

Scripture, Liturgy and the Presence of Christ

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Since the Second Vatican Council, contemporary liturgical studies have drawn heavily on the conclusions of modern biblical scholars to present a particular understanding of the relationship between the various constituent elements of our Catholic liturgy. It is therefore understandable that, once again, Catholics find themselves accused by non-Catholics of not knowing Scripture. It is certainly true that Scripture occupies a central place in our understanding of the liturgy, just as it does in the life of the Church: it is indeed in the sacred liturgy that the majority of Catholics most clearly discover the two sources of divine revelation (*scriptura and traditio*) and most frequently draw upon them.² There is something direct and, at the same time, vital in God's self-revelation in the Word that is Holy Scripture, which the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses as follows: 'Through all the words of Holy Scripture, God speaks but a single Word, his one and only Word, in whom He reveals Himself in His entirety.'³

One need only glance briefly at the texts of the Missal to realise that Holy Scripture is, by far, the principal source of liturgical texts: the *Preparatory Prayers* at the foot of the altar, the *Introit*, the *Epistle*, the *Gradual*, the *Alleluia* (or the *Tract*), the *Gospels*, the *Offertory* verses, the *Lavabo* prayers, the *Lord's Prayer* and the Communion verses are all, without exception (apart from the doxologies), texts from Scripture; furthermore, the *Gloria*, the *Sanctus* and the *Agnus Dei* are clearly inspired by Scripture.

Given the eminently spiritual nature of the liturgical texts of the Missal, it is hardly surprising that the Fathers of the early Church frequently speak of the reverence due to Holy Scripture, which is the Word of God, and, in this sense, the holy liturgy of the Church is the means by which the content of divine Revelation is proclaimed.⁴ This is, moreover, what Origen expresses when he reminds us that this reverence is analogous to that which is

¹ Lecture delivered at the 6th CIEL symposium, in Versailles, on Thursday 9 November 2000.

² *Dei Verbum*, 10.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 102 (cf. Heb 1:1–3). In the Mass, the holy humanity of Christ, made present to us in the sacrament of His Body and Blood, is also highlighted in the humanity of the Word of God: 'For just as the words of God, passing through human languages, have taken on the likeness of human speech, so too the Word of the eternal Father, having taken on the frailty of our flesh, became like men' (*Dei Verbum*, 13).

⁴ 'The mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit, which, in the sacramental liturgy of the Church, proclaims, actualises and communicates the mystery of salvation, continues in the heart that prays' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2655).

due to the Blessed Sacrament. It states that, naturally, the faithful will take great care, when receiving Holy Communion, to ensure that no particle of the Holy Eucharist falls to the ground: for it would indeed be a culpable act of impiety for them to allow even the smallest part to be lost. A *similar* reverence ought to be shown to the Holy Word of God, which is not merely a constituent element of a rite preparatory to the consecration and distribution of Holy Communion, but is an integral part of our celebration of the saving mystery of Christ in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.⁵

I would like to emphasise at this point that I do not subscribe to any of the erroneous views which hold that, in any way, Christ's presence in Scripture is identical to His presence in the consecrated elements of the Holy Eucharist. The Church has always affirmed, fundamentally and unambiguously, that in the consecrated elements Christ is present *modo singulari*,⁶—a mode of presence which, to use an expression found in *Lumen Gentium*, is marked by 'an essential difference and not merely one of degree'.⁷ That said, this fundamental reverence for the Word of God is clearly evident in certain features of the liturgy which we know to be of very ancient origin, for example the marks of respect accorded to *the Gospel book* during High Mass and pontifical Masses: the Gospel book is solemnly carried in procession with candles and incense; we stand whilst the Gospel is being sung; we make the sign of the cross during the introductory dialogue; and the priest incenses it after the Gospel has been sung.⁸ These are all expressions of an instinctive understanding of the theological truth set out in the *Constitution on Divine Revelation*, which points out that, when the Holy Scriptures are used in the Church's liturgy, it is Christ who speaks, and it can be said that Christ is present to us in the Scriptures.⁹

Having thus established that Scripture constitutes an essential component of the liturgy as a whole, we shall now focus our attention on the relationship

⁵ Cf. Origen: **Homiliae in Exodum**, XIII, 3.

⁶ Sacred Congregation of Rites: *Eucharisticum mysterium* (1967), 55: 'In the celebration of the Mass, the principal modes of Christ's presence in His Church are progressively revealed to us. First and foremost, Christ is present in the assembly of the faithful gathered in His name; next, in His Word, when the Scriptures are read and explained; in the person of the minister; and finally, and in a unique way (*modo singulari*), under the species of the Eucharist.'

⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, 10.

⁸ These ceremonies are accorded even greater importance in certain non-Roman rites and in all the Eastern rites, where the priest blesses the faithful with the Gospel book after the Gospel has been sung.

⁹ *Dei Verbum*, 3.

There is a particular distinction between the *Mass of the Catechumens* and the *Mass of the Faithful*; we shall see that it is then possible to begin to fully appreciate the immense importance of this essential characteristic of the Eucharistic liturgy of the Catholic Church. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* reminds us that these two elements are not distinct but form ‘a single act of worship’, which consists of two parts ‘closely united with one another’. ¹⁰

The Council of Trent provided us with the formulations that most clearly express the sacrificial nature of the Mass, but it should be noted that, in antiquity, the Mass was the only form of worship that combined a liturgy of the Word with the sacrificial liturgy that is the Eucharist. In the ancient pagan religions, this association between *instruction* and *sacrifice* is not found: the temples were accessible only to those who offered sacrifices. In the Jewish Temple, the inner courtyard was reserved for the various sacrificial rites celebrated there; the reading and teaching of the Torah took place solely in the outer courtyards of the Temple and in the synagogues. From the earliest times, the influences of the Temple and the synagogue converged in a sacrificial liturgy thoroughly imbued with the presence of Holy Scripture.

The Liturgy of the Word, which forms an integral part of the Mass of the Catechumens, has its origins in the service celebrated on the morning of the Sabbath in the synagogue. This service invariably followed the pattern set out below: a first reading from the Torah, a psalm, a reading from *the Nevi'im* (Prophets), followed by a homiletic explanation of the readings from the *sidrah* (the passage read), and finally concluding prayers. Whilst the resemblance to our pre-Mass service is clear, it is not entirely clear, however, how, historically, this particular liturgical element was introduced into the celebration of Mass. On this point (as on many others relating to the early history of the development of the liturgy of the Mass), scholars are deeply divided. However, broadly speaking, three different viewpoints can be identified to explain this inclusion.

- The scriptural liturgy of the synagogue was adopted by the Church in the celebration of Mass at the beginning of the 2nd century as a form of compensation following the expulsion of Christians from the synagogues and their separation from the liturgical life of the Jewish community. The New Testament attests that Christians of Jewish origin regularly attended instruction services in the Temple in Jerusalem and in local synagogues, to which they

¹⁰ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 56.

.¹¹ It would appear that the Gentile communities abandoned synagogue worship well before the end of the first century, although Christians of Jewish origin continued this practice for some time afterwards.

- The second view (which I share) is that the scriptural element of the liturgy was an integral part of the Mass from the very beginning. If we consider that Our Lord's discourse, preserved for us in John 13–17, was in fact delivered during the Last Supper, the liturgical precedent provided by this institution seems evident. We also know (Acts 20:7–11) that Paul spoke at length during the Eucharistic celebration that took place at Troas, which confirms that, in their practice, the Apostles appear to have followed the precedent established by the Lord.
- The third theory, favoured by scholars of a school that, if not strictly modernist, is at least more modern, is that, originally, in the early Church, the scriptural liturgy was distinct from the celebration of the Eucharistic agape. However, against this view, we have St Paul's instruction (Col 4:16 and 1 Thess 5:27) requesting that his epistles be read in the assembly; therefore, one cannot reasonably assume that, for this purpose, the most appropriate assembly was that gathered for the celebration of Mass. However, what might be retained from this suggestion is the idea that the earliest form of the Gospels – the Acts of the Apostles – took the form of a series of readings intended to be read during Mass.¹²

In the post-apostolic era, Saint Justin, writing around 150, tells us that the customary practice of the Church at that time was that, on Sunday mornings, the Liturgy of the Word (Mass of the Catechumens) was followed by the Liturgy of the Eucharist (Mass of the Faithful). It seems reasonable to interpret Saint Justin's description of the Mass in his time – which is also that of the Mass we still celebrate today – as meaning that these two elements were joined together and constituted a single celebration.

In Saint Justin's *First Apology*, there are two descriptions of the celebration of Mass: one presents a Mass that includes the baptismal liturgy and the other

¹¹ Acts 2:46.

