

Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Insert

Liturgy: 1 hour



Completion of this study entitles the catechist to one hour of credit toward certification.

LITURGY: The Liturgy of the Word

THEME

The Liturgy of the Word is an essential activity of the assembly.

CATECHIST COMPETENCIES

As a result of this study, the catechist will be able to:

1. Articulate the importance of the Liturgy of the Word in the context of Eucharist.
2. Describe and interpret the symbols and actions of the Liturgy of the Word.
3. Understand the essential role of the assembly in the Liturgy of the Word.

CATECHISM REFERENCES

#1136; 1187; 1071-72; 1100-02; 1140-62; 1190; 1346; 1349; 1103

FOCUSING THE STUDY

The Liturgy of the Word is an essential activity in forming the Body of Christ which calls for active participation on the part of the assembly. We proclaim and respond, we listen actively, we profess our belief, we intercede, and so are prepared to come to the Table of the Lord.

INTRODUCTION

In the gathering of the family for important meals, there is always a period of time before the food is shared when people engage in conversation. Newcomers are introduced. Important news about who is married or who lost a job is shared. We tell the children stories about their parents or share old jokes. This time helps us “re-member” ourselves as family. The Liturgy of the Word performs the same function for the Catholic community.

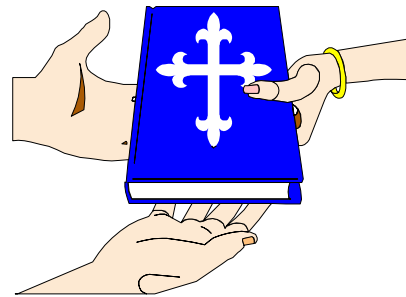
A well-known liturgical hymn describes the Liturgy of the Word in the following manner:

*Words from afar, stars that are falling,
Sparks that are sown in us like seed.*

*Names for our God, dreams, signs, and wonders
Sent from the past are all we need.*

*We in this place remember and speak again what we have heard:
God’s free redeeming word.*

*“What Is This Place,” Gather,
GLA Publications, Inc., 1987*



These lyrics capture the essence of what the Liturgy of the Word, especially in the proclamation of Scripture, does for us. Through the proclamation of God’s word and the homily, we remember who we are and to whom we belong. In the confidence of knowing that we are God’s people, we proclaim our faith and intercede for the life of the world. It is hard work (the word *liturgy* comes from the Greek meaning *the work of the people*). It is the necessary work of the Body of Christ to gather as one, listen to God’s word, give thanks and then be sent forth (dismissed) at the end of Mass to continue Christ’s work of bringing the Good News to the world.

Christ’s Presence In Scripture

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (#7) declares that Christ is present “when the church prays and sings” and “is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in church.” Just as Christ is present in the eucharistic elements, so also, Christ is truly present in the assembly and in the proclamation of the word! For this reason, we hear the lectors and deacon/priest proclaim “The Word of the Lord” and “The Gospel of the Lord” in the same way that the eucharistic minister proclaims “The Body of Christ” and “The Blood of Christ” at communion. Scripture is of the “greatest importance” because “it is from the Scriptures that actions and signs [of our Eucharist] derive their meaning” (CSL #24).

This conviction about sacred Scripture led to the assertion that “the treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly” (CSL 51). Since the Second Vatican Council, the Lectionary has been revised to provide for greater proclamation of Scripture at Mass

Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Inserts are property of the Office for Catechesis, Archdiocese of Chicago, and may be re-produced only for the purpose of catechist formation. These may not be sold by any entity other than the Office for Catechesis.

Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Insert

and throughout the liturgical calendar. As a result, our present lectionary covers most of the Bible over a three-year Sunday cycle and a two-year weekday cycle. On Sundays, we read from Scripture four times: the first reading, the responsorial Psalm, the second reading and the Gospel. Scripture is so important to us that when we lovingly dismiss our catechumens (those who are preparing for Christian Initiation and cannot join us at the Lord's Table) they do not go home. They go off together with their catechist "to share their joy and spiritual experiences" (*Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults* #67) by reflecting more deeply on the word of God which they have just shared with the assembly.

"For this reason, the Church has always venerated the Scriptures as she venerates the Lord's Body. She never ceases to present to the faithful the bread of life, taken from the one table of God's Word and Christ's Body."

-Dei Verbum #21

Proclaiming Scripture

As mentioned above, the word *liturgy* comes from a Greek word meaning "public work" or "work of the people." Our liturgies, especially our Eucharist, are never a private function but are celebrations of the whole Church through signs and symbols, words and actions, singing and music" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1140-1162). In order to "nourish the faith of believers, the signs which accompany the Word of God should be emphasized" (*CCC* #1154). Among the most important signs in our celebration of the Eucharist is the *Lectionary* and the *Book of the Gospels*.

