



## LESSON THREE

*GOD SPEAKS OUR STORY*

*“Once you label me, you negate me...”*

– Søren Kierkegaard

How many times in our lives have we had the experience of believing that, on the basis of just a fact or two, we know someone well enough to judge whether we would be interested in knowing them further? It happens frequently in politics, particularly in the United States, which has become so mindlessly tribal in service to ideologies that a single comment on a social media thread, in context or out, is enough to have one quickly labeled, and just as quickly dismissed, as a great many assumptions are made about one’s character and intelligence. This rather kneejerk, presumptuous dismissiveness is not limited to politics, of course. We’ve all had the experience of rejecting a book or film out of hand because someone has labeled it “too-something” before we’ve really checked it out. We do it when we consider where to live, too. Let someone suggest that a school district has vague, unspecific “problems” and we’ll look at the next town over.

Sometimes we even apply Kierkegaard’s attributed negation technique to our willingness to study the saints. It’s not unusual to hear a Catholic say that he has never read Saint Therese of Lisieux because someone nicknamed “The Little Flower” could have nothing to say to him. Or to hear another say—with absolute certainty, by the way—that she would never read Thomas Merton or Dorothy Day because their ideas were “too modern.”

Generally, if such folks can be urged to put aside their assumptions and actually engage with what they’ve been so quick to label and negate, they realize they have judged too rashly. Suddenly “The Little Flower” is seen for the spiritual warrior she was; Merton and Day are appreciated for their ability to strike those interior notes we’ve permitted to go unplayed within us.

Likewise, people who had doubts over their new neighborhoods and schools can discover that they actually suit them very well. Sometimes it is even possible for instinctive opponents on social media to discover that the dismissed person actually had something to say that was worth hearing and was, in fact, kind of smart, humane, and...*nice*.



A willingness to revisit something about which we had already made up our minds can lead to deeper understanding and appreciation. And that deeper appreciation often leads us right into love.



## LOVE FOLLOWS KNOWLEDGE<sub>2</sub>

Something very similar to the examples above actually exists regarding the Mass: minds are made up quickly and liturgies are abandoned by too many, and we all miss out in ways great and small because of it.

There are many reasons why people stop attending Mass. Some of them are emotional; it is undeniable and tragic that there are in fact people carrying within them lasting wounds dealt to them by the behavior of some representative of the Church. Their trust has been broken and—for their sakes and the Church’s too—we must work very hard to help such people find healing, so they can once again feel safe enough to come to worship, where Christ, the Divine Physician, can be fully and intensely met.

Others may carry lesser, but still real, injuries. Folks who have felt marginalized or dismissed by someone prominent within the local church (anyone from a parish priest to an office secretary or grounds custodian) will sometimes declare their unwillingness to attend Mass because of the hypocrisy they have perceived in a Catholic who was himself perhaps having a bad or distracted day, and blew cold instead of warm at just the wrong time. We all have our *mea culpa* moments where we might have sent someone packing, without even realizing it.

It is entirely possible, however, that the vast majority of Catholics, particularly young adult Catholics, stay away from Mass because they don’t know *why* they should be there. They were given the sort of slap-dash catechesis that comes when parents drop kids off at a weekly 45-minute “religion class” but seldom back it up at home or through attendance at liturgies and devotions. Once confirmed and (too often) thinking they’ve “graduated from religion,” these folks believe they have taken the measure of the Mass and found it boring, or fussy, or perfunctory, or pointless. They’ve been sacramentalized, but never truly evangelized. Having never quite experienced that cognitive

moment of encounter with Christ, they do not know what they do not know, or why any of it matters.

This has been the parish reality, at least in the United States, for a couple of generations now, so in fairness, we should acknowledge that the parents of these young adults were likely sacramentalized without being evangelized as well. We didn't get where we are overnight.

In any case, these are the people who, if they can be engaged and if they have their questions addressed in a friendly, respectful, enthusiastic manner through ongoing adult formation, might actually accept an invitation to come to Mass and experience it through the lens of their more thorough understanding. Then, as Saint Catherine of Siena promises, love for the Mass, love for the Risen Christ encountered, will follow.

Precisely that circumstance happened a few years ago, and of all places, it happened on Twitter. During the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations in New York City, a Catholic writer who was very visible on that medium was tweeted at by one of the demonstrators, whose snark was directed mostly toward the Church.

