



NATIONAL Eucharistic Revival

Step-by-Step Walk Through the Mass Do This in Remembrance of Me, Part 21: The Four Gospels By FR. LUKE SPANNAGEL



Have you ever wondered why there are four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? Why not just one? For nearly 2000 years, theologians, scholars, and saints have been wondering about this “problem.” For some people, differences in the four Gospels regarding details and the order of events can feel like a challenge. Even more, the Gospel according to St. John is very different from the other three. So, what is the deal?

First, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are all very similar. They are called the synoptic Gospels, coming from the word “synopsis,” which means, “at one view.” For the most part, these three Gospels are similar in content, although each contains a few events, miracles, and teachings which are not in the others. In addition, in each of these Gospels, some of the events are related in a different order. Secondly, the Gospel of John is very different in style; one doesn’t need to read more than a few verses to realize it gives us a quite different account of the life of Jesus.

Why Are There Four Gospels?

One of the main reasons for there being four Gospels relates to how they developed. First, Jesus Christ, present on the earth, taught, preached, and worked miracles. After his Death, the Apostles orally proclaimed the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, faithfully recounting his life and words. This oral stage of preaching, as well as catechesis, hymns, and doxologies, became the background for the Gospel writers, called Evangelists. After several years of preaching and meditation, the Gospel writers took the oral sources and earliest body of instruction and wrote it all down in what we know today as the four Gospels.

When the Gospel writers wrote these accounts (under the guidance of the Holy Spirit), they had different audiences and different contexts in mind. This accounts for some of the differences we find in their Gospels. For example, scholars suggest that St. Matthew was writing for a Jewish audience who would know, for example, the Jewish background for rituals and other things Jesus did. Therefore, the Gospel of Matthew doesn’t explain the meaning of these things because he is assuming that his readers would already know them. More importantly, because he was writing for a Jewish audience, it was important to St. Matthew that he show that Jesus was the true Messiah they had been waiting for. St. Luke, on the other hand, was a former Gentile who had converted, and he was writing for a Hellenistic (Greek) audience who would not have understood Jewish rituals and traditions. That is why we find in his Gospel more detailed explanations of ceremonial actions. The Gospel of Mark, the first Gospel to be written, presents a powerful narrative of Jesus’ life and often includes more vivid detail than the others. St. John, writing a little later than the other three, emphasized specific events to inspire and confirm his readers’ faith in Jesus, since he could assume that they would already be familiar with the story of Jesus and his miracles and teachings.

The True Purpose of the Gospels

So, we can see, in writing the Gospels, the writers were not simply recalling the deeds and words of Jesus; they were preaching Jesus, the true Messiah, so that people would really get to know him. The Gospels, in this sense, are kind of like homilies, which are a way to try and help people relate to Jesus and his message of salvation. They are a careful presentation of what Jesus said and did—both an instruction and an invitation to deeper faith.

That we have these four Gospels after 2000 years is really an argument for their Divine Inspiration. Had these documents simply been authored by men, the differences in words, events, and ordering would have been too much to overcome. People would have quickly dismissed Christianity as a religion that could not get its story straight! For us, we can see that God has allowed various accounts with differing details to stand together in the same book of books (the Bible) because they were accepted as inspired by God, even if somewhat different. The early Fathers of the Church let them stand as handed down because they respected the Tradition as received. They respected the received Gospels as sacred and realized that if they tried to “fix them” by rolling them into one narrative, we would be missing out on some special aspect of the life and ministry of Jesus as it was recounted by one or the other of the Gospel writers. They saw the wisdom of God that having four Gospels with four different presentations of Jesus would ensure that all people, no matter what their background or experiences, could listen to or read an account about Jesus Christ that they could understand, that would speak to their hearts, and that would draw them into a life of union with Jesus the Son of God, the true Savior of the world!