

St. Therese Catholic Church
Canton, Texas

Lenten Reflection - The Gospel Procession

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Last week Deacon Larry introduced the theme of these Lenten reflections, on the processions of the Mass. He spoke about the Entrance Procession, and he noted that the focal point of any Catholic Church (and therefore, of the liturgical processions) is the Altar, which symbolizes Jesus Christ in a special way. In particular, the Altar represents Christ as Priest and also as the willing, perfect Victim of the priestly sacrifice that is necessary for our salvation.

Christ is also present to us in the liturgy through His Word and in His ordained Ministers. Through His Church, He discharges not only His office of Priest, but also of Prophet - proclaiming the Word of God - and of King - one who maintains order and presides over the assembly of the faithful. Just as the Altar reminds us of Christ as our Priest, so the Ambo reminds us of Christ as Prophet, and the Chair (you know, the big one over there with red cushions) reminds us of Christ as King. These three elements of the liturgical environment are connected by the Gospel Procession, at the apex of the Liturgy of the Word, the first part of the Mass.

The Gospel Acclamation ("Alleluia", except during Lent) signals the start of the Gospel Procession. All assembled stand, and the minister of the Gospel goes to the Presider in the Chair and receives from him a blessing to proclaim the Gospel. If the Presider is also serving as the minister of the Gospel, he simply proceeds from the Chair to the Altar, where, bowing his head, he asks the Lord directly for a blessing. Other ministers of the Gospel, besides the Presider, proceed from the Chair to the Altar and reverence it with a bow. If a special Book of the Gospels is provided, the minister picks it up and elevates it so the people can see it, and then he proceeds from the Altar to the Ambo, where he will either place the Book of the Gospels open to the correct passage, or ensure the Lectionary is open to the Gospel for the day.

In a solemn celebration of the Mass, the minister of the Gospel may be accompanied by incense and lights, born by assisting ministers, acolytes or altar servers, from the Chair to the Altar to the Ambo.

At the Ambo, once the Gospel Acclamation is concluded, the minister of the Gospel greets the people, "The LORD be with you," and the people respond, "And with your spirit." In this response, the people acknowledge that the minister of the Gospel has been ordained for this purpose, and they are asking that the spirit of his ordination, that portion of the Holy Spirit of God invested in him on that occasion, is enlivened at this time for this proclamation.

The minister of the Gospel then traces the sign of the Cross over the Gospel passage while announcing it, "A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew / Mark / Luke / John." To this announcement the people respond, "Glory to You, O Lord." As they do so, the minister and the people trace three small crosses on their forehead, over their lips, and on their chest. One

interpretation of this triple cross gesture is that in thought, word and deed (or will) they dedicate themselves to living the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their own lives.

In a solemn celebration of the Mass, the minister of the Gospel then incenses the book.

The minister proclaims the Gospel passage, and at its conclusion announces, "The Gospel of the Lord," to which the people respond, "Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ." Note that the Gospel of the Lord is not a book of printed words, but rather of spoken words, heard by people, like you and me, who are then expected to live it. Jesus lived the Gospel, and His Apostles, who witnessed Him doing so for at least three years, later gave testimony to His lived Gospel by their spoken words, so that others might hear and believe in Jesus. Some of those early disciples wrote down the words of the Apostles, many of which included the actual words that Jesus spoke (although in different languages), so that later generations might have a record of this essential Apostolic witness. In our day, the minister of the Gospel starts with the printed words, then proclaims them in spoken word, so that we might hear, and by hearing the words of the Gospel, the words of and about Jesus Christ Himself, we might understand more clearly how to live His Truth, His Way and His Life.

The minister then kisses the Gospel passage just proclaimed, praying in a low voice, "Through the words of the Gospel may our sins be wiped away." If a bishop is presiding at the Mass, the minister carries the book to the bishop, who kisses the passage. This prayer reminds us of the words of Jesus, recorded in John 15:3, "You are already pruned (or cleansed) because of the word that I spoke to you."

If the Book of the Gospels has been used, the minister of the Gospel may place it in a special place before the Homily is preached. If the Lectionary has been used, it will normally be closed and placed inside the Ambo.