

THE GATES OF HEAVEN ARE LIGHTLY LOCKED: PART IV  
THE LITURGY OF THE WORD AND THE READINGS FROM SCRIPTURE

I. The Liturgy of the Word (which goes from the first reading through the general intercessions) and the Liturgy of the Eucharist (which goes from the preparation of the altar and the presentation of the gifts through the distribution of Holy Communion and the prayer after Communion) form one act of worship. Vatican II Council, Sacrosanctum Concilium 56. As the proclaimed and written words of God prepared for the coming of Christ, the written word of God prepares the way at the Mass for the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. See General Instructions to the Roman Missal 55; Is. 40:3-5; Heb. 1:1-2; Luke 4:16-22, 24::13-35; John 1:19-34.

A. The center of the Liturgy of the Word is the readings from Scripture. The homily explains the readings, while, the Creed and the prayers of the faithful express the response of the congregation to these words of God.

B. The idea of beginning prayers with the word of God in a ancient one and fulfills the natural desire for increased understanding to enter more deeply into the mystery of God.

1. The tradition of listening to readings from Scripture and a reflection on the word of God to structure part of our prayer together goes back to the ancient Jewish synagogue liturgies. See, e.g., Luke 4:14-28; Acts 13:13-42. Likewise at Pentecost, St. Peter quoted Scripture (especially the prophets Isaiah and Joel) and then applied these words to the events at hand. See Acts 2:14-41.

2. Likewise, as recounted in the Book of Dueteronomy, just before the Chosen People entered the Promised Land, Moses recounted God's saving actions from the past and gave the people once again the law for the future.

3. Likewise, at the Last Supper, Jesus offered gave His Apostles instructions before instituting the Eucharist and offering His high priestly prayer for them. See John 14-17.

4. Continuing this tradition of having readings from Scriptures in preparation for the Eucharist, early Christians listed to "the memoirs of the apostles and the writing of the prophets" (what we now call the New and Old Testaments), listened to a sermon at the beginning of their celebration of the Mass. St. Justin the Martyr First Apology 65-67, cited in the Catechism of the Catholic Church 1345.

C. The Creed (said on Sundays and Solemnities) and the prayers of the faithful then complete the Liturgy of the Word with an affirmation of our faith.

1. Once again, Jewish liturgies always included prayers for the people; and Jesus gave His high priestly prayer for the Church at the end of His sermon at the last Supper. See 2 Kings 8; Nehemiah 9:32-37; John 17. Likewise, as St. Justin the Martyr pointed out, the early Christians would offer intercessions at Mass after the readings and the exhortation by the presiding cleric.

2. Through the Creed the congregation once again reaffirms our commitment to the timeless faith. The Creed, which was developed in the first through fifth centuries,

was added later to the Mass (in the 11<sup>th</sup> century in the Roman tradition) to reaffirm the common faith of the community. But this notion of worshipping with the common faith goes right back to early days. See, e.g., John 17:20-23; 1 Cor. 2:1-11; Gal. 1:8-9; Eph. 4:1-6; 2 Peter 2.

II. The readings follow a definite pattern that tries to open the fullness of revelation to the people, fulfilling the call of the Vatican II Council that “the treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare might be provided for the faithful.” See Sacrosanctum Concilium 51.

A. On a Sunday Mass or a solemnity, there is a reading from the Old Testament, a responsorial Psalm and a “reading from the Apostles,” i.e. the New Testament. Then the Gospel brings the Liturgy of the Word to its high point. During weekday Masses, there is either a reading from the Old Testament or a reading from the Apostles. Ritual Masses (e.g., weddings, funerals, Confirmation Masses) may have either arrangement.

- During the Easter Season (i.e. from Easter to Pentecost), there is a reading from the Acts of the Apostles and a reading from the one of the epistles of the New Testament on Sundays.

