his insight, his interests, his "public speaking skills," his personality. Even worse, Pope Francis warned that the preacher will end up leading the people astray: "Yet if he does not take time to hear God's word with an open heart, if he does not allow it to touch his life, to challenge him, to impel him, and if he does not devote time to pray with that word, then he will indeed be a false prophet, a fraud, a shallow imposter."[53] But if a homily flows from the preacher's own personal encounter with Jesus in the sacred text, it is more likely to bless the faithful and stir in their hearts a spirit of ongoing conversion.

Who Gives the Homily?

Finally, the homily is to be given only by an ordained minister: a deacon, priest, or bishop. The same is true for the reading of the Gospel at Mass. While the other Scripture readings may be proclaimed by religious or laity, only a deacon, priest, or bishop is to read the Gospel. As a successor of the apostles, the bishop—and the priests and deacons with whom he shares his authority—have the responsibility to proclaim the Gospel and pass on all that Christ taught the apostles (see Matthew 28:18-20). Since the Gospels are the heart of the Bible, reserving the Gospel reading for ordained ministers reminds us how *all* the readings from Scripture to which the Gospels point are to be "read and understood under the authority of apostolic faith."[54]

This sheds light on why the homily, too, is to be delivered only by an ordained minister. A layperson or religious brother or sister certainly might have greater speaking abilities or more theological and spiritual points to offer on a given topic than a particular priest

or deacon. And there are many ways for those gifts to be shared with the community. But that is not the purpose of the homily at Mass. While a homily ideally would be thoughtful, clear, and engaging, it ultimately is not a matter of eloquence or insight. Driscoll notes that the homily being given by an ordained minister is meant to be a sign or "guarantee" that the preaching is passing on "the Church's apostolic faith and not merely the private thoughts and experiences of an individual."[55] Although God's people as a whole are to give witness to the faith of the Church, it is the particular responsibility of the bishop as a successor of the apostles to teach the apostolic faith. And his union with the pope and the other bishops throughout the world gives further visible, concrete witness to the apostolic faith. Since priests and deacons, by virtue of their ordination, share in this particular responsibility, they also may proclaim the Gospel and deliver the homily at Mass.

12. The Creed

Why do we recite the Creed each Sunday at Mass? Do we really need to repeat this same profession of faith week after week after week? Wouldn't an annual statement of faith be enough? It's not as if we're likely to shift our core beliefs about God dramatically in the matter of just seven days. So why do we need to come back every Sunday and say, "Yes, I still believe all this"?

One key word at the start of the Creed sheds light on the weekly Profession of Faith at Mass. That key word is "believe."

According to the *Catechism*, there are two aspects of belief. On one hand, belief is something *intellectual*. It is "a *free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed*" (CCC 150, original emphasis). This aspect is what is most obvious in the Creed. We affirm our belief that there is "one God," that Jesus is "the Only Begotten Son of God" who died and rose again on the third day. We also believe in "the Holy Spirit" and "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church."

On the other hand, belief also involves a personal entrusting of ourselves to God. It is "a personal adherence … to God" (CCC 150). One Hebrew word for belief (*'aman*), from which we derive the word "Amen," expresses this point beautifully. The word can literally mean to take one's stand on something else.[56] In other words, from the biblical perspective, belief in God does not simply express an intellectual conviction that God exists. It

also entails a personal entrusting of one's entire life to God. It expresses how God is truly the foundation for my life.

Marriage and a Math Equation

The difference between these two aspects of faith—the personal entrusting and the intellectual—is like the difference between marriage and a math equation. If I say, "I believe 2 + 2 = 4," I am affirming that I think this statement is true. However, when I say to my wife, "Beth, I believe in you," I am not merely affirming my belief that she exists. I am saying "I believe in you … I entrust myself to you … I give my life to you."

Similarly, when we say in the Creed "I believe in one God," we are expressing something quite personal. More than simply affirming that God exists—though we certainly do that, too—we are also saying that we entrust our entire lives to the One who makes all the difference for us. This is one reason why we recite the Creed every Sunday at Mass. Just as married couples may affirm their trust and commitment to each other regularly and tell each other over and over again, "I love you," so do we in the Creed renew our commitment to the Lord each week, lovingly telling him over and over again that we surrender ourselves to him, that we want him to guide us, and that we want him alone to be the foundation of our lives—that we "believe" in him.

With this biblical sense of belief in mind, we can clearly see that the Creed is not merely a list of doctrines on a sheet of paper that need to be checked off. The "I believe …" in the Creed invites us to surrender ever more of our lives to God each week. It challenges us to ask, "Who is really at the center of my life? In whom or in what do I really place my trust?" We can ask ourselves, "Do I truly seek *God's* will for my life? Or am I seeking *my* will first, running more after my own desires, dreams, and plans?" "Do I truly surrender my life to the Lord? Or are there areas of my life that are not consistent with the way of Jesus?"

"Do I trust my cares to his providential care? Or am I afraid to give up control and rely more on God?"

