

The Mass

The Parts of the Mass – Part 4 (continued) – The Liturgy of the Word

A. The Cycle of Readings

The idea of having a cycle of readings from Scripture for Mass is rooted in ancient Jewish practice. In the first century, writings from the Law and the Prophets were regularly read during synagogue worship. 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 the practice in Jesus' day. Some of the rabbinic evidence even points to the possible use of a three year cycle of readings.

Similarly, the selections from Scripture read at our Sunday Masses 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 Mass. These readings aren't chosen based on the Priest or congregations personal 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.

B. 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' resurrection triumph 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.

All throughout the year, the Church also draws our attention to the various mysteries of faith. The feast of Corpus Christi, 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 and the saints most often commemorated in the Liturgical Year, as we celebrate her Immaculate Conception, her Nativity, her Assumption, and other aspects of her life and role in God's saving plan.

Journeying through the Church's Year annually throughout one's life also helps us to appreciate Christ and his work of salvation all the more. It is similar to what happens when families celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and other important dates and events. As the Family of God, the Church fittingly marks off special days to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and other key aspects of God's work of salvation. But in this supernatural family, it is Christ Himself who is present in the various yearly celebrations.

As Pope Pius XII taught:

“Hence, 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.”

(Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, no. 165)