- The introduction to the Lectionary refers to a “reading from the Apostles” rather than a reading from the New Testament generally, both to distinguish the second reading from the Gospel reading (which has pride of place) and to emphasize the point that all of the New Testament books must at least have had an association with the Apostles. See Vatican II Council, Dei Verbum 20.

B. Meditative silence is also an important part of the liturgy of the Word. See General Instructions 56. Thus, for example, there is preferably a short time of silence before the readings, between them, and after the homily. The idea is that there should be time both to prepare for, and to reflect upon, the word of God. See Zech. 2:17; Rev. 8:1. It is also a time to invoke the Holy Spirit to bring us to a fuller understanding of the words of Scripture. See Introduction to the Lectionary 9, 28; cf. John 14:25-26, 16:12-16.

C. The readings are structured to give a comprehensive overview of Sacred Scripture in an orderly way.

1. All of the books of the Bible except Obadiah are included in the regular Sunday or weekday Masses sometime during the two or three year cycles.

2. The Old Testament reading and the Responsorial Psalm are generally connected to the theme of the Gospels. The second reading is often connected as well, but for the sake of covering the books of the New Testament in a comprehensive and orderly fashion, that reading sometimes has less of a relationship to the others.

D. There is a three year cycle for readings for Sunday and a two year cycle for weekday Masses.

1. In general, the Sunday readings are divided into three years, years A, B, and C. Year A emphasizes the Gospel according to Matthew, year B the Gospel according to Mark, and year C the Gospel according to Luke. Readings from the Gospel according to John are placed in special locations during the year, especially during

the seasons of Christmas, Lent, and the beginning of Ordinary Time. There are also more readings from the Gospel according to John during year B due to the brevity of the Gospel according to Mark.

2. The weekday readings are divided into years 1 and 2. For both years, the Gospel readings are generally the same. The first reading and responsorial psalm change, and are designed to support the Gospel reading and to give a systematic presentation of each book.

E. During Advent, the readings focus on the preparation for the coming of Christ before He was born and our preparation for the return of Christ.

1. Thus, the Gospel readings for Sundays focus on preparing for the end of human time on the First Sunday, and then on the proclamations of John the Baptist, and then the preparation for Jesus's birth.

2. The Old Testament readings for Sundays during Lent generally focus on the prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah.

3. The New Testament readings are not in as continuous a fashion as they are during Ordinary Time. They are more designed to support the Gospel message, especially with regard to carrying out the grace given through Christ and being prepared to meet Him again.

4. The weekday readings begin with a focus on the fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah, then continue onto the events surrounding the birth and public witness of John the Baptist, and finally in the last week onto the events preceding the birth of Jesus.

F. For the Christmas season, the Old Testament readings emphasize the prophecies about the Messiah, while the Gospel readings proceed from the infancy narratives to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry as described in the first chapter of John. The first three days after Christmas are the feasts of St. Stephen, St. John the Apostle and the Holy Innocents, reflecting both the sufferings of the innocent because of the hostility of the world and the witness of St. John to the Word becoming flesh. On a similar note, the weekday first readings are often from the First Letter of John, which very much emphasizes the true humanity and divinity of Jesus. When there is not a special feast day, the Gospel readings deal with the childhood of Jesus, Jesus's first public appearances, and other events early on in Jesus' public ministry.

G. During Lent, the readings focus on the overcoming of sin and transformation into the glory of God.

1. Thus, the Gospel reading for the first two Sundays deal with the temptation of Jesus in the desert and His Transfiguration.

2. The next three readings during Year A (which can also be used in any year) deal with the Samaritan woman at the well, the cure of a man born blind (which is a symbol of the light of truth Jesus brings), and the raising of Lazarus. They are meant

to focus on the triumph over the darkness of sin, of ignorance, and of death. The Gospel readings that can be used on those Sundays for years B and C deal with Jesus' prediction of His Crucifixion, death, and resurrection and with conversions.

