

The Gospel (Part 2)

We've looked at the Gospel acclamation, the Alleluia, some of the blessings of the Deacon, and the secret prayers of the priest, as well as the procession that leads up to the great moment of the reading of the Gospel. Now we want to look at what happens when the Gospel is actually read. And this is what the missal says about the reading of the Gospel:

The Deacon, or the Priest, then proceeds to the ambo, accompanied, if appropriate, by ministers with incense and candles. *There he says: The Lord be with you. The people reply: And with your spirit.*

The Deacon, or the Priest [says or chants]: A reading from the holy Gospel according to N [Matthew, Mark, Luke or John]. and, at the same time, he makes the Sign of the Cross on the book and on his forehead, lips, and breast. The people acclaim: Glory to you, O Lord.

Then the Deacon, or the Priest, incenses the book, if incense is used, and proclaims the Gospel. At the end of the Gospel, the Deacon, or the Priest, acclaims: *The Gospel of the Lord.* All reply: *Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.*

Then he kisses the book...

This is important. It's not over with that

...saying quietly: Through the words of the Gospel may our sins be wiped away.¹

And then follows the homily. So those are the rites of the reading of the Gospel as described in the Roman Missal. So we want to ask ourselves, where does this come from? The announcement of the Gospel, the greeting, the use of incense for the Gospel. The response to the Gospel, you know, "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ," the symbolism of making the sign of the cross on the forehead and the lips and the

¹ Roman Missal, *The Order of Mass*, nos. 15-16.

breasts. Where's that from? And then finally, the kissing of the book and the saying of the secret prayer by the priest, "Through the words of the Gospel may our sins be wiped away." Especially that last line, because it makes it sound like the reading of the Gospel somehow has the power to wipe away sin, to forgive sin. Heard that before? Okay, where's that from? What's that mean? Where's this all from in Scripture and tradition? So, we'll walk through it step by step and try to unpack it.

Let's begin with the greeting itself. So when the deacon or priest is going to announce the Gospel, they can say or they can sing with a chant, "The Lord be with you" and we respond "And with your spirit." Where's that from? Well, again, this is one of those passages where it goes back to ancient Judaism. So, you might have missed this, but in the book of Ruth, which is one of the shortest books in the Old Testament, but it's just a fantastic story. In the Book of Ruth 2:4, you may remember the famous story, Naomi and Ruth lose their husbands, and so Naomi is going to return to her people in Israel. And although Ruth is a Moabite. In other words, she's from the tribe of Moab. She's a gentile. She's from a pagan tribe who is normally considered an enemy of Israel. She's grown so close to Naomi that she wants to stay with her and says, you know, I want your God to be my God, your people to be my people. So in that context, we read this, that Boaz, who is an Israelite living in the land, finds Ruth, the Moabite, gleaning among the reapers of grain in the field. And listen to how he greets her:

And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem; and he said to the reapers, "*The Lord be with you!*" (Latin *Dominus vobiscum*) And they answered, "The Lord bless you."² (Ruth 2:4)

That expression, "The Lord be with you" is just a kind of standard ancient Israelite blessing. If you want to greet someone, you want to greet them with a blessing, it's kind of a request for God to bless whomever you come across. So he would say, "The Lord be with you," right? And then they respond, "The Lord bless you." So it's a standard back and forth blessing. So the first part of the greeting for the Gospel that the deacon or priest will say, "The Lord be with you." It is from the book of Ruth. The second part is not from the Old Testament but from the New

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Testament. So if you go and you look at the writings of St. Paul for example, he will sometimes use this also, again as a standard Jewish blessing. In 2 Timothy 4:22, at the very end of his letter to Timothy, Paul says:

The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.

So, what the liturgy has done here in this traditional greeting and response, is it has taken two expressions from Scripture: "The Lord be with you," like Boaz says to the reapers in the field. And then we say "and with your spirit," which is like what St. Paul says to Timothy in the Letter To Timothy. So these are, just again, the inspired words of Scripture being placed on the mouth of the priest and deacon and the people in blessing one another before the Gospel is read.