The *Lectionary* and the *Book of Gospels* are not themselves the Word of God: the Word lives in our hearts. These books contain our heart's memories of the Word as passed down from all of our ancestors in faith. Consequently, we carry these books visibly into our midst. We often venerate the Gospel proclamation with procession, candles and incense. We proclaim scripture from an ambo, a special kind of large, beautiful lectern we consider worthy of the Word of God. In many ways, this ambo may be considered to be an altar for God's word.

Following the Introductory Rites of the Mass, which are designed to unify the assembly and prepare us to receive God's word with heart as well as mind, the assembly is seated for the first reading. Some members of the assembly step forward as lectors to offer their gift in service to the assembly. A lector has prepared to proclaim the Old Testament (first reading) and Epistle (second reading) and a cantor has prepared the sung Scripture: the Psalm. The whole assembly does its work by participating fully and actively through listening carefully and responding vigorously. At the end of the reading, the lector asserts, "The Word of the Lord" and the assembly reflects its gratitude for God's gift by replying, "Thanks be to God!"



Following the first reading, the cantor moves to the ambo, the proper place for Scripture, in this case, the Psalm, to be proclaimed. The cantor and the assembly together participate in the proclamation of the Psalm through its sung dialogue of verse and refrain. The Psalms express humanity's deepest feelings of satisfaction, joy, lament, praise, despair, trust and anger in a way that spoken words cannot. With our ancient sisters and brothers, we cry out all of these feelings, flowing from our very lives, to a God we trust is listening. The Psalm is sung, not because we are adapting a written or spoken word to music but because the Psalms were originally songs and songs are meant to be sung. When we sing the Psalms, we are proclaiming them the way they were meant to be proclaimed!

Following the Psalm response, the lector proclaims the second reading from one of the Letters (Epistles) of the early Church. Next, after a pause of silence so that the Word has time to settle into our hearts, the assembly stands, candles are brought forward and the assembly bursts into a song of praise with the Gospel acclamation. Usually our words are multiple "Alleluias!" as we wait to hear of Christ's own life. "Alleluia!" is a proclamation of praise to God: we are thankful to receive the gift of God's word! This acclamation is meant to be sung, not spoken. In fact, if we are not going to sing the Alleluia, it should be omitted. During Lent, we bury our "Alleluia!" as a type of aural fasting...stripping down the liturgy to a more sober and simple style. Even so, during those forty days, we still sing words of praise: "Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ, king of endless glory!"

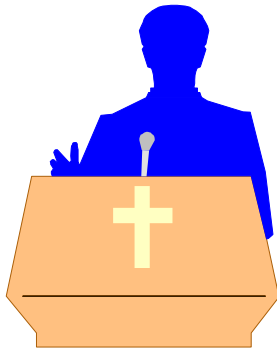
As we prepare to proclaim the Gospel, the Book is lifted high and carried in procession. The procession might be as simple as a movement of the priest or deacon from the presider's chair to the ambo or it might move through the entire assembly and body of the church. Occasionally, incense is used to venerate the Gospel's proclamation. Incense is a symbol of our prayers "rising to heaven." We always proclaim the specialness of this scripture after it is named ("A reading from the Gospel of Matthew") by our response,

Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Insert

“Glory to you, O Lord.” By marking our forehead, mouth and heart with a cross, we indicate that we pray that the word of God may be in our minds, on our lips and in our hearts. The priest or deacon does the work of proclaiming the Gospel after which the assembly greets the declaration “The Gospel of the Lord” with great joy: “Praise to you, Lord, Jesus Christ!”

The Homily

Following the Gospel, the assembly is once again seated to hear the homily preached. This is *not* a sermon which is “a lengthy and tedious exhortation” (*American Heritage Dictionary*), but a discourse by which “the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text” (*CSL #52*). The homily helps us to see our lives in light of Scripture and how God has enriched those lives. A homily, as opposed to a sermon, is designed not primarily to *inform*, but to *transform*. Following the homily, we keep some silence again, so that we can think about, retain, and apply in our lives what we’ve heard in four Scripture readings and the homily.



We know that we will be dismissed after our Communion, after we are fully “re-membered” as the Body of Christ. We will be sent forth to go into the world and be signs of the kingdom, signs of the Good News. It is in our daily lives that Scripture becomes “sparks sown in us like seeds” to enlighten our political, social and business decisions. How we vote, where we choose to put our money, how we speak of and to people, what we let others say and do in our presence, all matters. And when we suffer evils that we cannot control (e.g. illness or ridicule for taking a stand against evil), the Scriptures console us with the promise that we are like Christ and that Christ is always with us.

