

The Overall Structure and Meaning

Young adults moving into a first apartment may have just the basics - a table, a chair, a bed, a hotplate, running water. A church also needs “basics” for the liturgy: a baptismal font, chairs for leader and people, and two “tables” – one for proclaiming the Word and one for sharing the Eucharistic Meal. The Liturgy of the Word gathers people around the “table of the Word”.

This part of the Mass has a rhythm of proclamations and responses. The first reading, usually from the Hebrew Scriptures, is followed by the people’s acclamation – “Thanks be to God” – and a psalm which uncovers the core meaning and challenge of the text. A second reading from a New Testament letter is followed by the same acclamation. Then all stand to greet the Gospel singing “Alleluia.” After the Gospel proclamation and the people’s acclamation – “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ” – the priest responds to the readings through the homily. Then the whole assembly, expressing its communion with the apostolic faith, proclaims a Creed. Finally the Prayer of the Faithful concludes the Liturgy of the Word. This litany of intercession connects the scriptures to real needs, local and worldwide. The people’s cry, calling out to Christ as mediator, is the heart of this intercessory prayer. The presider’s closing prayer completes the Liturgy of the Word.

What do we believe about this part of the Mass? The General Instruction on the Roman Missal says, “When the Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself is speaking to His people and Christ, present in His own word, is proclaiming the Gospel” (GIRM, n.29). This statement grounds our faith regarding the Liturgy of the Word. In the dialogue between ministers and people, the divine Logos, the Word spoken by the Father from all eternity (John 1:1-14), speaks to us personally through the scripture proclaimed and preached. The physical books we use may be honored with processions and incense, but the true Word of the Lord is that transforming Light which fills our minds and hearts and teaches us to live as disciples of Jesus, the Lord.

Ritual Language and Ministers of the Word

Some people dislike ritual. “It’s always the same! Boring!” they say. Meanwhile these very people might see a favorite play or movie over and over – even though it is exactly the same every time. Boredom doesn’t come from repetition. It comes from the combination of inattention and uninspired proclamation. In fact, the sign-language of ritual performed simply, cleanly, and with attention to detail can grab and hold people’s attention – and make a difference.

Every Sunday, the Liturgy of the Word has the same “choreography:” A lector comes forward, ascends the ambo, proclaims the reading, pauses for a moment, says, “The Word of the Lord,” and returns to a pew or chair after the people’s response. The cantor and assembly sing the psalm. The same thing is repeated for the second reading. While the Gospel acclamation is sung, the deacon or priest walks to the altar, lifts up the Book of the Gospels, and processes to the ambo. Sometimes the book is incensed and kissed. The Gospel is proclaimed and the assembly responds, “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ”. These things take place with little variation from week to week.

Perhaps. But the way people move, speak, and sing – their pace, posture, intonation, animation, sense of purpose – is also part of the message. Their reverence, their body language, their ability to catch people’s eyes, their obvious love for the Word all speak as loudly as the words they proclaim. Homilists may provide insight about a text; but before they have said a word, lectors, cantors, and deacons have already proclaimed the central truth that God is here among us, speaking to us and inviting us to be transformed. Proclaiming as though it really meant something requires hard work – pondering the text, digging for meaning through prayer and study and practicing various ways to read or sing the words. Such ministers of the Word communicate both their love for the message and for the God who speaks. When this happens, hearers feel their passion and are moved and enlightened for the week’s journey. It isn’t boring at all.

The Creed

Chanting the Creed on Sunday may become a familiar part of the assembly’s experience with the new Roman Missal. In this proclamation shared by priest and people, we remember and confess the great mysteries of the faith presented in the readings and homily. They are, “the joyous ‘yes’ of the faithful to the message they have received” (Jungmann, 299). The Creed is rooted in the Gospels (cf Mt 28:19) but is not strictly a prayer. From at least the second century, the Elect were ritually questioned about their faith at Baptism. These questions and answers became the raw material of the great creeds. For this reason, today’s catechumens are dismissed *before* the Creed begins until they formally receive it in one of the catechumenal rites.

Why do we have creeds? Because they provide answers to difficult questions posed by early Christian believers trying to express the divine mysteries. Was Jesus really human? Really divine? Was the Spirit divine? Was Mary the mother of Jesus only, or was she also Mother of God? Fourth and fifth century bishops of East and West struggled with the theological, philosophical, and cultural implications of these and other questions. They crystallized their answers in the simple metaphorical language we still proclaim today.

The new Roman Missal provides two different versions of the Creed. During the Lent/ Easter season, we will use the shorter Apostles’ Creed in solidarity with catechumens preparing for and rejoicing in their baptisms. The rest of the year we will use the theologically rich Nicene Creed. The texts have been retranslated more literally from the Latin, so they will be somewhat different from what we are used to. We will also return to the reverent bow the faithful made for centuries at the mention of the incarnation – “*and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man*” (Nicene Creed) and “*who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary*” (Apostles’ Creed). The creeds are a precious distillation of the Church’s faith which every Christian should know by heart, ponder in prayer, and boldly proclaim.

The Prayer of the Faithful – Priestly Ministry of the Baptized

The Second Vatican Council says that every liturgical celebration is an action of Christ the priest and of His Body the Church [CSL #7]. The priestly ministry of the people flows from that baptismal moment when we are signed with Holy Chrism and told: “As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and

King, so may you live always as a member of His body, sharing everlasting life.” We exercise this priestly ministry at the end of the Liturgy of the Word when, together with the ministers and all the faithful, we join Christ in His role as Mediator.

We have just heard the scriptures proclaimed and preached, and Christ has taught us to be concerned about *all* people, to be servant of *all* people. The way we pray the Prayer of the Faithful, reveals how well we have heard this message. The 2002 *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* instructs those who craft these prayers to include the needs of the Church, the world, the needy, the local community, and the dead – to all who need the compassion of Christ, His mercy, His healing, and His tenderness.

The Prayer of the Faithful has four parts.

- The presider stands and calls the assembly to prayer.
- All stand, and the deacon or another minister announces the intentions.
- The assembly responds.
- The presider gathers up all the intentions and directs them to God, who is always ready to listen to Christ and to His body.

The heart of this prayer is the people’s response. Joining in song – “O God, hear us, hear our prayer,” or “Lord, hear our prayer” – helps everyone to experience our unity with Christ and one another. A strong shared response demonstrates that this, and not the intention, is the true prayer of Christ and His people. Faithful Christians want to grow in union with Christ. Not everyone recognizes that this union is not just personal spirituality. The challenge for us all is acknowledging our identity as part of the Body of Christ and fulfilling our proper role as Mediator in union with Christ our Lord.