Second, the actual reading of the Gospel itself in the liturgy is a fulfillment of something we've already looked at, namely, Jesus coming into the synagogue at Nazareth, at the very beginning of his public ministry, and proclaiming the Gospel. In Luke 4:16 and following, Jesus goes into the synagogue at Nazareth, is given the book of the prophet Isaiah, and when he is given that book, he stands up and says these words:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news... to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."
And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The Greek word there is *euangelisasthai*. It could be translated, literally, to preach the Gospel, to preach the good news, to preach the good message. And then he's going to sit down and say "this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And then he's going to give his first sermon, his first homily. So the words "proclaim the Gospel" is going to be the basis for what we do in the liturgy today. Just like

Jesus is going to proclaim the good news of His coming as the Messiah, who's going to bring salvation to the people of Israel, and then ultimately to the Gentiles as well, so too in the liturgy today, every time the liturgy is celebrated, the good news, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, according to Matthew or Mark or Luke or John, the words and deeds of Christ and how they fulfill the Scriptures is going to be proclaimed in our presence in the liturgy, in the reading of the Holy Gospel. And sure enough, elsewhere in the New Testament, for example, at the end of Gospel of Mark, Jesus is going to say to the Apostles:

Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation.

So that's in Mark 16. Jesus commands the Apostles to preach the Good news, to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth. So what we're doing in the Gospel Reading, it is pretty simple in terms of its biblical roots, is just fulfilling Jesus' command. We're following His command. We're imitating Him who was the first to preach the Gospel in the synagogue liturgy, and we're fulfilling His command, we're obeying His word to the Apostles to go out and preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth. And the highest form of the Gospel is, of course, the words of Christ Himself.

So that's where the Gospel Reading comes from in Scripture. What about in Sacred Tradition? Well, there are certain aspects of the Gospel reading that are really fascinating and worth highlighting. First, it's really interesting that the Gospel, because it was so solemn and so significant, that there was a tradition going back into the early Church, especially in the Church of Rome, of the Gospel not just being read, but being chanted, being chanted, and chanted in particular by the Deacon. And maybe you've been to the a Mass, a Solemn Mass, where the Gospel is chanted in this way. Well, this goes all the way back at least to the 6th century. So there was a Synod in Rome in the 6th century that actually gave some rules about the chanting of the Gospel by the Deacon. So I want you to listen to this and get a little window into the ancient mass in Rome. It says this quote:

It has long been customary in the Roman church to ordain cantors as deacons, and, furthermore, to use them for singing rather than for preaching and caring for the poor.

All right, so pause there. All the way back to the New Testament, the deacons had, as, you know, some of their principal tasks: They would preach and they would give alms to the poor. Think here about the deacons who were chosen in the book of Acts to care for the widows and others who were in need of financial support, and also food and things like that in the Church. So the deacons were set up to assist them. But, they said it also became a custom in the Roman Church to appoint deacons who could sing to be the ones who chanted the Gospel. The Synod continues:

As a result at divine services a good voice is more appreciated than a good life. Consequently no deacon may henceforth sing in the church except for the gospel at Mass. The remaining lessons and psalms shall be sung by subdeacons or, if necessary, by those in minor orders.³

Okay, so what the Synod at Rome here appears to be addressing is the fact that the deacons had been appointed to preach, to give alms, and to sing the Gospel. But apparently, some deacons who had really good voices were doing all of the singing and all of the chanting, or they were starting to sing more than just the Gospel. So the Synod of Rome had to restrict that and say no, no, no, the other readings can be done by people who aren't in Holy Orders. They're what we call minor orders at the time. Subdeacons. There were also the offices of Lector, who would be people who did the readings. There were people called Cantors who would chant the Responsorial Psalm. Basically what the council is saying here is that those other readings and psalms need to be sung or read by someone else, but the Deacon has the task of chanting the Gospel. That's his particular role as Deacon, is to be the one who proclaims the Holy Gospel. So to this day in the Roman liturgy, if a Deacon is present at Mass, you will notice that the Deacon will read the Gospel, because that is the ancient tradition of the Church at Rome. Even if a priest is there, it's the deacons proper task to be the one who either reads or chants the Gospel. As a side note, the Synod of Rome was held July 5th, 595 AD, and that was during the pontificate of Pope St. Gregory the Great. So you can see that these are some of the liturgical reforms that happened during the period when St.

