

CATHOLIC CHURCH OF EASTERN MONTANA DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

How we Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it. Liturgy of the Word #11

In this age of mass communication we need not be told that we are often inundated with more information than we can possibly absorb. It may seem like a “curse”, but it can also be a blessing.

At the death of Pope John Paul II, for instance, and the Conclave which followed it, Catholics had an opportunity to learn more about the life of the Church than they could ever imagine. Even secular news outlets proved to be an invaluable source for Christian catechesis. Anyone with access to radio, television or the Internet could learn something about their Christian faith.

It is true that we are often exposed to so many types of information each day that we tend to develop “selective memories.” Unless a piece of news or information is somehow very practical or spectacular, we pay scant attention to it. Unfortunately, such a habit can rub off on us even as we hear the Word of God proclaimed Sunday after Sunday in our churches. This may seem especially true when we hear a reading from the Hebrew Testament which often seems so historically distant from our experience today.

The second reading, often from the letters of St. Paul with their heavy theological content, is often difficult for people to understand. The gospel, of course, is always more familiar to us because we understand and love the stories of Jesus. They never grow dull.

It would be safe to say, therefore, that hearing the Word of God in the liturgy each Sunday takes a special sort of attitude and attention because these readings are proclaimed to us not primarily for information but for inspiration and meditation. We do not necessarily need to understand all that is laid out before us. Indeed, often the readings are proclaimed in such haste that no normal mind can possibly keep up, much less absorb the meaning of what is read. What is more reasonable to expect of us is that we come into the presence of God’s Word with an open mind. If even a few insights come to us during this time, it is time well spent. After all, this is not a classroom; we are not going to be examined and graded on what we have heard!

Moreover, each person who hears the Word will bring his or her particular background and insight to bear upon it. Jesus story, for instance, about the

sower who scattered seed and left it to grow in its own way seems to apply to the way we hear and absorb God's Word in the liturgy.

Nonetheless, there are certain practical things that can help us in our efforts to gain as much spiritual nourishment as possible from the Word that is proclaimed in our midst.

There needs to be a reverent pace and style on the part of the lector. The rapid style and volume of the car salesman on radio or television is completely out of place in the liturgy. Anything that hinders attention and recollection should be avoided.

Secondly, the pace of the proclamation of the word must include moments of silence. We Catholics are not often used to this, of course. We wonder whether the lector has forgotten to continue on with the next reading. These few moments of silence, however, are very important: This is the time when our minds and hearts have the opportunity to be open to the insight and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. If the word has been well-proclaimed with dignity and grace, surely the Holy Spirit's power will be felt.

Finally, how can the gathered assembly respond to this Word which has been proclaimed among us? First of all, the liturgy provides us with a prayer response we call the Responsorial Psalm, literally, a sung response chosen from a psalm. Ordinarily this psalm will reflect the theme of the first reading. If the music is not too difficult for us to sing, we have the opportunity to concentrate further on what we have just heard in the spoken word.

Another prayer response that the liturgy provides for us is called The General Intercessions or The Prayer of the Faithful, the faithful, of course, being us, the gathered assembly. Ideally the community itself would compose these prayers because, at least in part, they should represent the intentions and the needs of the local community. They should also include the needs of the world, the church, the pope, those who are oppressed or afflicted, the special needs of this community and a remembrance of the faithful departed. These are public prayer and not individual intentions.

We can discern from all this, therefore, that the proclamation of God's Word awaits our response. In a sense, the liturgy provides us an opportunity each Sunday to carry on a dialogue with God. If we assume that God has had something important to say to us, it is only right and proper that we should have something to say in return.