

Why do we process a Book of the Gospels instead of the Lectionary?

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council called for a greater reverence for Scripture by Catholics, both in the Mass (n. 51) and at other times (n. 35.1, 35.4). As a result of this conciliar decree, the order of readings used at Mass was revised in the late 1960s and published in 1969 as part of the revision of the Order of Mass and the Roman Missal. This new "Lectionary for Mass" was the first time in around 1000 years that the readings proclaimed at Mass were regularly published in a book separate from the "Sacramentary," the book of prayers used by the priest.

Although the pre-Vatican II ordination rites of a deacon and a bishop both prescribed that a special Book of the Gospels be used during the ordination rites, and the rubrics for a Solemn Mass prescribed that a deacon use a special Book of the Gospels for proclaiming the Gospel, oftentimes a regular Missal, which contained the Gospel readings in it, was used instead. As a result, Western Catholics had no living tradition regarding a special Book of the Gospels, unlike Byzantine and other Catholics.

The reformed Order of Mass was approved by Pope Paul VI in 1969 along with a document called the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) that included practical rubrics and theological and spiritual explanations of the revised Mass. The 1969 GIRM presupposed that the Lectionary containing all the readings would be placed at the ambo before Mass and ready for the reader and the deacon or priest. This document also made mention of a separate Book of the Gospels, if such existed, which could either be placed on the altar before Mass began or carried during the entrance procession.

A Book of the Gospels carried in the entrance procession is mentioned in documents describing the seventh and eighth century Roman liturgies, and the "Little Entrance" with a Book of the Gospels is a dramatic moment in the first part of a Byzantine Liturgy. In referring to carrying of the Book of the Gospels during the entrance procession, the 1969 GIRM was re-introducing a practice that had historical precedents in liturgies of both East and West.

Since, however, Books of the Gospels were not available in the early 1970s, many parishes substituted carrying the complete Lectionary for a Book of the Gospels when implementing the revised Order of Mass. The practice of carrying

the complete Lectionary was, in fact, never authorized by the 1969 GIRM and is contrary to the more ancient custom of carrying the special "icon" of Christ, the book of his words, namely, the Book of the Gospels, in liturgical processions.

The third edition of the Roman Missal with the revised 2002 GIRM has attempted to clarify and update the rubrics and instructions related to the Mass based on liturgical books issued since 1975 and the experience of over 30 years of using the 1969 Order of Mass and the original GIRM. With regard to the use of the Lectionary and the Book of the Gospels, the 2002 GIRM has tried to clarify the original intent of the 1969 GIRM by specifically noting that it is the Book of the Gospels (and not the Lectionary) that is to be carried in the Entrance Procession. If a special Book of the Gospels is not available, then it is not necessary to carry any sort of "substitute" book. Carrying the cross, flanked by candles is appropriate for any entrance procession.

If a parish makes use of a special Book of the Gospels, it may be placed on the altar before Mass begins (as is the custom in the Byzantine Churches) (cf. 2002 GIRM 117) or it may be carried in the entrance procession (cf. 2002 GIRM 120d, 172) and then placed on the altar (cf. 2002 GIRM 122, 173). The Book of the Gospels remains on the altar until right before the proclamation of the Gospel (cf. 2002 GIRM 133, 175), when it is carried solemnly elevated during the singing of the Gospel Acclamation from the altar to the ambo and used for the proclamation of the Gospel.

After the Gospel, the Book of the Gospels is placed on the side table or in some other suitable place, such as a special "shrine" for the Gospels.

Christian liturgy has always focused on the person of Christ as the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures. For this reason, liturgical traditions of East and West have given special reverence to the books containing the words of Christ over books containing other sacred scriptures. Although a return to carrying only a Book of the Gospels during entrance processions may be a departure from recent practice in some U.S. parishes, it is actually a return to a more ancient Christian liturgical practice to help us focus on the person of Christ, our Risen Savior.



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