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The Jewish Federation of Nashville and Middle Tennessee light candles April 12, 2016, at a community relations Seder at the Gordon Jewish Community Center in Nashville. (CNS/Tennessee Register/Rick Musacchio)



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To understand the Eucharist, we must remember that Jesus and his first disciples were all Jews. We might even say the first Christians were Jewish heretics because, unlike their fellow Jews, they believed Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah.

After Pentecost, the Jewish Christians continued to go to the temple to pray. If they were outside of Jerusalem, they would go to the synagogue on the Sabbath and on Sunday they would gather for a meal, imitating the Last Supper celebrated by Jesus.

Because they kept talking about Jesus as the Messiah, their fellow Jews finally got fed up and kicked them out of the synagogue.

My guess is that these excommunicated Jews started meeting on the Sabbath for their own synagogue service. Like their fellow Jews, they would read from the Jewish Scriptures, hear a sermon, say prayers and sing psalms. But to this service they added stories about Jesus, which became the Gospels, and letters from Christian leaders like Paul.

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At some point, people started complaining, "Why do we have to meet twice? Can't we combine these two services?" Thus, the adapted synagogue service became the Liturgy of the Word followed by a meal that was modeled on the last Passover celebrated by Jesus.

Today's Christian Eucharist is a combination of the Jewish synagogue service and Passover meal as adapted by the early Jewish Christians. If we forget our Jewish roots, we will never understand the Eucharist or anything else about Christianity.

The reform of the liturgy after Vatican II had a tremendous impact on the Liturgy of the Word. When I was a child, the liturgy was in Latin and the selection of Scripture readings was very limited. During weekday Masses, we often heard the parable of

the wise and foolish virgins because that Gospel was used on the feast day of a virgin saint. In any case, the priest in preaching would often ignore the readings.

After Vatican II, the service was put into English so people could understand the Scripture readings and prayers. The homilist was encouraged to preach on the readings, not on some extraneous topic. And a new lectionary was created so that over a three-year period, the Sunday readings would present a more comprehensive selection of Scripture readings. Likewise, the weekday readings presented much of the Bible over a two-year cycle.

After centuries of neglect, Catholics are being encouraged to read the Scriptures, something Protestants still do at greater rates than Catholics. Catholicism today has some of the best Scripture scholarship in the world, but sadly little of that gets down to the parish level. Seminaries still do a poor job of training priests to preach on the Scriptures. Bible study is not a big part of parish life as it is in evangelical churches.

One of the best ways to prepare for the Eucharist is to study and pray over the Scripture readings before going to church.



Pope Francis leads Benediction as he celebrates Mass marking the feast of Corpus Christi in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in this June 14, 2020, file photo.  
(CNS/Vatican Media)

The structure of the Liturgy of the Word is one of "proclamation and response." Keeping this in mind helps us understand what parts of the liturgy need emphasis and what can be downplayed.

For example, the confession of sins at the beginning of the liturgy is not essential. It actually puts the "response" ahead of the proclamation of the Scriptures.

It can also put the congregation on a roller coaster when, after a joyous opening song, the people are told to think about how bad they are and their need of forgiveness. Then we go up again, singing or reciting the Gloria. All of this before we hear the Scriptures.

The responsorial psalm is a response to the first reading and the homily should help the congregation understand how to respond to the proclaimed Word. The homily should explain the Scriptures and help the congregants apply what they have heard to their lives. Jesus told us about the Father's love and our duty to respond to his love with love for him and our neighbor. The homilist should do the same.

The creed can also be seen as a response to the Scriptures, but originally the creed was part of baptism, not the Eucharist. It was added to the Western liturgy by Pope Benedict VIII at the insistence of Emperor Henry II in 1014. Overemphasizing the creed can limit our response to an intellectual assent rather than a life of Christian action.

The prayers of the faithful should also be a response to the word we have heard, turning to our loving Father as proclaimed in the Scriptures and asking him to help us and our brothers and sisters.

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In ancient time, the prayers of the faithful often ended with the Lord's Prayer and a kiss. Early Christians often concluded prayers with a kiss, just as a family might conclude saying the rosary with hugs and kisses. Tertullian (d. 220) asks, "What prayer is complete without the holy kiss?" For him, the kiss was an affirmation, an "Amen," to everything that went before it.

The kiss at the end of the Liturgy of the Word was a sign of our common commitment to our covenant with God as described in the Scriptures. It was a "shaking on a deal." It is possible that Christians ended their synagogue service with a kiss while it was still on Saturday, before the service was joined to the Christian meal on Sunday.

When the services were joined, the kiss remained and some then reinterpreted it in the context of Matthew 5:23-24: "if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

But its original meaning was an affirmation of what went before, not a preparation for what followed. However, when the Lord's Prayer was moved closer to Communion, the kiss went along with it.

During the pope's visit to Congo, we may have seen a different arrangement of the Liturgy of the Word. The Congolese Rite begins with an invocation of saints and ancestors who are asked to "Be with us" as we celebrate the Eucharist. The penitential rite and sign of peace come after the homily, which better fits the "proclamation/response" ideal.

My only problem with this sequence is that it makes confession of sin the only possible response to the Scripture readings. The Scriptures call us to do a lot of things other than confess our sins. It especially calls us to follow the example of Christ in living lives of justice, healing and love. It calls us to continue his mission in the world. Sin does not have to be the principal focus of every Liturgy of the Word.

Proclamation and response are at the core of the Liturgy of the Word. The Word is proclaimed, and we are called to respond.

An integral part of that response is celebrating the Eucharist. We respond to the Word by celebrating the Eucharist, in which we give praise and thanks to the Father

for his actions in the world. We unite ourselves with Christ's sacrifice and pray that by the power of the Eucharist we may be transformed into the Body of Christ continuing his mission of love and justice in the world.

But that is for next week's column.