

What role does scripture play in the liturgy?

If, as the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* states, Christ is present in liturgical celebrations in the proclamation of his word—“He is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church” (n.7)—then it follows that sacred scripture ought to have a place of prominence. The proclamation of scripture, in fact, is an integral part of the liturgy. Of the Mass in particular, the *Constitution* says that “The two parts which, in a certain sense, go to make up the Mass, namely, the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship” (n.56). In this and later documents the Council will even speak of the “table of the word” in addition to the table of the altar (n.51; see also *Perfectae caritatis*, n.6; *Dei verbum*, n.21; *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n.18).

While the analogy of the *table* of God’s word may seem strange (not to mention describing the word’s proclamation as “lavish and rich fare” (see n.51)), this nourishing image exists first of all in scripture. In its most literal passage, St. John the Evangelist describes his encounter with the angel of the Apocalypse: “I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, ‘Take it and eat it; it will turn sour in your stomach, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey.’ I took the little scroll from his hand and ate it, and it tasted sweet as honey in my mouth. But after I swallowed it, it turned sour in my stomach. Then I was told, ‘Once again you must proclaim God’s message about many nations, races, languages, and kings’” (10:9-10). Here we see St. John being fed by the scroll, the word of God, and being strengthened to preach the word he had received. But what of it turning sour in his stomach? Could it be that the first taste of the word left his heart burning for the second table, the table of the Body of Christ? The disciples on the road to Emmaus said as much: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us” (Luke 24:32)?

Since sacred scripture is so fundamental to the celebration of Mass and other liturgies, it is no wonder that the *Constitution* announces that “...to achieve the restoration, progress, and adaptation of the sacred liturgy, it is essential to promote that warm and living love for scripture...” (n.24). Do we have a “warm and living love” for the scriptures that are proclaimed at Mass? (Do we even remember what the readings were from last Sunday’s Mass?) St. John the Evangelist *asked* to be nourished by the word of God, while the disciples on the road to Emmaus were found discussing Christ and his recent passion (see Luke 24:13). They were hungry, and we, too, must become hungry to hear God’s word, preparing ourselves as we would prepare for the most “lavish and rich fare!”

We have recently celebrated the incarnation and birth of Jesus Christ in the world. St. Ephraim the Syrian spoke of a “double incarnation:” the incarnation of Jesus Christ not only in the flesh but in word also, for in both cases the infinite God lowers himself to our finitude, in body and in language. The Mass is similar: Jesus comes to us in the proclamation of his word and in the sacrament of his body and blood. Both are for our nourishment, our holiness, and our oneness with God.

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