

LITURGICAL CATECHESIS

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HEARERS AND DOERS OF THE WORD: LITURGICAL CATECHESIS ON THE LECTIONARY



Catechesis on the Lectionary should have one primary goal: to lead all the faithful to be both hearers and doers of the word of God. The introduction to the Lectionary points out that “what is heard in the celebration of the Liturgy may be carried out in a way of life: ‘Be doers of the word and not hearers only’ (James 1:22)” (6).

The primary way we are formed to be hearers and doers of the word is through the liturgy. The Lectionary explains that the celebration of the Liturgy “deserves to be regarded as a pedagogical resource aiding catechesis” (61); the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* highlights the tremendous formative power of liturgy by affirming that it is “the privileged place for catechizing the People of God” (1074).

The *Constitution on the Liturgy (CSL)* called for the treasures of the Bible to be opened up more lavishly (51). The introduction to the Lectionary explains that the people of God have been fed at the table of the word “as the unfolding mystery of Christ is recalled during the course of the liturgical year” (3). But how has the Liturgy of the Word actually stirred our hearts and formed and transformed us as a people to pray and live as hearers and doers of the word?

An authentic catechesis on the Lectionary needs to take us to the next level of understanding. It needs to lead us to be a people of the word who understand what it means to listen when God speaks to us and to respond with our whole lives.

Catechesis for the Lectionary should begin with formation on the nature of the word proclaimed at liturgy. On the pastoral level, people have been encouraged to listen, not read, when the word is proclaimed. Catechesis needs to take this further and enable people to see that the word proclaimed at liturgy is indeed a living word. The revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)* states that “When the Sacred Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his own word, proclaims the Gospel” (29). Our posture of listening means opening our entire being to hear God speaking to us; it means letting this living word stir our hearts in such a way that we are able to “bear witness to Christ before the world by our manner of life”

(Lectionary, Introduction 12). It is for this reason that the liturgy requires a profound silence after the readings so that we can “take the word of God to heart” (Lectionary, Introduction 28).

The introduction to the Lectionary provides a delightful description of how we Christians are to listen to God speaking to us. We are called to listen gladly because the power of God’s word moves the heart toward conversion (47). How often do you perceive gladness on the part of the assembly at Mass during the Liturgy of the Word? Is the acclamation after the readings sometimes rote or without enthusiasm? The introduction to the Lectionary recommends that the acclamation at the conclusion of the readings be sung, even by someone other than the reader, to elicit from the faithful a sung response of gratitude for the word of God (18).

Catechesis also needs to lead people to comprehend that, when the word of God is proclaimed, the divine covenant is announced; in the Eucharist, the covenant is embodied and renewed. Thus, the Liturgy of the Word is not a mere prelude to the Liturgy of the Eucharist but, rather, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist “form one single act of divine worship” (10).

God speaks to us. The covenant is announced. How can we not help but respond? The introduction to the Lectionary explicitly states that “when God communicates his word, he expects a response” (6). We respond ritually through acclamations, silence and the responsorial psalm. These ritual actions, however, give prayerful expression to a much deeper reality. The Liturgy of the Word demands that we enter into a dialogue with our lives (10).

The entire ritual structure of the Liturgy of the Word manifests the dialogue that takes place between God’s living Word and our response to it. The *Introduction to the Order of Mass (IOM)* points out “In this dialogue with the Lord, the people listen to the word, reflect on it in silence, respond to it in song, assimilate it, and apply it to their lives” (80). This is liturgy as catechesis at its best. Sunday after Sunday, the Liturgy of the Word forms us into a people who listen, reflect, respond, assimilate and apply the living word of God in our

lives. As we ritually celebrate these realities, we are transformed into a people who are hearers and doers of the word of God.

Forty years after the liturgical renewal inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council, people's appreciation of the Liturgy of the Word should be more than a time where we sit, sing, stand, hear a homily (or sermon) and give money in the collection. It should go beyond an appreciation that the readings are in the vernacular or that we sing the responsorial psalm. Liturgy as catechesis demands that the Liturgy of the Word be prepared and celebrated in such a way that its transformative power is unleashed so that we are continually formed into being hearers and doers of the word.

Liturgy as catechesis is complemented with catechesis for liturgy. The introduction to the Lectionary frequently mentions the need for prior catechesis that awakens the desire for an understanding of the scriptural texts and, at the same time, fosters a readiness for response (48; also see 19, 55, 61). Bible study groups, catechetical courses on Scripture and the Lectionary, and prayer groups that focus on the upcoming Sunday readings are some examples of how this is achieved on the parish and/or diocesan level.

However, catechesis needs to do more than this. An authentic conversion catechesis should also empower people to be doers of the word as well. The *General Directory for Catechesis (GDC)*, published in 1997, situates the entire ministry of catechesis within the context of evangelization and relates it to the many other forms of the ministry of the word of God. This relationship unfolds the proper nature of catechesis. Thus, evangelization "is an indispensable point of reference for catechesis" (35).

As hearers and doers of the word of God, all of us are called to spread the Good News. In celebrating the Liturgy of the Word, we are at one and are formed and commissioned to go out and spread the word of God to others. The Apostolic Exhortation,

Evangelii Nuntiandi (EN), proclaims that the church "exists in order to evangelize" (14).

As doers of the Word, we are called to engage in the totality of evangelization: "witness and proclamation, word and sacrament, interior change and social transformation" (*GDC* 46), thus, actively participate in the overall mission of the church. By means of this, nonbelievers are inspired to follow Christ; catechumens are led to full initiation; the alienated are encouraged to return to the church; and the faithful deepen their call to be disciples of Jesus Christ. It is not by chance that the faith journey of catechumens takes place "solidly supported by celebrations of the word" (*RCIA* 75.1) or that the *General Directory for Catechesis (GDC)* mentions that one of the notable weaknesses of catechesis is the marginalization of liturgical celebrations (30).

Authentic catechesis goes far beyond teaching about the arrangement for the readings at Mass or even an exegesis on the readings. The introduction to the Lectionary teaches that, as we listen to the word of God in the liturgy, we are called to strive harder to commit ourselves to the word incarnate in Christ. "Thus, [we] endeavor to conform [our] way of life to what [we] celebrate in the Liturgy, and then in turn to bring to the celebration of the Liturgy all that [we] do in life" (6).

In his poem "Sharon's Christmas Prayer," John Shea captures the sense of this teaching through the simple and unsophisticated response of a young child who is captivated by the marvel of God's living word:

She was five,
sure of the facts,
and recited them
with slow solemnity,
convinced every word
was revelation.

She said

they were so poor
they had only peanut butter
and jelly sandwiches to eat
and they went a long way
from home without getting lost.

The lady rode a donkey,
the man walked,
and the baby was inside the lady.
They had to stay in a stable
with an ox and an ass (hee-hee)
but the Three Rich Men found them
because a star lited the roof.
Shepherds came and you could
pet the sheep but not feed them.
Then the baby was borned.
And do you know who he was?
Her quarter eyes inflated
to silver dollars.
The baby was God.
And she jumped in the air,
whirled around, dove into the sofa,
and buried her head under the cushion
which is the only proper response
to the Good News of
the Incarnation. (68)

Somehow, the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word should lead all of us, each in our own way, to want to jump and whirl around; this is the only proper response to the proclamation of the living word of God.

Work Cited

Shea, John. *The Hour of the Unexpected*. Allen, TX: Tabor Publishing, 1977.

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