¹² This would also apply to the Book of Revelation, which was clearly intended to be read aloud during the sacred liturgy (*cf.* Rev 1:3), given that its content was not to be kept 'secret' (Rev 22:10) and that it was intended to be 'revelations concerning the churches' (Rev 22:16).

of the Sunday morning Mass. In the first description, there is no mention of a Liturgy of the Word, and one might suppose that this is because baptism was administered during a prolonged vigil (the *Easter Vigil*), one of the main elements of which was a Liturgy of the Word. By contrast, the second description of the ordinary Sunday Mass at that time does indeed include this essential element of the liturgy:

‘On Sundays, Christians gather for a communal celebration; they hear the prophets and the Gospels as time permits. When the reader has finished, the celebrant addresses them, exhorting them to put into practice what they have heard.’¹³

The earliest sources give us no indication of the cycle of readings; however, it is reasonable to assume that, very soon, the Church adopted the Jewish practice of such a cycle (the synagogue had an annual cycle for the reading of the entire Torah). Much greater detail is provided by the *Apostolic Constitutions*, written in the 4th century in Antioch. This document attests that, in Antioch, the custom was to have four readings (two from the Old Testament, one epistle and one Gospel). However, certain indications suggest that, in the 4th century, the practice—in Rome if not elsewhere—was to have only a single reading that was not taken from the Gospel; this was taken from the New Testament on Sundays and from the Old Testament on weekdays. Those who are keen to defend the structure of the lectionary in the 1962 *Missale Romanum* should take note of the antiquity of this venerable tradition!

The lectionary of the old missal is often criticised on the pretext that it offers only a limited selection of Scripture readings compared with the broader cycles of the *Missale Romanum* (1969). One also frequently hears the observation that a second reading not taken from the Gospels (with no thematic link to the first reading) makes the Liturgy of the Word too confusing due to the diversity of its elements and themes. My personal view is that if the traditional cycle of readings is properly expounded in our sermons, this can only strengthen and deepen a genuine participation in the mystery of Christ made present in the sacred mysteries.

It is also interesting to note that, in the fourth century, it was not unusual for texts not taken from Scripture to be read at Mass, particularly hagiographic texts for the feasts of martyrs.¹⁴ But this eventually came to be regarded as a

¹³ St Justin: *Apology* I, 67, 3–4.

¹⁴ This seems to have been the custom in North Africa, Spain and Gaul.

abuse and, as it had never been practised by the Church of Rome, this practice was soon abandoned.

In the 3rd and 4th centuries, we also see the establishment of a specific place for the proclamation of the readings; this was originally a raised platform, sometimes fitted with a *legilium* or lectern. Gradually, this developed into *the ambo*, which was used not only for the readings but also for the chants that punctuated them and perhaps even for the homily. This is an important historical testimony to the fact that, by this stage, the Liturgy of the Word had been definitively incorporated into the celebration of Mass. Sources also indicate that, in both Rome and Constantinople, the number of readings was gradually set at two.

It is impossible to determine exactly when a common cycle of readings or a common lectionary came into use. In southern Italy, there was certainly a lectionary for Sundays after Epiphany and after Pentecost as early as the 6th century. This type of lectionary continued to develop during the following century, from which the first complete lectionaries date.

*The *Ordo Romanus Primus**, which dates from the 7th century, provides a clear description of what the Liturgy of the Word was like during Mass at that time: it is certain that there was only one reading other than the Gospel. This document specifies that the Gospel book was not carried in procession at the beginning of Mass but was placed on the altar before Mass began. After the Collect, the subdeacon sang the Epistle. During the chants preceding the Gospel, the Gospel deacon would approach the papal throne, bow before the Pope and ask for his blessing. He would then take the Gospel book from the altar and, preceded by the Gospel procession, proceed to the ambo. It is in this description that mention is made, for the first time, of candles accompanying the Gospel. From the context, it is clear that they symbolise the light of Christ present in His Word: the Gospel. After the Gospel chant, all members of the clergy present in the *presbytery* would bow before the Gospel book. The Gospel book was then immediately taken back to the papal palace, and this final detail clearly illustrates the veneration attached to the Gospel book, which was richly decorated and inlaid with precious stones to visibly signify the fundamental importance it held in the sacred liturgy.