The Profession Of Faith

Having been reminded of the faith of those who have gone before us, we stand and give our own Profession of Faith, the Creed, which asserts the truths that the Church holds dear. It is a type of pledge and pledges are meant to be spoken while standing, as if ready for action. It is a way for the assembly to “respond and to give their assent to the word of God heard in the readings and through the homily...” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal #43*). Our community’s recitation of the Creed is echoed by every Catholic community in the world on Sunday: one more indication of our unity with a Church that is much larger than our own parish community.

“As on the day of our Baptism, when our whole life was entrusted to the ‘standard of teaching,’ let us embrace the Creed of our life-giving faith. To say the Credo with faith is to enter into communion with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and also with the whole Church which transmits the faith to us and in whose midst we believe.”

-The Catechism of the Catholic Church #197

The General Intercessions

The Liturgy of the Word closes with some of the most important prayers of the Eucharist, the General Intercessions. The assembly “exercising their priestly function” (*GIRM #45*), intercedes for the world before God. We look beyond our own lives and pray “for the needs of the Church; for public authorities and the salvation of the world; for the oppressed by any need; for the local community” (*GIRM #46*). If the community has gathered for a particular kind of celebration like confirmations or marriages, the prayers may include specific reference to those occasions.



The intercessions are introduced by the priest-president, who invites the assembly to pray, and the intercessions are voiced by “a deacon, cantor or other person” (*GIRM #47*). Notice that the intercession itself is not the prayer: it is the assembly who does the prayer. The intercessor simply directs the assembly to consider certain needs. The assembly voices its prayer through its response e.g., “Lord, hear our prayer” or by a silent prayer after each intention. The intercessions work best when composed in the style of a litany or short, simple phrases. In fact, it is recommended that intercessions be sung occasionally to underscore their importance. Finally, the priest-president prays a *Collect* (pronounced COL-lect, meaning literally: *to collect*) at the end of the *Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Inserts* are property of the Office for Catechesis, Archdiocese of Chicago, and may be re-produced only for the purpose of catechist formation. These may not be sold by any entity other than the Office for Catechesis.

Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Insert

intercessions to which the assembly gives its “Amen.” These prayers are sometimes called the “prayer of the faithful” which may come from ancient times when the catechumens were dismissed from the assembly of the faithful *before* the prayers/intercessions.

CONCLUSION

After the intercessions, we sit again. By now, if we have done our work well, we need the rest! We have proclaimed our spoken and sung Scripture with passion, listened attentively, responded enthusiastically, preached thoughtfully, expressed our common Creed faithfully and prayed intently. We are well prepared to come to the Table.



REVIEW/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In order to complete this study and earn one hour of credit toward catechist certification, you must respond to the review/discussion questions in either of the following ways:

1. Write/type your response (20-40 words each) and submit them to your catechetical leader;
2. Engage in a formal discussion of the questions (at least 30 minutes) in some forum approved by your catechetical leader (e.g. a catechist meeting, level meetings, team meetings, catechist pairings, etc).

Review Questions

1. Why are stories important? What do they do for human beings?
2. What is significant about the Church asserting that Christ is present “when the Church prays and sings?” What does that mean to our participation in the Liturgy of the Word?
3. What does the Gospel procession usually look like in your parish? What might a fully realized Gospel procession look like? What movements, gestures and elements are part of it, e.g. what path could it take? What might be carried?
4. What do you think is the difference between proclamation and reading out loud? What might storytelling have to do with Scripture proclamation?
5. List ten actions we do in the Liturgy of the Word. Choose three and explain their significance.
6. What is sung during the Liturgy of the Word and why? What could be sung?
7. Explain the different roles of the intercessor and the assembly during the General Intercessions.

Practical Applications/Critical Thinking

1. What does it mean to let Scripture illuminate our political, social and business decisions? What are some of those decisions?
2. Do you have an important family story? Why is it important? What does it say about your family?
3. How can you form students to *proclaim* the word instead of just *read* it? What skills do they need? How much practice?
4. What are your favorite stories from both Testaments? Do the stories have anything in common?
5. What can you do before and after liturgy to help children listen more actively during the Liturgy of the Word?

Vivian E. Williams, a former Catholic school teacher and parish catechist, now serves as the liturgy director for a local Catholic Church. Vivian is a M.A.P.S. candidate in Word and Worship at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and frequently speaks and writes on liturgical topics. She often serves as a presenter for the Fostering Faith Institute for Catechist Formation.