The Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist: One Act of Worship

In 1963 Vatican II, intent upon renewing the life of the Church, published one of its most important documents: the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Since then, Catholics have become familiar with many aspects of the Church’s prayer and, in particular, the two principal parts of the Mass: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. In the first, we listen to the Scripture readings of the day. In the second, after praying the Eucharistic Prayer, we receive the risen Lord in Holy Communion. As familiar as these two parts of the Mass might be, we can find ourselves puzzled by the Church’s teaching that both parts constitute one act of worship (SC 1 § 56). “Worship” implies a conscious action of offering praise or thanksgiving. Yet our experience is sometimes largely that of inactive listening to the readings (which we have heard many times before) and, perhaps, even inactive listening as the priest celebrant prays the Eucharistic Prayer which follows (and which we have also already heard many times before).

To enter into both parts of the Sacred Liturgy – the Word and the Eucharist – and experience both together as one act of worship does indeed require action. It first requires conscious, active listening to the Scriptures being read. Fundamentally, however, the act of worship is more a spiritual one of response via a movement of the heart. This response comes only with truly receiving the word of God – not as God’s word to past ages – but as God’s living, redemptive and effective word to his people today. This active reception of God’s word is truly a divine encounter. In this, the Father through his Son Jesus is speaking to us his word of salvation. It is a word that, through the power of the Spirit can touch, comfort, or even shame or chastise, but always it will be a saving word! It is able to move us to a response of obedience – to acting on the word in the Spirit-given desire of the heart that is moved to conversion and praise.

Of course, God’s ultimate “word” to us is Jesus Christ – God’s Word made flesh for us. Present in the Old Testament like an “invisible and silent figure on every page,” as well as in the New Testament, Jesus is already present to us in the Gospel, since it is he who speaks his redemptive word and announces the love of the Father for his people (SC 1 § 7).
Having been nourished through the Scriptures at the “table of the Word”, we then move to the table of fullness, the altar, in the Liturgy of the Eucharist (Intro LFM no. 10). Important to understand is that one part of the Mass leads naturally to the next for its completion. That our Father has revealed himself in his word, Jesus, who speaks salvation is cause for thanksgiving. It is all one act of worship of the Father with the Son in the Holy Spirit!

After we have received the redemptive word and promise anew in the Scriptures, the Liturgy of the Eucharist begins as the unfolding of our praise and thanksgiving that God has entered into our presence, our very being. First, gifts of bread and wine are brought forward as the “work of human hands,” and the Father is acknowledged as the giver of all gifts. In the gifts brought by the people, we may easily sense that we are bringing what is needed for the offering – something of ourselves, of our lives – for the great thanksgiving about to begin. There, all will be transformed in Christ.

As the Eucharistic Prayer begins, the priest invites us to enter into the great thanksgiving: “Let us give thanks and praise.” Our response is that “it is right and just” to do so. Then, as we recall all God’s great deeds, our thanksgiving reaches its apex as we remember the great work of Jesus Christ for our salvation. We hear his words: “Take this . . . my Body . . . eat . . . Take this . . . the Cup of my Blood . . . drink . . .” Through the voice of the celebrant, it is Christ who speaks his word again and, through the Spirit, we experience a silent, interior moment of adoration and praise. Remembering specifically his Passion, Death and Resurrection, we proclaim as an assembly our thankful praise of his saving work and our undying hope: “Dying, you destroyed our death . . . rising, you restored our life . . . Lord Jesus, come in glory.”

The mystery revealed is that, through the celebrant acting in persona Christi, Jesus makes present in our very midst his everlasting sacrifice of Calvary, his own perfect worship, offering himself to the Father for us as both victim and priest. Moreover, as if that alone were not enough, he joins to his offering the offering of the whole Church and gives it wholly new value (CCC no. 1368). Thus, we are drawn into his perfect offering, his perfect obedience to the Father’s will, and into the one worship fitting to be offered by Christ’s body, the Church. Because it is through Jesus alone, “with him, and in him,” that we are able to offer the Father all honor and glory, we acclaim “Amen.” One with him in his redemptive sacrifice, our reception of his Body and Blood which follows is then wholly and true communion. We are transformed by both the Word and the Eucharist.

**Reflection Questions:**

1. What does God reveal about himself in the Sacred Scriptures? In the Eucharist?
2. As individuals, we gather to celebrate one act of worship. How does this action challenge us to become “one community” in mind and heart?

3. How do you become “actively” involved in the worship of God during the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist?

**Prayer:**

Heavenly Father,
We give you great thanks
   for your divine presence to us in the Mass
   in which we worship you in your holy Word and Eucharist.

We ask your mercy upon us
   when we fail to give you fitting adoration
   as we hear your Word and join in the Offering of your Son.

We ask for your grace to grow in our faith
   so that we may always worship you
   with our whole body, mind, and soul.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.