3. The Old Testament readings for Sundays during Lent provide an overview of the history of salvation.

4. The daily readings for Lent cover the themes of repentance, conversion, and the need to join in the sufferings of Christ so as to share in His glory.

5. During Holy Week, the Gospel readings describe the events immediately leading up to Jesus' death and resurrection.

H. The readings for the Easter season reflect the Resurrection of Jesus, the Last Supper, and the growth of the Church at the beginning and until the end of time.

1. There can be up to seven readings before the Gospel at the Easter Vigil, including two from the New Testament that proclaim the Resurrection; there must be at least three, divided by Responsorial Psalms. The Gospel Readings are, of course, about resurrection appearances, with the Gospel featured in each year used for the Easter Vigil, and the Gospel according to John as the first option for Easter day.

2. The Gospel readings for the rest of the Easter season then describe the Resurrection appearances of Jesus and then the Last Supper discourse of Jesus, as described in the Gospel according to John. The Acts of the Apostles describes the growth of the Church, while the second reading is from either the first letter of Peter, the first letter of John, or the Book of Revelation for years A, B, and C respectively. Those letters tend to deal with our rightful conduct in living the life of Christ, Jesus as our Advocate and guide, and the triumphant Christ leading His faithful from heaven.

3. The weekdays Gospel readings generally describe the Resurrection appearances or the Last Supper discourses of Jesus as described by the Gospel according to John.

I. During Ordinary Time, the readings begin with the Baptism of the Lord. The second Sunday focuses the beginning of Jesus' public ministry as described in the Gospel according to John. The Gospel readings then proceed through the synoptic Gospel for the year. However, for weeks 16 to 20 in year B, the bread of life discourse in chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John, which focuses on the Eucharist, replaces the Gospel according to Mark.

1. The Old Testament readings for Sunday generally provide background for the Gospel reading. The second readings provide the highlights in a semi-continuous fashion from the letters of St. Paul and St. James. Each year begins with a reading from First Corinthians, which deals for the most part with the governance of the Church and Christian morals. Years A and C end with readings from First and Second Thessalonians, which give teachings regarding the resurrection of the dead, individual and together at the end of all things on earth. Year B ends with readings from the Letter to the Hebrews chapters 1-10, which described the high and eternal

priesthood of Jesus.

2. The Gospel readings for the weekdays in ordinary time proceeds first through the Gospel according to Mark, then through the Gospel according to Matthew, then through the Gospel according to Luke. The first readings are from a broad range of books in the Old and New Testaments.

- At the end of ordinary time, the readings from the Gospel according to Luke describe the eschatological discourse that Jesus gave near the end of His public ministry. See Luke 19:41-21:36. The first readings are either from the Books of Maccabees about the resurrection of the dead (for Year 1) or from the Book of Revelation (for Year 2.)

J. There are also readings for solemnities, feast days, and memorials, as well as ritual Masses, such as those for weddings and funerals. On solemnities and feast days, the readings for the day are obligatory/ For memorial days, there is usually an option about whether to use the regular readings for that day of the week, or the readings for the memorials. However, for the sake of preserving the continuity of the readings from Scripture during a week, the priest generally selects the regular weekday readings for a memorial. Introduction to the Lectionary 83. For sacramental Masses, the readings specific to that sacrament are generally preferred.

III. The readings begin and end with phrases that proclaim their value and application to our lives.

A. Thus, when beginning the first (and when used) second reading, the lector begins, “a reading from the Gospel according to. . . .”

- Part of the idea is that the passage read is a part of a larger writing and should be understood in its context. The Bible is a combination of 73 different documents, all inspired by the same Holy Spirit, and thus should be seen as a whole. See Vatican II Council, Dei Verbum (1965) 10.

B. The lector then concludes the reading with “The word of the Lord.” The idea is that these readings are inspired by God and, therefore, should have an impact upon one’s life. See, e.g., Jer. 1:1-13; Is 55:10-11; Wis. 18:14-15; Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12; 1 John 1:1-4. Jesus Himself is the perfect Word of God. See, e.g., John 1:1-2; Rev. 19:11-16 And thus the congregation responds by thanking God for the gift of His word.