³ *Synod of Rome* (July 5, 595 AD), Canon 1. This Synod was held during the pontificate of Pope Gregory the Great. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 4:58.

Gregory was Pope in Rome. As another side note, I should note here that although it was the Deacon who had the proper role of saying or reciting or proclaiming the Gospel at the time of old Gregory the Great, eventually in the later Middle Ages that role is going to be appropriated by the priest. So that the priest is going to be the one who ordinarily says both the Epistle and will often say the Gospel. And one of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council was to restore that ancient Roman custom, going back to St. Gregory the Great and the time of Gregory the Great, of the Deacon proclaiming, chanting, and reading the Gospel at Mass.

Okay, so that's just one aspect of the tradition. What about the sign of the cross? So one of my favorite aspects of the Gospel is when the when the Deacon says "A reading from the Holy Gospel..." and he makes the sign of the cross on the book, on his forehead, lips, and breasts, and we do that along with him, right? That gesture is very significant. So where's that from? This is from the tradition. Again, this is a medieval tradition. So not an ancient tradition, but a medieval tradition in the Roman liturgy. And we find it witnessed in the 9th century AD in the writings of a great figure, Amalar of Metz. Amalar was a Bishop and he was a liturgical theologian who actually was a member of the court of King Charlemagne. So at the time of Charlamagne, there were lots of liturgical reforms that took place, a great interest in the theology of the liturgy, and Amalar wrote this two-volume set on the Liturgy, which was a kind of classic work of the theology of the Liturgy, explaining each part of the Mass at the time of King Charlemagne. So in Amalar's book on the Latin liturgy of his day in the 9th century, he describes the liturgy of the Gospel reading as follows. So let me just give you, again, pretend you're in the court of Charlemagne, and it's the early 9th century, late 8th century, early 9th century AD, right, the turn of the century, honestly. And this is what's happening at Mass, Amalar says this quote:

Now we should rise for the words of the Gospel...

So notice, everybody stands up.

Then the bishop places incense over the coals in the censer, to bring forth a sweet odor...

So they are using incense.

*After this the deacon seeks a blessing from the priest. The priest says to him:
“May the Lord be in your heart and on your lips.”*

We've already seen that elsewhere

Let the deacon listen carefully, that his heart may go forth with the words of the Lord and that the priest's prayer may not be fruitless. Let him keep in mind the Lord, whom he receives through the priest's blessing. And that he may not breathe out the words he has received or introduce harmful words, he is fortified with the sign of the cross, made over his head by the priest.

So pause there. To this day, the priest makes the sign of the cross over the Deacon. That goes all the way back to the 9th century. That's a medieval Roman practice.

*Then he goes up to the altar to take up the Gospel book for the reading....
Upon the deacon's greeting...*

So he's the one who greets everyone.

...all the people should turn toward him. Afterward the priest and all the people turn to the east, until the deacon begins to speak of the Lord, and they make a cross on their foreheads.

So pause here. I can't go into orientation and direction in this video in any detail, but for our purposes here, what you want to note is that there are certain directions and postures that are taken during the liturgy that have a significance. So when the Deacons reading and greeting the people, they face one another and then they face the East after that, because the East is going to be a very significant direction in liturgical prayer throughout Church history. For now, the most basic point you should realize is that the East was associated with the coming of Christ, who in Matthew 24 says:

For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man.

