

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD AT THE EUCHARIST

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Much of what has become part of our service of Holy Eucharist or Mass developed by the fourth century due to changes that took place in the life of the Church and the Roman Empire. First of all, the Christian community had long since ceased to be primarily Jewish. This meant that Christians were no longer attending the synagogue on the Sabbath, as the first generation of Christians had done. Now the service of the synagogue, called the *synaxis*, had to be brought into the Church. This is essentially what the Ministry of the Word is: readings of Scripture, Psalms, and prayers. Also by this time the canon of Holy Scripture had more or less been determined by the Church, so Christians knew what to read. Moreover, Christianity had become first decriminalized and then later the official religion of the Empire, so instead of meeting in homes in secret, Christians could now build churches and repurpose pagan temples for Christian worship. This created the need for formal entrances and recessions at the beginning and end of service.

The readings at the Holy Eucharist usually numbered three. The first was called the Prophecy, and was taken from Hebrew Scriptures, what we usually call the Old Testament. The second was called the Epistle and was taken from the writings of St. Paul or one of the other Apostles. The third was the Holy Gospel, and because it contained the words of Christ himself, was attended with greater dignity and honor, to the point of being carried into the midst of the congregation with accompanying candles and incense.

Between the readings there was usually a recitation of Psalms. The first one, between the Prophecy and the Epistle, was divided into a refrain, sung by the Deacon or Cantor, and repeated by the congregation, which was then followed by verses sung by the Deacon or Cantor alone (the congregation had no books), with the refrain repeated after every two or three verses. The Deacon led this Psalm from a step in front of the altar, called the *gradus*, so this Psalm came to be called the Gradual.

After the second reading there was another Psalm, this one sung straight through with no refrain. Because “straight through” in Latin is “tractus,” this Psalm came to be called the Tract. At some point the Tract was replaced by the Alleluia, first only in Eastertide, but then throughout the year except in Lent. The Alleluia consists of “Alleluia” sung by a Cantor such as our own Geo Flores, and then repeated by the congregation. The Cantor then sings a verse of Scripture, often based on the Gospel reading. Finally the congregation sings “Alleluia” again.

In simple said services (“Low Mass”) all of these parts still exist, but without a choir they are simply recited. The congregation rises during the Alleluia, the clergy, assistants, and congregation prepare for the reading and hearing of the Gospel.