

Why Do We Reverence the Book of the Gospels?

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The Book of the Gospels contains readings from the Gospels according to Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. Selections from the four accounts of the Gospel are proclaimed over the three years of the Sunday and solemnity cycle of readings. The other readings, namely the First Reading from the Old Testament (except in Easter when the First Reading is chosen from the Acts of the Apostles), the Psalm, and the Second Reading from the New Testament letters are proclaimed from the Lectionary. The Gospel proclamation “is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, #60). Therefore, the Gospel readings are themselves typeset into a beautifully decorated liturgical book.

The procession of the Book of the Gospels sometimes includes servers carrying candles and incense. The assembly and ministers stand while the book is being processed and sing, “Alleluia” (or “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ” in the season of Lent). The book is placed on the ambo, opened to the correct page, and at times incensed. The Gospel selection for the particular Sunday or feast day is proclaimed, and the minister venerates the Book of the Gospels with a kiss. Processing, incensing, standing, singing, and kissing the book are liturgical gestures or actions that speak of the Christian community’s care for the word of God.

The Book of the Gospels is a sign and symbol of Christ’s active presence in the proclamation of the word of God. Symbols participate in the reality made present. They make Christ tangible. Think of a photograph. A photograph is a historical snapshot of someone or something at a particular time, in a particular place. Symbols are like photographs, but more so because they speak of divine presence. Symbols are images of the divine mystery in this time and in this place. Images are windows into divine mystery. Because divine mystery is so vast, and beyond human categories, images or symbols are



windows into an aspect of who God is for humanity, and for all of creation. The Book of the Gospels is a symbol of our access to God, through Jesus the Christ and made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. The book is a symbol of Christ, who is present, speaking to this Christian community, at this time and in this place.

The Book of the Gospels contains not only the words of scripture, but is processed, incensed, and kissed because it is Christ who speaks when the scriptures are proclaimed in liturgy. The word “gospel” means “good news.” The “good news” is not something but someone. Jesus Christ is indeed good news. His words call us to listen, to hear, to take to heart the message, in order that we can be transformed by his very presence as the proclamation of his words, as good news, to a people who long for truth, goodness, and beauty. By incensing the Book of the Gospels, processing with it, and kissing it following the proclamation, the Church and minister is venerating or reverencing Christ himself, who is the word of God.

The word reverence comes from the Latin word for “fear.” This is not a dreadful fear. Rather, the Latin word conveys the meaning of awe. When something is full of awe, it calls one to contemplate, to pay attention by focusing our senses on the person or thing. We begin to ask, “Why does this (person or object) move me?” The proclamation of God’s very word, housed in the Book of the Gospels, should indeed be awesome. It should stir our being to pay attention, to contemplate the depth of meaning, and to live the Word of Christ in our daily life. We reverence the Book of the Gospels because Christ is present in the proclamation of his words, calling us to live these words in our life.

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