This was associated with the coming of Christ. And as they turn to the East, they do something significant. They make a cross on their foreheads. So we can already see that in the Middle Ages it wasn't just the sign of the cross being made over the Deacon, but the laity would make a sign of the cross on their foreheads to mark themselves. And Amalar says this:

This [meaning the sign of the cross] should not be considered purposeless: Each of the faithful strives to fix upon his own soul the same sign that the priest fixed upon the heart of the deacon through his prayer... *He who is not very quick should at least say—I borrow these words from the Gospel — “Glory to you, Lord” [Gloria tibia, Domine is the Latin. Luke 14:10, Latin Vulgate].*

So when we make the sign of the cross and say "glory to you Lord," we're actually quoting the Gcriptures again, it's from the Gospel of Luke 14, but it's in the Latin.

*After this prayer, let all fortify themselves with the sign of the holy cross to confirm all that they have planted in their mind by thinking and speaking well.*⁴

So what's Amalar saying there? This is really interesting. His point is that after the Deacon announces the Gospel, we say "Glory to you, Lord," and we make the sign of the cross on the forehead in order to say, Lord, in effect, write Your word on my mind. Let it be planted in my mind so that I might think and speak well. So you can see here, while it's going to develop too, that we not only cross our forehead, but we also cross our mouths, right? So that we might not just think in conformity with the cross, but we might speak in conformity with the cross. And then eventually it's also going to develop where you'll cross the breast so that our hearts might be configured to the Gospel, if you think with the same symbolic meaning of

⁴ Amalar, *On the Liturgy*, 3.18. In Amalar of Metz, *On the Liturgy*, 2:105, 107. Cf. *Missa Illyrica* 1, 4, IV.

the action. So this moment of crossing the forehead and saying "Glory to you, Lord," is a medieval custom that is really meant to highlight the solemnity of this moment of hearing the holy Gospel not just proclaimed, but received into the mind, spoken on our lips and written onto our hearts. You almost think here of the ancient Jewish *Shema*, which says to write the word of the Lord in the heart so we might love the Lord our God with all our mind, all our soul, and all our hearts. Okay, that's the sign of the cross and that aspect of it. That's in the 9th century. There's another element, though. By the 13th century, that sign of the cross has developed to the forehead, the mouth, and the breast. So these things take time. There are these changes in the 9th century. They're just crossing the forehead. But by the 13th century, it's going to be forehead, lips, and mouth.

Okay, so if we move into the 13th century, there's another important book on the Mass by a man named William Durand, or you sometimes hear it as Durandus, there are all kinds of ways people will pronounce it. But in his *Rational Explanation of the Mass*, in explaining the rationale and the reasons for the various liturgical rites, in this famous book, which was one of the most widely read books in the Middle Ages after the Bible itself, he actually gives us a witness to the 13th-century medieval custom of signing the mouth, forehead, and breast, after the reading of the Gospel, and this is what William Durand says about the meaning of that rite:

After the reading of the Gospel has been announced to them, ...those hearers of the Gospel, rejoicing in the praise of their Savior, cry out together, saying: "Glory to you, O Lord..."

So same thing we do today.

And when they are saying these words, they likewise fortify themselves against the Devil with the sign of the cross on their forehead, their mouth, and their breast, so that he will not prevent them from hearing the Gospel. On the forehead, because that this the locus of modesty and shame... They do this on the mouth; they signify that they boldly preach the cross of the Lord.... The sign on the breast is done to signify that the words of the Gospel

ought to strike us in our heart and mind.⁵ (William Durand, *Rationale of the Divine Offices*, IV.24.28)

So notice something really important here. Here, William Durand is alluding to the Parable of the Sower, which says (Matthew 13):

“A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them.