Though none of us has perfect faith, when we recite the Creed, we express our desire to grow in our friendship with God—to entrust *more* of our lives to him. To put our total trust in anything or anyone else—our abilities, our plans, our possessions, a career, a politician, a friend—would be foolish and end in disappointment. Only God is worthy of our total trust. The *Catechism* makes this point: "As personal adherence to God and assent to his truth, Christian faith differs from our faith in any human person. It is right and just to entrust oneself wholly to God and to believe absolutely what he says. It would be futile and false to place such faith in a creature" (CCC 150).

The Origins of the Creed

The Creed is a summary statement of the faith used in the early Church as a rule or standard for Christian belief. Originally part of the rite of Baptism for catechumens to profess the faith of the Church, the creeds later served as a means for ensuring right doctrine and curbing heresy.

But since the Creed is not itself from Scripture, one might wonder, "Why is this non-biblical text included in the Liturgy of the Word?" In response, we should note that the Creed summarizes the story of Scripture. Moving from creation to Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection, the sending of the Holy Spirit, the era of the Church, and finally Christ's second coming at the end of time, the Creed carries us through the entire story of salvation history. In one short statement of faith, we draw out the narrative thread from Genesis to the book of Revelation: creation, fall, redemption. And we do so with a keen eye to the three divine Persons who are the principal actors in this drama: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As one theologian has commented, "What the Scriptures say at length, the Creed says briefly."[57]

The Old Testament "Creed"

The practice of prayerfully reciting a creed has deep biblical roots. Ancient Israel was called to profess their faith in a creedal statement known as the *Shema*, the Hebrew word for "hear," which represents the first word of this prayer: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). These sacred words were to be constantly on the people's hearts, taught to their children, and recited regularly throughout the day: in the morning when they wake, at night when they fall asleep, when in their homes, when they go out on the streets (see Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

The *Shema* told a very different kind of story about the world than what was commonly known by the peoples surrounding Israel. Most ancient Near Eastern peoples held a polytheistic worldview: they believed there were many gods, and each tribe or nation had its own set of deities whom they needed to appease and keep happy. In this perspective, religion was typically tribal, ethnic, or national. In the highly polytheistic environment surrounding Israel, the words "The LORD our God is *one* LORD" were a bold, countercultural expression of Israel's monotheistic belief. But for the ancient Jews, this was not simply an abstract view about how many deities exist (only one). Jewish monotheism had a subversive edge. It proclaimed not only that there was one God but that this one God was in a special covenant with Israel. In other words, *Israel's* God was not merely one god among the many deities in the world. Israel's God was the one, true God over all the nations. Accordingly, Jewish monotheism unmasked the deities of the Egyptians, Canaanites, and Babylonians, for example, and showed them to be what they truly are: false gods, not deities at all! *Israel's* God was the only God.

We must see the Creed we recite at Mass as our *Shema*. Like the *Shema* of old, our creed has a countercultural message today. It tells a very different kind of story about life than what is commonly taught in the

modern, secular world. Ours is an era of relativism—the view that there is no moral or religious truth, no right or wrong, no truth that's true for everyone. The relativistic worldview claims it does not matter what one believes about God or what one chooses to do with one's life. Since life has no real meaning, everyone should be free to make up their own moral and religious values and do whatever they want with their lives.

The Cosmic Battle

In this "anything goes" culture, the Creed grounds us in reality and reminds us that our beliefs and choices do matter. Progressing from Creation to the redemptive work of Christ and the sanctifying mission of the Church today, the Creed presumes a narrative framework for human history. In other words, the Creed assumes that there is a plot to life, and that we are here for a reason. It proclaims that the universe is not here by random chance but was brought into existence by the one true God, "the maker of heaven and earth," and is moving in a certain direction according to God's plan. The Creed also presumes that this divine plan was fully revealed in God's Son, the "one Lord Jesus Christ" who "became man" to show us the pathway to happiness and eternal life.

The Creed also notes how Jesus came "for us men and for our salvation" and to bring "forgiveness of sins." This admission that we need to be saved and forgiven tells us that something went terribly wrong with our situation before the coming of Christ. It points to the original rebellion against God by Satan and his minions and to how they led Adam and Eve in the Garden and the rest of the human family to participate in that rebellion by falling into sin. Thus, the story of the Creed implicitly tells of an intense conflict that has been raging since the beginning of time. It is a battle between good and evil, between God and the serpent (see Genesis 3:15; Revelation 12:1-9), between what St. Augustine called "the City of God" and "the City of Man" and what John Paul II called the "civilization of love" and the "culture of death."

Thus, the Creed reminds us that our little lives are caught up into this much larger story. And we each have a significant role to play in this drama. The question is, How well will I play my part? The Creed will not let us persist in the modern relativistic myth that says there is no truth, there are no right or wrong choices, it doesn't matter what we believe or what we do with our lives, and everyone can make up their own truth. The Creed reminds us that at the end of our lives we will stand before the Lord Jesus Christ, who "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." And at that moment, all our life's choices will be weighed in a balance before the Divine Judge, and we will receive our just reward or punishment for how we lived.