It is also from this period that we have evidence of a cycle of Gospel readings for Sundays and solemn feasts. We can state with certainty that it is this very same cycle of Gospel teaching that has been handed down to us through twelve

centuries, an eloquent testimony to the enduring call to conversion that lies at the heart of our faith. It was probably also at this same time that the association—a tradition of ancient origin—between certain scriptural texts and the celebration of particular feasts and mysteries first emerged; this is an enduring feature of our liturgy and, even today, lies at the very heart of our understanding of certain essential doctrines and fundamental mysteries. This emphasises that the liturgy generally makes typological use of Holy Scripture, the two Testaments being presented to us as a single revelation of God's plan of salvation in Christ and being interpreted in the light of one another.¹⁵

In the Middle Ages, the Liturgy of the Word was given prominence—comparable in beauty—through the manner in which it was proclaimed. This was the era of *the cantor*, whose art is evident in the songs of great beauty for the Gradual, the Tract and the Alleluia found in manuscripts of that time. Many modern liturgists take great care not to dwell on this aspect of the aesthetic beauty of the medieval liturgy, as they are determined to convince us that the medieval liturgy was gradually becoming detached from the faithful. The primary aim of this deliberate obfuscation is to bolster the arguments in favour of a more recent radical liturgical reform, particularly with regard to the scriptural element of the liturgy.

From this perspective on the evolution of the liturgy, the most significant aspect of the medieval Church's liturgical practice is the increasingly widespread practice of private celebrations, in the form of low Masses. I have no intention of launching into a polemic against the low Mass, given that, for me as for most priests, it is the most common form of celebrating Mass. It is worth remembering, however, that the immediate effect of this mode of celebration is that all liturgical texts are accorded the same dignity. In such a case—for example, in a private Mass celebrated almost entirely in a low voice—it is not difficult to see that the proclamation of Holy Scripture might be accorded less respect. Perhaps this highlights for us the fundamental importance of maintaining a clear understanding of the specific character of each liturgical text, whether it is intended to be sung or read and, in the latter case, whether it is recited *clara voce* or silently. On this point, it is in the

¹⁵ 'The Church, already in apostolic times and then constantly throughout her Tradition, has shed light on the unity of the divine plan in the two Testaments through *typology*. This discerns in the works of God under the Old Covenant prefigurations of what God accomplished in the fullness of time, in the person of his incarnate Son. Christians therefore read the Old Testament in the light of Christ who died and rose again' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 128, 129).

It is in the most solemn forms of celebration used by the Church—such as the High Mass—that we find a very clear hermeneutical key to interpretation.

Bearing this historical and liturgical framework clearly in mind, let us now consider certain theological perspectives which serve to underline the central importance of Christ's presence in the proclamation of His Word during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass: Christ, the living Word, speaks to us or, rather, enables us to take part in the conversation taking place with God the Father through the Holy Spirit. To quote Saint Augustine:

‘We speak to Him when we pray; we listen to Him when we read the divine oracles’ (*De Officiis ministrorum*, 1, 20, 88; *PL* 16, 50).¹⁶

- Christ is present in His Word and, in a special way, in the Gospel of the Mass, which serves as a sacramental to dispose us to receive grace and for the forgiveness of sins.¹⁷
- Christ, who is present to us in the proclamation of His Word, is made sacramentally present on our altars in the Holy Species, and we receive Him in His entirety in Holy Communion.¹⁸
- Just as Christ is present in the celebration of the Mass,¹⁹ so too is the Mass the privileged place for the interpretation of His Word. It is the same Holy Spirit who inspired the writing of Holy Scripture who acts in the epiclesis of the Canon to bring about the transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the living Word of God, Our Lord Jesus Christ,²⁰

¹⁶ This is an idea frequently found in the texts of the Magisterium: ‘The God of all providence, who, in the wondrous designs of His love, first raised the human race to a share in the divine nature and then delivered it from its universal fault and ruin [...] has granted man a marvellous gift and pledge by making known to him, through supernatural means, the hidden mysteries of His divinity, His wisdom and His mercy’ (Leo XIII: **Providentissimus Deus**, Introduction). And, more recently:

‘Indeed, in carrying out this great work, Christ always takes the Church, His beloved Bride, as His partner; she invokes Him as her Lord and, through Him, offers her worship to the eternal Father’ (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7).

¹⁷ It suffices to recall the silent prayer recited by the priest after the Gospel: ‘*Per evangelica dicta deleantur nostra delicta*’. In the Eastern rites, a penitential litany follows the singing of the Gospel. In the Dominican rite, a sign of the cross at the conclusion of the Gospel reading serves to acknowledge the grace of this particular sacramental and to receive its benefits.

¹⁸ Thus, it is through the Church that we receive the Word of Christ and its interpretation, and it is through this same Church that we receive, by means of the sacraments, the grace of Christ which enables us to be conformed to his likeness – cf. *Lumen Gentium* 48, 4.