In a mood to engage, she responded with good will and asked a question. After a few exchanges, it became clear that the young demonstrator was angry, yes, but also intelligent, curious, and witty. The writer, going with a hunch that her interlocutor might be Catholic, pressed the engagement and a dialogue developed. Over the course of a few weeks, the two enjoyed a broad-ranging and protracted discussion that found its own audience of "regulars" who would look in and occasionally comment. On one weekday the young demonstrator tweeted, "I actually went to Mass this morning. I liked it." The daily exchanges concluded with the demonstrator posting that he had gone to confession for the first time in fourteen years, and that it had been a very positive experience for him. "I'm receiving Communion this Sunday," he added.

After a while, the Catholic writer lost track of the young man, but she had learned a few great lessons from the exchange:

- *Talk to everyone:* Dismissing someone out of hand because of how others have labeled them, or even because of what they call themselves, makes objects of people, shuts dialogue, and ties the hands of grace.
- *Be unshaken by a hateful remark about the Church:* It quite possibly comes from some-one who has been wounded by another Catholic, or who simply does not know what she does not know.
- *Respectfully engage:* Because respectful engagement is at the core of evangelization.



- *Ask the Holy Spirit to guide the discussion:* Because we can do nothing perfectly of ourselves, but much can be achieved through us, if we are open conduits to the workings of God.

The whole story proves Catherine of Siena right: In the case of our young demonstrator, curiosity begat knowledge, knowledge begat love. “Love follows knowledge.” An impromptu online discussion ends up rousing a man’s interest in attending a Mass, so he goes. There the encounter with the Reality of Christ, made manifest through ritual and the Word, makes him want some-thing even more intense: authentic Communion with Jesus in the Flesh.

This progression should not amaze us because the truth is God wants the event, Christ wants that encounter. He gave us the Mass to facilitate it. Within the Mass, after the Introductory Rites of cleansing, praise, and petition, things really begin to open up in the Liturgy of the Word, where we take a seat and begin to listen—not because we are being lectured to, but because the Master is speaking to us and wants our full attention. This is where we really start to “get to know” God better.



## ONE WHO KNOWS MORE, LOVES MORE<sub>3</sub>

“In the beginning was the Word,” writes John in his Gospel. We are attending to a God who actually speaks, who actively communicates. The creation of the world happened on the force of God’s Word. It was spoken into being—“thought into being” as it were—and there is an eternal call-and-response extant within creation: God is forever speaking creation into being; creation is forever speaking of its Creator. The psalmist writes of mountains that shout and rivers that sing, and the heavens themselves making a proclamation of God’s glory. Take a moment, sometime, to listen to the birds and the crickets and the woodland creatures at sunrise, and again at sunset. At the very moment so many humans are chanting praise for the start of the day, or its ending, these creatures are joining in.

God speaks through all things even today; as Bishop Barron says, “All things come forth, imbued with intelligibility.” And we can certainly find God when we are out and about within creation, especially in those moments when we

see a brilliant sunset or are enthralled within a pine-scented wood or standing before the immensity of the ocean and sensing our smallness.

We can “find” God, and even praise him and give worship in those moments, but we cannot there find our fullest worship or make our deepest communication with him—one where God is truly, clearly, speaking to us, and we are truly, clearly, speaking back, and encountering the Reality of the All Good. Only the Mass can give us such space and opportunity whereby that dialogue becomes, as Bishop Barron says, “more pointed, clearer.” With each telling of the history of Israel, Barron notes—as God forms his people and sends the patriarchs and the prophets forward—“the Divine Voice is becoming clearer, more focused, more intelligible.” It speaks to us from ancient days until today, and brings forth the Word Made Flesh, who is Christ Jesus. And so, says Bishop Barron, it is time to listen.

There is something wonderful about being read to. As children, when someone reads aloud to us, we are filled with a sense of wonder but also of a kind of safety as we get comfortable and hear words that both entertain and instruct. The story is told by someone, usually a parent, who thinks we’re important enough to receive it. There is a unique kind of intimacy there, in between the words. The more frequently we are read aloud to, the more we can make out the unspoken subtext that says, “I love you” and “I am present. I am here for you.”