So the Creed will not let us be lukewarm bystanders in this cosmic struggle. It challenges us to pick what side of the conflict we will fight for. Will we follow the prince of this world who wants us to think there is no right or wrong? Or will we follow the King of heaven and earth who leads us to happiness in his everlasting kingdom? When we profess our faith at Mass in the Creed, we publicly stand before the whole congregation and almighty God and plant the flag with Jesus. We solemnly declare that we will strive not to live like the rest of the world but to give our wholehearted allegiance to the Lord: "I believe in one God …"

"Consubstantial with the Father"

In closing, let us reflect on a few key words in the Creed we recite at Mass. First, the word "I." After the Second Vatican Council, until 2011, English translations of the Mass used the plural "*We* believe" for the Creed. But the singular "I" makes the Creed more personal and challenges each individual to interiorize the faith. As the *Catechism* explains, "I believe" expresses "the faith of the Church professed personally by each believer" (CCC 167). This is what we do when we renew our baptismal promises at a baptism or at Easter. Each individual answers for himself or herself. The bishop, priest, or deacon says, "Do you reject Satan?" And we each respond, "I do."

Second, we affirm that God is the maker "of all things visible and invisible," which points to God creating not just the visible world—the physical universe—but also spiritual beings, the angels, whose beauty, strength, power, and majesty far exceed the most spectacular mountains and valleys, seas and oceans, constellations and supernovas. It also reflects the language of St. Paul, who referred to the creation of all things "in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible" (Colossians 1:16).

Third, let us consider some of the technical, Christological language found in the Creed, such as Jesus being "consubstantial with the Father." What does *consubstantial* mean? This reflects the theological language of the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325, which clarified that the Son was "of the same substance" (in Greek, *homoousios*) as the Father and condemned the teaching of a man named Arius. He taught that Jesus "came to be from things that were not" and that he was "from another substance" than that of the Father (see CCC 465). Though the transliteration "consubstantial" might not roll off the tongue easily for some modern men and women, the use of this precise term in the Creed provides an opportunity for us to reflect more on the divine nature of Christ and the Trinity.

Another important theological term refers to Jesus' unique conception. We speak of the Son of God being "incarnate of the Virgin Mary." The term "incarnate" refers to "the fact that the Son of God assumed a human nature in order to accomplish our salvation in it" (CCC 461). In the words of John's Gospel, "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14). Accordingly, we say that the Son "by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man." Indeed, the Son of God was not just *born* of the Virgin Mary. The Eternal Son of God who is of the same substance as the Father actually took on human flesh! In awe over this mystery of God become man in Mary's womb, we bow at this moment in the Creed as we speak these ineffable words.

13. The Prayer of the Faithful

The Liturgy of the Word culminates in what is known as the Prayer of the Faithful.

This is one of the most ancient parts of the Mass, already attested to by St. Justin Martyr in AD 155. St. Justin wrote to the Roman emperor explaining what Christians did at Mass, giving an outline of the prayers and rituals. In this letter, he described the intercessory prayers offered after the readings from Scripture and the homily: "Then we all rise together and offer prayers for ourselves … and for all others, wherever they may be, so that we may be found righteous by our life and actions, and faithful to the commandments, so as to obtain eternal salvation."[58]

This, of course, is quite similar to the Prayer of the Faithful we have in the Mass today—intercessory prayers that stand in a tradition that goes back at least to Justin Martyr's time in the second century.

But the practice of intercessory prayer goes back even further in Christian history. When Peter was imprisoned by Herod, the church in Jerusalem offered up "earnest prayer for him," and that night an angel came to release him from his chains (Acts 12:1-7). When St. Paul gave instructions to his disciple Timothy, he told him to intercede for all people: "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high

positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:1-4). Paul himself prayed constantly for the needs of his communities (see 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3) and pleaded with them to pray for his ministry (see 2 Corinthians 1:11). With this strong call for intercessory prayer in the New Testament, it is fitting that general intercessions formally found a home in the Mass from the earliest centuries of Christianity.

Your Priestly Intercession

These general intercessions at Mass represent a significant moment for the faithful. For in these intercessions, the faithful exercise "their baptismal Priesthood."[59] That all of God's people—ordained priests, religious, and laity—are given a priestly role is well attested in Scripture. We are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9), for Christ has made us "a kingdom [of] priests" (Revelation 1:5-6).

One way our priestly office is exercised in the Mass is in the prayers of the faithful, whereby we participate in Christ's priestly prayer for the entire human family. Jesus poured out his heart in loving intercession for the whole world (see John 17). He is able to save others "who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). We participate in Christ's intercession in a particular way at this moment of the Liturgy.

The *Catechism* notes that intercessory prayer is "characteristic of a heart attuned to God's mercy" (CCC 2635). If we are truly in tune with God's heart, we will naturally want to pray for others. The culmination of the Liturgy of the Word is a fitting time to offer up these intercessions. Up to this point in the Mass, the faithful have heard the Word of the Lord proclaimed in Scripture, expounded upon in the homily, and summed up in the Creed. Now, having been

formed in God's Word, the faithful respond with the heart and mind of Jesus by praying for the needs of the Church and the world. Since the prayers are meant to be universal in scope—for those in authority, for those experiencing various needs and sufferings, and for the salvation of all—the intercessions train us to look not only after our own interests "but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4).