C. The responsorial psalms are ideally sung, for they come from the Book of Psalms, which was a hymnbook of the ancient Jews. See Introduction to the Lectionary 20-21. It is noteworthy that, as part of the Jewish worship, Jesus Himself would have prayed these very hymns during His earthly life. We are thus praying with Jesus and the entire Church throughout history when we pray the Psalms together.

D. If a priest is proclaiming the Gospel, he begins by praying in a quiet voice, “Cleanse my heart and my lips, Almighty God, that I may worthily proclaim Your Gospel.” Similarly, if a deacon is proclaiming the Gospel, the priest gives him the blessing “May the Lord be in your heart and on your lips that you may worthily proclaim His gospel in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” In both cases, the idea is to purify the cleric so that

he may more worthily deal in the sacred word of God, and that his life may be a better witness to the Gospel. See, e.g., Isaiah 6:7; Zech. 3.

E. Before the Gospel reading, the “Alleluia” verse may be sung. This verse begins with the Alleluia, then quotes from Scripture, then repeats “Alleluia.” Alleluia is a term of joyous praise in the presence of God. See, e.g., Ps. 150:1, 6; Rev. 19:1-6. Due to the penitential nature of Lent, the word “Alleluia” is replaced by one of four acclamations, e.g., “Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ, king of endless glory.”

F. The priest or deacon can incense the Book of the Gospels as well, with the incense here representing the cloud of mystery that God’s presence and word is shining through. See, e.g., Ex. 41:34-38; 1 Kings 8:10; Dan. 7:13; Matt. 17:1-8; Rev. 1:7 (representing the clouds around the divine presence at the Tent of Meeting, the Temple, the Transfiguration, and in the return of the Son of Man in glory.) He may also bring the Book of the Gospels from the altar to the lectern with candles at his side, reflecting the light of truth that it is shining on into the world, as well as the joyful acceptance of God’s word. See Is. 9:1; Matt. 4:15-16, 5:15-16; John 1:9, 8:12; Rev. 1:12-13, 20.

G. The priest or deacon then gives a greeting that reflects the glory of the Gospel.

1. As with the beginning of Mass, he begins with, “The Lord be with you,” reflecting among other things, the angel announcing the Gospel to Mary when Jesus first came to earth 2000 years ago. As with the beginning of Mass, the congregation then responds, “and also with your spirit.” The congregation is once again asking God to be with the priest in the depths of his soul and with the spirit of ordination.

2. The priest or deacon then begins the Gospel reading with the words, “A reading from the Holy Gospel according to . . .” The people respond by asking that the Gospel proclamation give glory to God.

3. The priest or deacon emphasizes the centrality of the Gospel message again by concluding with the proclamation, “The Gospel of the Lord.” And the people respond, “Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ.” Once again there is a desire that the proclamation and listening of the Gospel give praise to God.

4. The term “gospel” means the saving message of Jesus Christ. The term came from the Greek term “evangelion,” meaning “good news.” This term was used in the Septuigint (the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures used by the evangelists) primarily for good news about victory in battle, either past or future. See, e.g., 1 Sam. 18:19; 2 Kings 7:9; Isaiah 40:9, 52:7. In the New Testament, the term begins the Gospel according to Mark, as well as the message of John the Baptist. See Mark 1:1, 14; see also Matt. 4:23, 9:35; Luke 4:18, 7:22. The New Testament uses the term “gospel” frequently, especially used in Acts (16 times) and the letters of St. Paul (59 times) to mean the universal message of salvation through Jesus. See, e.g., Acts 5:42, 11:20; 14:7; Rom. 2:16, 1 Cor. 15:1, 2 Cor. 4:3. There is one deep Gospel message, proclaimed in different ways, particularly through the inspiration given to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.