

IV. “The Gospel of the Lord”

This is the fourth in a series of eleven or so articles on the celebration of the Mass.

Article #5: *Preparing the Gifts and Our Hearts.*

Proclaiming the Good News

The proclamation of the Gospel at Sunday Mass is replete with rich and significant ritual gestures: the choir or cantor intones the Alleluia; the people join in singing with gusto; the presider blesses the deacon; a procession to the ambo with the Book of Gospels; the proclamations / responses: “The Lord be with you” / “And also with you.” “A reading from the holy Gospel...” / “Glory to you, O Lord.” Finally, the faithful sign their foreheads, lips, and breast.

The assembly does all this to underscore its belief that the proclamation of the Gospel is the climax of the Liturgy of the Word. In the Gospel, Christ speaks to his people.

Let us reflect for a moment on the following several ritual gestures that are proper to the proclamation of the Gospel:

The Opening Dialogue:

The dialogue between the minister and the congregation informs us that it is Christ speaking directly to us in the words of the Gospel proclaimed. The people acknowledge that truth in faith by their response, “Glory to you, Lord.” At *that* moment we are all speaking directly to Christ and not the minister.

Recall that the Liturgy of the Word includes:

The First Reading

(Usually taken from the O.T. or the Acts of the Apostles)

The Responsorial Psalm

The Second Reading

(Usually taken from the N.T. Epistles or Revelation)

The Gospel Acclamation

The Gospel

The Homily

The Profession of Faith

The General Intercessions

Standing for the Proclamation of the Gospel:

A significant change of posture occurs at the singing of the *Alleluia* – the community stands. No longer seated as disciples, as those who are ready to hear and be taught by God, now the faithful stand

to receive the Good News. This change of posture certainly speaks of respect and honor. When someone important comes into our presence we stand as a sign of respect or honor. But, notice, too, that when the faithful stand during Mass, they do so at those times that reveal the Church as the Body of Christ – at the Entrance Procession, the start of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and at the Communion Procession. In a way, then, like speaks to like – the Word of Christ addresses the Body of Christ in the World.

The Signs of the Cross

The act of making the signs of the cross on the forehead, lips and breast is a ritual gesture that we often do without much thought. Two suggestions might enliven our practice of this simple gesture.

First, the faithful could pray the prayer that the priest prays or the deacon is blessed with prior to proclaiming the Gospel. “May the Lord be in our minds, on our lips and in our hearts as the words of the holy gospel are proclaimed to us.”

Second, in the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens, the sponsors of the inquirers claim the new Catechumens for Christ by signing all five senses of the person – plus, their shoulders, hands, and feet. We might recall how hearing the Gospel claims us anew for Christ each time we sign ourselves with the cross at this point.

The Book of Gospels

The Book of Gospels?

In many places the Book of Gospels has been used only in cathedrals when the bishop presides at ceremonies. But now, the revised *General Instruction* has mandated that a Book of Gospels be used now at every Sunday Mass.

The Book of the Gospels differs from the Lectionary because it contains *only* the gospel readings for the liturgy, while the Lectionary contains the First and Second Readings as well as the Responsorial Psalms. The use of the Book of Gospels at liturgy demonstrates ritually the primacy of the Gospel of Christ, the lens through which Christians interpret all Scripture. It signifies the Church’s faith that Christ speaks directly to us through the Gospel.

Various signs of honor attend the use of the Book of Gospels: incense, candles, and kissing the book at the conclusion of the proclamation of the Gospel. Recall that the only other thing kissed in the liturgy is the Altar, which, because it has been anointed with chrism, stands for Christ, our salvation.

The Four Evangelists and their symbols

The four evangelists have been associated in Christian art with “the four living creatures.” The scriptural background to these symbols can be found in the prophecies taken from the prophet Ezekiel, the book of Daniel, and the book of Revelation. We read in Ezekiel:

“As for the appearance of their faces:
the four had the face of a **human being**,
the face of a **lion** on the right side,
the face of an **ox** on the left side,
and the face of an **eagle**...”
(Ezekiel, 1:10)

St. Matthew the Evangelist:



St. Irenaeus (in *Adversus Haereses* 3.11.8 (in *ANF* 1.854-55) seems to have been one of the early Church theologians who identified the four evangelists with the four living creatures.

He says that “the third [living creature] had, as it were, the face as of a *man*,’ -- an evident description of His advent as a human being.” Matthew is depicted as human, because he instructs us about the human nature of Christ and he begins his gospel with Jesus’ genealogy.

St. Mark the Evangelist:



St. Irenaeus describes the significance of the lion: , “The first living creature was like a *lion*,” symbolizing His effectual working, His leadership, and royal power.” Mark’s gospel begins with the words spoken about John the Baptist, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness,” suggesting the roar of the lion.

St. Luke the Evangelist:



Here, St. Irenaeus says that “the second [living creature] was like an ox, signifying [His] sacrificial and sacerdotal order.” Luke the evangelist is symbolized by the winged ox, because he deals with the sacrificial aspects of Christ’s life and since his version of the Gospel begins with a scene in the Temple at Jerusalem

St. John the Evangelist:



Finally, St. Irenaeus refers to the eagle: “the fourth [living creature] was like a flying *eagle*, pointing out the gift of the Spirit hovering with His wings over the Church. And therefore the Gospels are in accord with these things, among which Christ Jesus is seated. For that according to **John** relates His original, effectual, and glorious generation from the Father, thus declaring, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’”

Thus, John the evangelist is symbolized by the rising eagle, since his gaze pierces so far into the mysteries of heaven and because his Gospel begins with a lofty prologue, a hymn to the Word made flesh.

For discussion/reflection:

- What new things did I learn from this article?
- Do I experience the proclamation of the Gospel as the highpoint of the Liturgy of the Word in our parish worship?
- How might the signs of the sign of the cross that I make on my forehead, lips and breast be more meaningful to me now?
- Does my worshipping community use a Book of Gospels? What might the ritual use of such a book mean to me?