And when Jesus gives the explanation of that parable, he says that this represents those who hear the word of God, but Satan comes and steals the words out of their hearts. They fall away. They lose the faith. So what Durand is doing is linking the Parable of the Sower with this symbolic action at the reading of the Gospel and saying that the sign of the cross isn't just a prayer to ask the Lord to write the word on our mind, on our lips and our heart, the sign of the cross was always seen as an act of...in the ancient Church it was often primarily seen too as a sign of protection against spiritual acts of the enemy, right A protection from the devil, a protection from Satan. And so here, William Durand takes that and says that when you sign yourself, you're protecting yourself against the devil, so that the devil will not prevent you from hearing the Gospel. It's basically a prayer to not be like the first type of soil in the Parable of the Sower, where the devil sterile steals the word away. And let's be honest with one another. If we think about how many times I've been to Mass and the word wasn't planted in my ears, it wasn't planted in my mind, it wasn't planted in my heart. It just kind of washed over me and I didn't really listen to it. I didn't hear it. It didn't impact me, right? Well, Durand says that's what the triple cross is for. It's to protect us against having the word stolen from us by the devil, but rather having that seed planted deep in our minds, our lips, and in our hearts so that we might not be ashamed of the gospel, he says the forehead for shame, so that we might boldly preach the good news, that's the mouth. And so that the word strikes us in our hearts. It's not enough to just change our minds, we have to change our hearts. And that's what this whole ritual of the triple crossing during the Gospel Reading is for. So this is a very powerful gesture. It's a very powerful sign. It's a beautiful vestige of just how medieval the Mass is, how deeply

⁵ In Durand, *Rationale IV*, 208-209.

rooted the Roman liturgy, the contemporary Roman liturgy is in the medieval worship of the Catholic Church, in the 9th century and the 13th century.

One last aspect here too, is what about that prayer? After we've done that and the Gospel is read and we all say "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ", which by the way is not the same as Alleluia. Alleluia is praise the Lord, but Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ is a different phrase. It's actually an English translation of a Latin phrase, so it's not identical there. But it is a final acclamation of praise to Jesus, for having heard the Gospel we give thanks, right? We praise him for the good news that he has given to us. But after that, the priest kisses the book of the Gospel and says "Through the words of the Gospel may our sins be wiped away." Where's that from? Again, this is from the Roman tradition. This is from the medieval tradition in particular, of secret prayers of the priest surrounding the Gospel reading. So this one goes back to the 11th century AD. So there's a Mass, a form of the Mass called the *Missa Illyrica*. It's a Latin Mass from the 11th century. And in that missal, the priest prays the prayer:

Through the words of this holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ may our Lord remit all of our sins.⁶

That is a very important prayer because it shows how highly the medieval Church esteemed the reading of the Gospel. When we read the Gospel today, we kind of think, Oh well, you know, I'm going to read the Gospels and I'm going to get information right. I'm going to learn about what Jesus did or what Jesus said. And that is true, you do get information, right. But in the medieval Church, they recognized that because the word of the Gospel is the word of Jesus Christ and is the inspired words of the God-man, they also believe that the Gospel words had the power to cleanse not just our minds from error, but to cleanse us from sin. There was an atoning power of the Gospel reading itself. So, although the remission of mortal sin is something that can only take place in the sacrament of Confession, the theology of the Mass itself and of the medieval Church that we see represented here by this prayer, was that when we listen to the Gospel and receive it, and we're rightly disposed, it actually wipes away venial sin. It has the power to remit sin. And I, at least from my experience, I don't think many Catholics recognize that.

⁶ *Missa Illyrica* 1, 4, IV (1030 A.D.). Cf. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, 1:450 n. 62.

They don't think of the Gospel in that way. So, if you're like me and you have venial sins that you would like to be wiped away in the liturgy to prepare your heart to receive the Holy Eucharist in a state of purity and grace, then this moment in the liturgy is a really important one, especially for the priests. Obviously, it's a secret, so we don't hear it as much. But whether we hear it or not, that's happening during the reading of the Gospel. So an attentive reading of the Gospel during the Liturgy of the Word is something that actually can cleanse from us from sin? Venial sin, obviously, not unrepentant mortal sin, but venial sin and prepare us and our hearts to receive the Holy Eucharist. So, this is a very important part of the liturgy.

