

PROCLAIMING THE PASSION

Each year, on Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion and on Good Friday, the Passion of the Lord is proclaimed in a way distinct from the usual proclamation of the Gospel, with three readers taking different parts. This practice goes back to the Middle Ages, during the time of the composition and performance of the popular Mystery and Morality Plays, with *Everyman* perhaps being the best known. In an age when the ability to read was uncommon, these dramatizations of the scriptures (*Mystery* plays) or of moral decision-making became an important way to teach the truths of the faith.

This ancient style of catechesis found its way into the Church where the proclamation of the Passion began to echo these dramatic productions. In fact, larger churches in Europe—and even many village churches—constructed *Rood screens* between the chancel and the sanctuary wide enough for proclaimers of the Passion to climb up stairs to the top of the “screen” where the Passion was proclaimed by priests and deacons in a very dramatic fashion. (The term *Rood* was the common Middle English name for the cross, and at the top center of those screens was a massive stone or wooden cross which became something of a focal point for the Passion proclamation.)

After Vatican II, probably in an attempt to make the lengthy Passion more inclusive, it became popular for the entire assembly to take part in the Passion by reading in unison those sections that involved a “crowd” or multiple voices. That resulted in the unfortunate and understandably uncomfortable situation of everyone shouting “Crucify him, crucify him.” This practice also seems to imply that, in order to participate fully in the mass, everyone has to have something to say whereas, in fact, *listening* plays an equally important and vital role in our common prayer. Admittedly, the priest does a lot of talking and you do a lot of listening at Mass; but when the Lectors proclaim the first two readings, I don't bury my head in a book but rather *listen* to their skilled proclamation of the Word of the Lord.

But over twenty years ago, liturgical theologians and bishops began to rethink all of this and began to discourage the inclusion of the assembly in the Passion or the division of the text into “Jesus”, “speaker”, etc. which tends to turn the Passion into a play rather than a liturgical proclamation. In 1997, Cardinal Bernardin instructed the Office for Divine Worship, through their publishing arm, *Liturgy Training Publications*, to create a structure for the Passion readings that reflected a more accurate understanding of how we “participate” in the Liturgy of the Word, even when that Word is lengthy. That is the form we will begin to use next Sunday and on Good Friday, and it may require a bit of an adjustment for you.

There will still be three readers proclaiming the Passion, but they will not be divided in the way you see them in our hymnal which unfortunately continues to use the older format. Instead, the three readers will proclaim the Passion as all scripture readings are

meant to be proclaimed—as a continuous *narrative*, not a dramatization. Those parts of the Passion marked “C” for “crowd” which you had been reading will now be part of the narrative proclaimed by one of the three readers; please do NOT read those parts! In fact, if your hearing is good, this is perfect time to exercise that important participatory skill of *listening*. The narrative will pause at times for a sung refrain—that is an additional opportunity for your participation—or for *silence* which is also an important form of participation for all of us.

There is one final aspect of the Passion which shouldn't change: the Church asks us to **stand** for the proclamation of the Passion. I've been in parishes where the practice had been to ask people to sit because it was unthinkable that anyone should have to stand for such a long time. Now, if you have a bad hip or knee or back or if you're “advanced in years” and need to sit part of the time or the whole time, do that and don't feel guilty! Some years ago, a parishioner at another parish did pass out during the Passion because she was determined to soldier on, even though she was diabetic and hadn't eaten before Mass. Jesus wouldn't want any of us to faint just to prove something to him, much less to ourselves. But if you are able to stand throughout the Passion, remember: that, too, is a form of participation.

And on a completely different subject....I feel a need to explain why I haven't always been outside after 8:30 or 10a.m. Sunday Masses lately. I've always made it a priority to greet parishioners after every Mass, not just the ones at which I preside, because I feel that's a pastor's responsibility; after all, it's the only time I have to see or talk to 95% of you. But I also try to get into our Religions Education classes on Sunday mornings and visit as many classrooms as possible. During Lent, that becomes even more demanding because we need to hear confessions and I have to do Confirmation interviews with each of our 8th grade candidates. Because of those important tasks, I don't always get out of the school before Mass ends. After next weekend, it should get a bit easier.

Fr. Bob