

On the Ministry of Lectors

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* observes, “The function of proclaiming the readings is by tradition not presidential but ministerial. Therefore, the readings are to be read by a reader”. What this means is that the role of the lector does not belong to the presider but to others who have been called to serve in this particular way.

The ministry of lector continues the mission of preaching the Word by proclaiming it in the liturgical assembly. The word *ministry*, also from the Latin, means to serve, and offers another perspective on the role of the lector: a form of service to the community. Lectors do this “in the service of the faith.” The words Paul wrote to the Romans about the importance of preaching can also apply to lectors: “But how can they call on [the Lord] in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? . . . Thus faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:14, 17).

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* outlines the following as the duties of this ministry:

Introductory Rites

194. In the procession to the altar, in the absence of a Deacon, the reader, wearing approved attire, may carry the *Book of the Gospels*, slightly elevated. In that case, the reader walks in front of the Priest but otherwise walks along with the other ministers.

195. Upon reaching the altar, the reader makes a profound bow with the others. If they are carrying the *Book of the Gospels*, they approach the altar and place the *Book of the Gospels* upon it. Then the reader takes their place in the sanctuary with the other ministers.

The Liturgy of the Word

196. The reader reads from the ambo the readings that precede the Gospel. In the absence of a psalmist, the reader may also proclaim the Responsorial Psalm after the First Reading.

197. In the absence of a Deacon, the reader, after the introduction by the Priest, may announce the intentions of the Universal Prayer from the ambo.

198. If there is no singing at the Entrance or at Communion and the antiphons given in the Missal are not recited by the faithful, the reader may read them at an appropriate time.

God's Word Spoken to Us

At the end of every reading, the lector says, "The word of the Lord," and the people respond, "Thanks be to God." These two phrases easily become routine. But take a moment and think about what you are saying to the people when you make this proclamation: "The word of the Lord." We believe that when we read these fragments of ancient texts selected from the Bible for the liturgy, "God speaks to his people, Christ is still proclaiming his gospel" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy 33). God has chosen to use human language as a way to communicate with us.

The Word of God and the Bible

The word of God has a particular meaning in the Roman Catholic tradition. Vatican II's Constitution on Divine Revelation states, "Tradition and scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the word of God, which is entrusted to the church". For believers baptized into the Roman Catholic Church, the word of God embraces Sacred Scripture as "the utterance of God put down as it is in writing under the inspiration of the holy Spirit" and the tradition which has been handed on orally in the preaching and teaching of the Church. "Thus God, who spoke in the past, continues to converse with the spouse of his beloved Son. And the holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel rings out in the Church—and through it in the world—leads believers to the full truth and makes the word of Christ dwell in them in all its richness (see Col 3:16)".

The Bible witnesses to the power and the purpose of the word of God. The power of God's word is revealed in both creation and redemption. In the opening words of the Bible we have a testimony to the power of the word at creation when the author of Genesis writes, "Then God said: Let there be light, and there was light" (Gen 1:3). Again and again in the opening chapter we hear "Then God said . . ." followed by "And so it happened." The power of God's word reveals itself first as a creative word, calling forth the richness of our world from a formless wasteland. God's word is revealed as one that shapes and designs, contains and expands, divides and multiplies. It is this

creative word that also calls forth a people. “[W]ho created you, Jacob, and formed you, Israel” (Isa 43:1a)?

In all of this we find reflected the Hebrew understanding of the Word as an event. When God speaks, something happens: creation, redemption, sanctification. God’s word is an effective word, bringing about the fulfillment of what it promises. But while God’s word is active and initiates, going forth with a purpose, it also expects a response:

In the New Testament, we know that “Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” Our response is to repent and believe and ultimately to proclaim the truth of salvation through Christ by word and deed.

The Word of God and the Liturgy

The reading of the Scriptures during community worship has its roots in the Jewish synagogue service where the first reading was from the Torah (that is, the first five books of the Bible), followed by a reading from one of the Prophets, which served to comment on the Torah selection. In Luke 4:16-19, we have Jesus going into the synagogue at Nazareth on the Sabbath, taking up the scroll, and reading from the text of Isaiah 61:1, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, / because the Lord has anointed me; / He has sent me to bring good news to the afflicted.” The Christian community kept this tradition of reading from the Sacred Scripture when it gathered to celebrate the Eucharist. In the earliest description of what took place on Sunday, St. Justin Martyr wrote in the mid-second century a description of the service:

“On the day which is called Sunday we have a common assembly of all who live in the cities or in the outlying districts, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as there is time.”

He goes on to describe the rest of the service, including preaching, universal prayer, the presentation of bread and wine, a prayer of thanksgiving, and reception of the eucharistic elements. From the beginning, the word of God was part of the community’s worship.

The Word of God and the Lectionary

A lectionary has been defined as “a book or list of readings of scripture for the church year.” The Lectionary is not the same thing as the Bible. The word of God, as found in the Bible and organized in the Lectionary, serves the prayer life of the Christian community in the course of the liturgical year. The Lectionary is arranged systematically according to the liturgical year in four volumes. Weekday readings appear in a two year cycle, Year I and Year II. There is also a three-year Sunday cycle, Year A, Year B, and Year C. The usual Sunday includes three readings:

The first from the Old Testament (except during the Easter season when Acts of the Apostles is read); a second reading from an apostle (either from a letter or from the book of Revelation, depending on the season); and the third reading from one of the gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke each having a year in the Sunday cycle during Ordinary Time with John featured during the liturgical seasons, especially Lent and Easter, and for several weeks during the Sunday Year B cycle).