## THE FIRST READING

Here in the first reading (usually from the Old Testament) is the voice of I AM—of God—giving us our history, reassuring us that he has a plan, and will be faithful as it unfolds. It is true that we can hear God in the rivers and in the leaves as they rustle in the wind, but the reception is always a bit fuzzy. We can hear I AM nowhere near as distinctly in the woods as we can in these moments when a lector brings us the patriarchs and prophets and the promises of old and then declares, “The Word of the Lord.” To which we respond—because this is a true communication—“Thanks be to God!”

What we have heard is the Word, still alive, still moving among us, and so we don’t simply say, “Thank you.” We don’t even say “Amen,” even though that might seem more appropriate. Rather, we offer a phrase of thanksgiving because a conversation between living things requires real acknowledgement, and so we are thankful for the history, thankful for the instruction, thankful for the guarantee that God never gives up on us.



God speaks, we receive, and we speak back. There is a Trinitarian dynamic at work here, as Bishop Barron points out. Within the style of the lector, the speaker is still Creator, the Father. The Word spoken is the Redeemer, Christ the Son. Interpretation operates within us by the work of the Holy Spirit.

This is what is unfolding as we encounter the Living Word. Along with God, we are moving through the great story of love, redemption, and eternity that began so long ago, from the beginning of creation, through the Fall, into the covenant with Israel and the assurance of the coming Messiah, the Holy Arm of the Lord. Within the Liturgy of the Word, we are participating in what Bishop Barron calls “the story of our being drawn evermore into the right praise of God.”

It is the greatest of stories, and we are right to be worried that this chronicle is not being heard, and cannot be correctly heard if people are not coming to Mass to hear it, and to understand that the story is theirs. It is the great narrative we all belong to.

This particular part of the story is one, in fact, that the Church has fought for because, very early in the Church (around 144 AD), Marcion of Sinope led a dualist movement that argued against the inclusion of the Old Testament within the Mass. Marcionists saw the God of the Old Testament as “a fallen, compromised deity.” The true God, they reckoned, was exclusively represented within the New Testament. It was Irenaeus of Lyon who sent Marcionism packing, declaring that the only way to really understand Christ Jesus is by reading him through the writings of the Old Testament. “Only when we see that strange cross as the climax of the story of Israel, only then will we understand what it means to declare him as the King of the Nations,” says Bishop Barron.

The Old Testament is an essential part of the story of Christ, as Jesus himself demonstrated on the road to Emmaus, when he walked along with two of his disciples and explained how everything that had just occurred—the whole mystery of Christ’s triumphant entry into Jerusalem and his eventual crucifixion— fulfilled the writings of the Old Testament. It all pertained to Jesus’ coming, and his redemptive mission.

In the Liturgy of the Word, then, the first reading is Christ breaking open the Old Testament for us. So we enthusiastically say, “Thanks be to God.”



## LET US ENTER INTO THE HOUSE OF KNOWLEDGE OF OURSELVES <sup>4</sup>

After the first reading, silence comes to the fore. As Abbot Jeremy Driscoll writes, it is “primarily the silence of awe and adoration in the presence of God who has spoken to us.... The silence of the assembly at this point is the same about which we read in the book of Revelation: ‘When the Lamb broke open the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about thirty minutes’ (8:1)”<sup>5</sup> Such a silence would be impractical at Mass, but it is necessary to pause and take in what we have just heard, and to recognize our heritage.



## THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

And then, we speak back to God in the form of the psalms, the ancient, articulate prayers used by Christ himself. They are still resonant and relevant today because—in their lamentations and songs of praise, their dark rages and weary supplications, their expressions of confused disappointment—they contain the honest entirety of the human condition, perfectly expressed. Intoned by a cantor at Sunday Mass, they are an invitation by Christ. “As the assembly repeats [the antiphon], it is singing with Christ, his song to the Father,”<sup>6</sup> writes Abbot Jeremy.

As Bishop Barron notes, the Responsorial Psalm is always coordinated to the first reading; its repeated antiphon is a line that acutely represents the whole theme or mood of our response to what we have heard. It is in that sense an affirmation, or endorsement, of the Word of the Lord, and a proper response to it. Whether the particular psalm is a plea for mercy, or a cry of triumph, or an expression of pure praise, it is meant to be of a piece with the rest of the liturgy, and hence, to help us better know ourselves as “a people as his own” (Titus 2:14) that we might further pursue our relationship to God.



