

Reverence toward the Book of the Gospels

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Some of the Catholic faithful may notice an added ritual gesture immediately following the proclamation of the Gospel reading while watching a televised papal Mass on EWTN, or while attending a diocesan Mass with Bishop Blair at Rosary Cathedral. The gesture is unique to those liturgies celebrated by the Bishop or the Pope, and is an option at Masses presided over by either of these persons. For those who have observed this ritual gesture on occasion, it finds the assisting deacon or a concelebrating priest who has completed the proclamation of the Gospel taking the Book of the Gospels (the Evangelary in liturgical parlance) to the Bishop to be kissed. The Bishop then takes the closed book and imparts a blessing over the people before going to the ambo (pulpit) to preach the homily. This added protocol is often accompanied with musical flourish while the congregation stands until the Bishop reaches the ambo.

While this ritual option is new and reserved exclusively to the Mass presided over by a Bishop or Pope in the 2003 revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM, art. 175), the practice actually has a long-standing history in the Latin Rite liturgy. Its purpose was and remains a means of emphasizing the reverence given to the Word of God. We are reminded in the revised GIRM that “the reading of the Gospel is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. The Liturgy itself teaches that great reverence is to be shown to it by setting it off from the other readings with special marks of honor”. (art. 60)

Liturgical historians tell us that the Book of the Gospels was brought to the Bishop (and Pope) after the proclamation of the reading to be kissed as a sign of reverence toward the Word of God. The signing of the cross over the people with the Book of the Gospels after the Bishop kissed it, a liturgical practice included during the eleventh century, likewise encourages the reverence of the assembly toward the Word of God. In the liturgy of the Middle Ages, provision was made that all clerics in attendance would kiss the Book of the Gospels, but most places in western Europe dispensed with the practice by the thirteenth century, having settled on the priest-celebrant alone or an attending prelate of higher rank to perform the ritual kiss.

A fact that also enhances both the gesture of having the Bishop kiss the Book of the Gospels and his subsequent signing over the people is the inaudible prayer required of the one performing this ritual action: “May the words of the gospel wipe away our sins.” Since the liturgy celebrated under the presidency of the diocesan bishop, along with the priests, deacons and lay faithful is considered the fullest expression of the Church at prayer, it is only fitting that he, the chief shepherd and leader of this prayer, kiss the Book

of the Gospels containing the mysteries of salvation. The corresponding gesture of signing ourselves with the cross as the Bishop imparts a blessing with the Book of the Gospels acknowledges the mystery that is, indeed, saving us.