In the course of the three-year Sunday cycle, every New Testament book is given some exposure, except for 2 and 3 John and Jude, which do show up in the weekday readings. The major feasts of the Lord, of Mary, and of certain saints—Peter and Paul, John the Baptist—also have special readings. Here is a breakdown:

Volume I: Sundays (Cycles A, B, C), Solemnities, Feasts of the Lord and the Saints

Volume II: Proper of Seasons for Weekdays—Year I, Proper of the Saints, Common of the Saints

Volume III: Proper of Seasons for Weekdays—Year II, Proper of the Saints, Common of the Saints

Volume IV: Common of Saints, Ritual Masses, Masses for Various Needs and Occasions, Votive Masses, and Masses for the Dead

KEEP IN MIND

- To be an effective lector calls for adequate preparation that includes study, prayer, and practice.
- Unless the readings are done well, people will not hear God's voice speaking through these texts and be truly nourished at the table of the Word.
- The ministry of lector continues the mission of preaching the Word by proclaiming it in the liturgical assembly.
- Lectors are called to a deep relationship with God specifically through the words of Scripture, this treasured legacy that has been preserved and handed down for thousands of years.
- Words are the basic building blocks of both communication and community, both of which have to do with communion, coming together in unity.
- "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the word of God, which is entrusted to the church" (Constitution on Divine Revelation 10).
- The Bible offers us a dynamic portrait of God's word in various activities: creating, redeeming, instructing, correcting, encouraging, sanctifying, and shaping a people of faith, hope, and love. (God's Word Spoken to Us 23).
- "The Church is nourished spiritually at the twofold table of God's word and of the Eucharist: from the one it grows in wisdom and from the other in holiness" (Introduction to the Lectionary, 10).
- A deliberate pacing is called for in the Liturgy of the Word to assure that the community hears the word of God: listening, silence, response (responsorial psalm), listening, silence, preparation for the gospel (alleluia), listening, preaching, silence, universal prayer. Silence is frequently neglected.
- God's word waits to become flesh—first, the flesh of the lector, then the flesh of the community.

SPIRITUAL PREPARATION:

- Step 1: Begin with prayer to the Holy Spirit.
- Step 2: Read the text aloud, slowly, digesting it.
- Step 3: Study the text with the help of biblical commentaries.
- Step 4: Pray with the text in the days before you read it to the community.

SPEAKING PREPARATION:

- To communicate a work of literary art “in its intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic entirety” demands a personal commitment from the lector.
- The lector is called to be a “holy interpreter” who lays down his or her life for the text, dying to self by giving one’s body, mind, heart, and spirit so that the text might live.
- Lectors deal with various literary genres—the story, the letter, and the poem.
- Each makes its own demands on the reader.

Some suggestions:

Story: If only a fragment, read the full story. Watch for the movement of the story and where it builds to a climax; the interplay of narrator and characters; the emotions of the characters: anger, hurt, fear, love, jealousy, confusion, wonder, suspicion. Don’t let fear of overdoing it lock you into a lifeless reading.

Letter: See what you can learn about the letter’s background: its audience, Paul’s relationship with them, and the situation that provoked the letter. Watch for a letter’s density of thought and feeling. Give listeners time to absorb complicated thought often expressed in complicated sentence structures.

Poetry: While often found in three forms in Scripture— prophecy, Wisdom literature, and psalms—poetry speaks to the heart and the imagination as well as the mind. Be sensitive to the imagery and feelings poetry expresses. Keep in mind that Prophetic oracles and Wisdom literature are often chosen in light of the gospel, so read the gospel first. Finally, make sure to listen for rhythm and watch for parallelism in the psalms.

VOCAL PREPARATION:

- Voice Quality: clear, natural, full voice.
- Vocal Variety: a range of voice that avoids monotony and singsong or overly repetitious vocal patterns.
- Rhythm: recognizing what words are to be stressed and un-stressed; certain poetic forms are given a rhythm of three or four beats per line.
- Intonation: the two basic tunes or melodies that carry our words and help bring variety to public reading.
- Diction: clear articulation of consonants and enunciation of vowels.
- Pace: providing variety in speed but neither too slow nor too fast.
- Pause: allowing time for listeners to comprehend what has been said.
- Person contact rather than eye contact when appropriate to the text.
- Correct your mistakes when necessary to dispel confusion or misunderstanding.

PRACTICAL PREPARATION:

- Keep your energy level appropriate to the space where you are reading.
- Make friends with the microphone; think of it as a collaborator.
- Nervousness is not always bad; use concentration as a protection against excessive anxiety.
- Familiarity with the reading can help to make you comfortable with your surroundings.
- The language of the translation can be problematic; keep aware of any developments in this regard.
- Clothing and jewelry can distract; help listeners attend to the Word.
- Both ambo and the books are signs of God's presence and deserving of our reverence.
- Arrive early, at least fifteen minutes before the liturgy begins. Check on the book to make sure it is set up correctly, with the ribbons in the proper place.