## THE SECOND READING

The second reading is typically, but not always, from one of the Pauline epistles. Whether from Paul, Peter, James, or Jude, the reading is always drawn from an apostolic letter be-



cause Christianity is an apostolic religion. It was born at Pentecost when the remaining Apostles (and later Paul on the road to Damascus)—those who personally saw, touched, traveled, and worked with Christ—were visited by the Holy Spirit and imbued with the wisdom and knowledge necessary to feed his sheep and build his church. “They knew him,” marvels Bishop Barron, “and our faith comes not from abstract speculation; it comes not from deductive reasoning; it comes not from mythology.” It comes, rather, from “this little band of twelve that gathered around Jesus and knew him.” The second reading, then, reminds us not simply of the origins of the church, but of its apostolic character.

The Liturgy of the Word is about to reach its zenith, the point toward which everything up to now has been leading.



## THE ACCLAMATION BEFORE THE GOSPEL (THE “ALLELUIA”)

Our reaction to the second reading is not another psalm; instead, after a brief silence, we come to our feet and a kind of fanfare is played. Incense is once again brought out, its spicy fragrance and haze directed over the Lectionary and the people, because no matter how good everything up to now has been, we are making way for the King who will instruct us with his own words.

Everything must be made ready to do him homage. While this is going on, we are echoing the words of eternal praise that pour forth from the heavenly host: *Alleluia! Alleluia!* What does it mean? It is a song of pure praise: God be praised! Praise the Lord!



## THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

As we end our praise, we remain standing. The priest or deacon proclaims the Gospel citation, and we Catholics do something that might seem a little strange: instead of making the sign of the cross over our bodies in the usual



way, we use our thumbs to trace little signs of the cross three times—over our forehead, our lips, and our heart. It is a silent proclamation of its own: May Christ live forever in our awareness, may his praise be always on our lips, and his words forever in our hearts.

Finally, the Gospel is read aloud, and in this action we are hearing the words of Christ himself. “We are about to listen to the King,” says Bishop Barron, “as he speaks directly to us.” Because this is true, when the proclamation has finished, our response is not “Thanks be to God” but instead “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.”

When it is God who is speaking...the proper way to behave is to imitate someone who has an irresistible curiosity and who listens at keyholes. You must listen to everything God says at the keyhole of your heart.<sup>7</sup>—Saint John Vianney

Since the Gospel is always read (or chanted) by a deacon or priest, the question does arise as to why, when so much of the Liturgy of the Word is facilitated by laypersons, this proclamation is reserved to ordained clergy.

That’s not a power trip, Bishop Barron explains: “whatever authority the priest or deacon has to read the gospel comes from a bishop, and a bishop is the successor of the Apostles.” Being an apostolic religion, he adds, “the authority comes from that little band of Apostles who passed their authority on through the laying on of hands, and this great unbroken chain has come down to us through the present day. And those who proclaim the Gospel have been ‘ordained’ to do so by a bishop. That’s why it’s not a power game “but an apostolic game to remind us of who this Christ is.”

“Reserving the proclamation of the Gospel to the ordained reminds us that the Gospel expresses apostolic faith in a preeminent way,”<sup>8</sup> writes Abbot Jeremy Driscoll.

Understanding why we do things as Church helps to avoid the sort of dismissive, often ill-informed, labeling that feeds misapprehensions and keeps people away from the Mass. As we grow in our knowledge of Christ and his Church, we begin to see that Catholicism is purposeful, faithful, intellectually and spiritually reasoned-out, and endlessly inviting.

“God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.”<sup>9</sup>—Saint John Paul II

## QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. St. Catherine of Siena said, “You can’t love what you don’t know.”<sup>10</sup> How does the Liturgy of the Word engender love for God and his plan for our salvation? (CCC 1073, 1082, 1103; 2 Tim 3:16-17)
2. Give some examples of how “God is forever speaking creation into being; creation is forever speaking of its Creator.” (Ps 98:4-9; Heb 1:1-3; CCC 302, 337-338, 421)
3. How is the Trinity reflected in the reading and hearing of the Scripture? (John 1:1-3; CCC 291-292)
4. Why is the Old Testament critical to the Christian faith? (Luke 24:13-35; CCC 121-122, 1094)
5. At what point in the Mass do we hear the King speaking to us? (CCC 125, 127) Through whom do we hear him, and why can only certain people proclaim this reading (CCC 857, 875)? What is our response after hearing this proclamation?