And sure enough, this is going to come over to us in the theology of this part of the Mass. So I just like to end by kind of asking the question, okay, we have all these signs and symbols, all these words and gestures. We have the prayers, the praise of glory, the marking of the forehead, the use of incense—I didn't mention that one. I'm going to come back and do, in a separate episode, a whole video on incense. But for now, we're just answering this question. Why do we use incense in the Gospel Reading? Well, as we've already seen, this is part of the Roman tradition going back to the 7th century, that incense in Solemn Masses would be used with the Gospel Reading. For our purposes here, I just want to make one quick point, namely that whenever incense is used, it's always a sign of two things: prayer and sacrifice. Prayer and sacrifice, right? So you'll see Psalm 141:2 talk about incense rising up like prayer at the time of the evening sacrifice. So, when we use incense with a Gospel Reading, what we are doing is venerating the book of the Gospels and lifting up the prayers of the people with the Gospel. But there's also a kind of a sacrificial dimension to the Gospel reading, and we can see that through the secret prayer of the priest, that through the words of the Gospels our sins are being wiped away. So, very powerful.

So, it's not an either/or. Multiple things are going on with the Gospel. On the one hand, the truth is being proclaimed to the people. The people are hearing it, they're receiving it. But at the same time, too, the proclamation of the Gospel has this sacrificial element to be able to cleanse us of venial sin. And so it's fitting that incense would be used both to venerate the Gospel book, but also to lift up the prayers of the people that flow from the Gospel that they're hearing. So, there's

more...we'll talk more about incense in a different video, but that just gives you an idea of what's happening. There's a lot going on. Pay attention during the rituals of the reading of the Gospel. This is a very, very solemn moment in the Liturgy of the Word.

And the reason it's solemn is simple. It's quite simple. It's this. It's that when the Gospel is read, unlike the reading of St. Paul where Paul is speaking to us, or unlike the reading of the Psalms where David might be singing to us, or unlike the reading of the Torah where Moses is giving the words to us, the reading of the Gospel, in the reading of the Gospel Christ himself speaks. And St. Augustine summed this up beautifully when he said this. What's happening during the liturgy? Christ is speaking to us in the Gospel:

The reading from the holy gospel, which I recently spoke to your graces about, is followed by the passage that was read today... *So then, let us listen to the gospel as if the Lord himself were present here; and let us not say, "Oh how fortunate were those who could actually see him!" because many of those who saw him also killed him, but many of us who have not seen him have also come to believe. The precious words, after all, that fell from the lips of the Lord were written down on our behalf, and preserved for us, and have been read aloud for our sake, and will also be read aloud for our descendants, and right on till the end of the world.*"⁷

So notice what Augustine says. Some people would say, Oh, I wish I was alive in the days of Christ. I wish I could have heard him speak. I wish I could have heard the Sermon on the Mount. And Augustine is saying you have. He is. When the Gospel is read in the liturgy, Christ is truly present through His Word. There's a presence that comes through the reading of the Gospel. It's one of the reasons we surround it with all these acts of veneration. Because, there were people who heard him during his lifetime, who rejected him and killed him. We didn't hear him during his lifetime, but hearing him through the Gospel, we can now respond with faith and hear the very same words that would have fallen from his lips during his earthly life. They're going to be read aloud for us, as he says, for our sake. They're

⁷ In Saint Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John 1-40* (Works of Saint Augustine I/12; trans. Edmund Hill, O.P.; Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2009), 496.

going to be read aloud for our descendants all the way down to the end of the world, because the Gospel of Jesus Christ is still being preached today. His words are still echoing in the halls of human history every time the Gospel reading is read in the Holy Mass. So, for me at least, this is very important to emphasize this, although it is of course true that in the Gospel reading Christ is not substantially present in the same way He is in the Blessed Sacrament. In the Blessed Sacrament, the Eucharist, Jesus is present body, blood, soul, and divinity.

But there is another mode of presence, and that you might call His verbal presence, that takes place through the Gospel. And it is a real kind of presence in that His words are really being proclaimed and really being heard and really transforming hearts and minds in a way that should not be neglected. We should not just blow over the Liturgy of the Word or allow the the seeds of the sower to fall on the ground because we're not listening carefully, we're not attentive to the Gospel. And so the Church gives us things to do. Standing at attention. Gives us signs to make, praying that we be protected through the cross from the enemy taking the word away from us. And words to say, "praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ," in thanksgiving for the great gift of the good news of Jesus Christ in the Holy Gospel.