

Catechism on the Liturgy: VI, 8

The Epistle is generally taken from the New Testament, and in times of penance the Old Testament, such as on Ember days. It is always sung by the subdeacon at the solemn high Mass, for the subdeacon represents not only St. John the Baptist, but his carrying with him the Old Testament, which prepared the world for the coming of Christ. He faces the altar on the Epistle side, since the altar signifies Christ, and since the entire Old Testament looked with great longing for the Messiah.

The Epistle, whether from the Old or New Testament, is read facing the east. Like the eyes of St. John the Baptist who represents both Testaments, he fixes his eyes on the Messiah who is the "True Orient, or the orient from on high." In the solemn Mass the chant of the Epistle is the voice of one crying in the wilderness; the subdeacon sings alone and he is escorted to his place without acolytes, since the Baptist was alone, and without escort to face Herod. There are no candles around the subdeacon because as we hear in the Last Gospel about the Baptist, "...he was not the light." (Jn1.8)

In the early church the Epistles were sung at the limits of the sanctuary (which represents heaven) and of the nave (which represents earth), and stood on an elevated area or platform called the ambo, to symbolize that the Word of God descends from heaven to earth, like a pre-incarnation. To this day the subdeacon goes back a little from the altar, not quite near the altar and not quite near the nave. This too represents well the Baptist, who is between the Testaments.

When the subdeacon is finished, he goes to the middle of the sanctuary to genuflect, like he did at the beginning before singing the Epistle. This shows that Christ is the source of the Old Testament, for "In the

beginning was the Word..." Then the subdeacon goes to the corner of the altar to receive a blessing, showing Christ that blesses all the goodness of the Old Testament, even though He was rejected by Israel. We do not see this blessing in the low Mass, but remember that the paradigm of the Mass is the solemn high Mass, and not the low Mass. In return for this blessing, the subdeacon kisses the hand of the celebrant, signifying those Jews who did believe and who did love the Savior, starting with the Baptist.

The faithful remain seated for the epistle like "them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death," awaiting Christ Who is the Light. Being seated also represents the attitude of St. Mary Cleopas, who sits at the feet of Christ as one receiving teaching with docility.

When the Epistle begins, notice how sober the presentation of it is. There is no greeting of the people, no prayer for purification, and no solemn escort to the place where it is read. The subdeacon simply sings "*Lectio...*(A reading from...)" This is because the subdeacon represents the Baptist who led the most pure of lives, and spoke most plainly and alone when he preached.

At the end of the Epistle, the phrase *Deo Gratias* (Thanks be to God) is announced. The first reason for this is simply to thank God for the instruction we have received through the mouth of His messenger. We thank Him because we have just received a letter from heaven, as from a good Friend. These letters water our hearts, where the Divine seed was planted.

But there is another sense in which this phrase is used, which goes back to the time of persecution in the Roman Empire. The *Ostiarius* (the minor order of Porter)

or doorkeeper had the tough job of trying to recognize Christians who were trying to get into Mass. The watchword often given was *Deo Gratias*. So no matter how difficult the story which is depicted in the reading, no matter how strong the persecution, it is still the watchword. That is, the Epistle might be about St. Paul being shipwrecked or beaten, or St. Peter arrested and thrown in prison. But we still say "Thanks be to God", since there is nothing outside the providence of God. True, at the time when these terrible events occurred it would not have been easy to say this. But now we can even rejoice in the imprisonment of St. Paul, as he rejoiced. And the path to heaven is not easy.

The readings are repeated in a one-year cycle. The first Gospel was written in about 50 AD. This indicates that the message of the Gospel had been preached and known to the faithful for about 20 years before the text was even introduced. This is part of oral tradition. In societies where literacy was limited and the circulation of written texts uncommon, memory and tradition are all-important. A specific pattern of words is used (thus the importance of reading just one translation), so that the faithful can learn the story. We still find this custom among pre-literate children; once they hear a fairy tale they want to hear it again in exactly the same words. They will object to the slightest change of the story. We should too, being the children of the Most High. We should insist on fidelity to the text, and that the subdeacon to the celebrant would read or sing it just as it is.

I suppose someone could object to this line of thought, and say that our society is

not oral and that we are not pre-literate children. True enough. However, we need to hear these texts over and over, since repetition is the mother of all learning. And as St. Augustine said, we need to hear a parable a minimum of forty times before we can start to understand it.

In the ancient synagogue service, readings were done first from the Law, and then the prophets, arranged in a cycle. Now they are taken from any part of the Old or New Testaments, except the Gospels. They are almost always from an Apostle, which is why we call it the Epistle (*epistola* in Latin means 'letter'), given that their testimony comes down to us by means of letters. If the text is from the Old Testament, it was chosen by the Church as an illustration of the New Testament. The Church regards the entire Old Testament in light of the New Testament; as a foundation for the New Testament.

When the Epistle is read at the low Mass, the presentation must not be given in a way that looks only to the understanding of the faithful. It must be stylized in the same way as the Oration or Collect. The reader must never inject his own sentiments or even convictions (no matter how right) into the sacred text, but must present it with strict objectivity, with reverence, as if he were reverently presenting the text both to God and to the faithful on a plate of gold.

Besides, anyone who shoehorns the text into his idea of what it should sound like, winds up sounding like a goober.