¹⁹ ‘The mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit, who, in the sacramental liturgy of the Church, proclaim, actualise and communicate the mystery of salvation, continues in the heart that prays’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2655).

²⁰ ‘Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit who inspired its writing’ (*Dei Verbum*, 12).

- Our reverence for the Word of God, who is present to us in the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, should enable us to perceive more clearly the Kingdom of God present in a realised form within the action of the Mass and, in particular, the ongoing sanctifying work of the Word of God in the lives of all those who celebrate this holy mystery.²¹

On this last point, we must acknowledge in all honesty that the mediocrity of many liturgical celebrations does little to help people grasp this inner dynamic of the holy liturgy. Communities and parishes that are able to offer a more solemn form of celebration, accompanied by appropriate and well-performed liturgical chants, provide an immense treasure of both catechetical and spiritual value. This is a vision of the liturgy that came to full fruition in the nineteenth century with the renewal, in France, of integral monastic life, thanks to such eminent figures as Dom Prosper Guéranger and Dom Paul Delatte of Solesmes, and Dom Jean-Baptiste Muard and Dom Romain Banquet of La Pierre-qui-Vire. All these masters of the spiritual life exhorted those who followed them to have a greater love and respect for the Word of God within the Holy Liturgy.

The *Rule* of Saint Benedict provides us with the priceless treasure of the traditional monastic office, which offers the perfect setting in which the celebration of the conventual Mass unquestionably takes centre stage. It is hardly surprising that the present-day successors of these pioneers of authentic liturgical spirituality have made such a significant contribution to the development of this essential work of practical catechesis. It is a source of wonder for us all to witness this in a monastery, but have we considered how these same ideas might be applied to the vastly different pastoral contexts of our own liturgical celebrations?

It is probably fair to say that those who, in our day, have analysed the classical Roman rite have tended to view the positions of modern scriptural scholars with a certain degree of suspicion, and not without reason, insofar as these ideas are often associated with heterodox doctrinal formulations. I am personally convinced that, as far as scriptural studies are concerned, the most promising approach is for them to be rooted in the broader context of the study of the liturgy, since, after all, we have been told that

²¹ 'Through its supernatural sense of faith, the entire People of God ceaselessly receives the gift of divine Revelation, penetrates it more deeply and lives it more fully' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 99).

‘The study of Sacred Scripture [must therefore be] to sacred theology as its soul.’²² And, if this were more natural and obvious to us, our preaching would be greatly improved and the Mass would guide far more people in the direction we know it is possible to go.

The sacred liturgy is the most appropriate context for the Word of God, and it is precisely in relation to this context that we understand and appreciate that Word most clearly and most deeply. I find my view confirmed by a reflection by the Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman who, speaking of the religious awe inspired by authentic worship and the subordination of all the elements of the Holy Liturgy to their single end, wrote this profound reflection, which I offer to you in conclusion:

‘There are two things we know about angels: that they sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy”, and that they do God’s will. Their holiness consists of worship and service. And our own holiness is proportional to the extent to which we draw closer to them. But all the exercises of the mind that lead us to reflect on our condition and to take stock of it, on what worship is and why we worship, on what service is and why we serve, on what our feelings entail and what the words we utter signify – all these exercises, unless we truly know how to use them, tend to divert our minds from the one thing that is truly necessary. All the proofs of religion, the proofs and demonstrations of particular doctrines, the scriptural proofs – all these undoubtedly give us the opportunity to exercise the great and admirable powers of our mind, and it would be fanaticism to wish to denigrate or reject them. But this requires a mind that is rooted and grounded in love, lest it become lost in these exercises. As for truly religious minds, when engaged in such exercises, rather than being content with mere controversies, they will certainly see inquiry turn into meditation, exhortation into adoration, and discussion into teaching.’²³

Let us hope and pray that the way in which we understand and appreciate the presence of Christ in the liturgy may be no less balanced and imbued with religious reverence and that, as with Newman and with our brothers and sisters in the faith throughout every age of the Church’s history, the sacred liturgy may become the place of our encounter with God, a place where He is present to speak to us, a place where we shall hear His voice more clearly and obey Him more faithfully, a place where the love of God, expressed in His Word made flesh, will be received and adored, a

²² *Dei Verbum*, 24.

²³ Cardinal J. H. Newman: *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, viii.

a place, finally, where human hearts will be opened to receive this Word in all its fullness and glory, so that, to the extent that we receive It, the Kingdom of God may spread – *Adveniat regnum tuum.*