

The Theology and Spirituality of the Lector

Jesus, the Proclaimer

“He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.’ Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. He said to them, ‘Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing’” (Lk 4: 16-21).

Spiritual and Technical Preparation

“By tradition, the function of proclaiming the readings is ministerial, not presidential. The readings, therefore, should be proclaimed by a lector. . . (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [GIRM] 59). “Laypersons may be **commissioned** to proclaim the readings from sacred scripture. They should be truly suited to perform this function and should receive careful preparation, so that the faithful by listening may develop in their hearts a warm and living love for sacred scripture” (GIRM 101). “Their **preparation must above all be spiritual**, but what may be called a **technical preparation is also needed**. The spiritual preparation presupposes at least a **biblical and liturgical formation**. The purpose of their biblical formation is to give readers the ability to understand the readings in context and to perceive by the light of faith the central point of the revealed message. The liturgical formation ought to equip the readers to have some grasp of the meaning and structure of the Liturgy of the Word and of the significance of its connection with the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The technical preparation should make the readers more skilled in the art of reading publicly” (*Lectionary for Mass: Introduction* [LMI] 55).

Scripture in the Liturgy

The **liturgy is the home of the scriptures**. In the earliest days of the Church, the disciples “devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The first Christians still observed the cycle of Jewish scripture readings in synagogues on the sabbath (Acts 15:21) as a regular part of their worship (Acts 13:14-15). Likewise, “on the first day of the week when [they] gathered to break bread” (Acts 20:7) within the homes of the apostles, the scriptures were read and preached on at length (Acts 20:7-11). Paul instructed churches to read his letters (Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27; Phlm 2), which soon became counted among “other scriptures” (2 Pet 3:16). Whether Jew or Greek, Christians paired Jewish scriptures with apostolic writings in their celebration of the Eucharist as Justin Martyr’s second century *Apology* attests: “The memoirs of the apostles are read and the writings of the prophets are read, as much as time permits” (*1 Apology* 67).

In continuity with this ancient tradition, the Second Vatican Council declared that, **“sacred scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy.** For it is from it that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung. It is from the scriptures that the prayers, collects and hymns draw their inspiration and their force, and that actions and signs derive their meaning” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium* [SC] 24). Further, the council prescribed that, **“the treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly** so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s Word. In this way, **a more representative part of the sacred scriptures will be read** to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years” (SC 51).

Sacraments of Faith

“The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men [and women], to build up the Body of Christ, and, finally, to give worship to God. . . They not only presuppose faith. . . they also nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called ‘sacraments of faith.’” (SC 59). “Because of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration and support, the word of God becomes the foundation of the liturgical celebration” (LMI 9). Through the proclamation of the word, **the Holy Spirit recalls for the assembly God’s saving work in history (anamnesis)** (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 1100). With the word planted in their hearts, **the Holy Spirit stirs up the response of faith** (CCC 1102), since “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). This **faith then impels the invocation of the Holy Spirit’s transforming power (epiclesis)** (CCC 1105). Together with the anamnesis, the epiclesis is at the heart of each sacramental celebration, especially the Eucharist, whereby “the priest begs the Father to send the Holy Spirit. . . so that the offerings may become the body and blood of Christ and that the faithful, by receiving them, may themselves become a living offering to God” (CCC 1105-1106).

Twofold Table: Word and Eucharist

“The Church has always venerated the divine scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God’s word and of Christ’s body” (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum* [DV] 21). Thus, “the Mass is made up, as it were, of **two parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.** These, however, are so closely interconnected that **they form but one single act of worship**” (GIRM 28). The Liturgy of the Word focuses on the ambo, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist on the altar. “The Church is nourished spiritually at the twofold table of God’s word and of the Eucharist” (LMI 10)—but it is one table. Two primary symbols from the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist come together as the Book of Gospels containing Christ’s words is placed on the altar signifying Christ and on which Christ’s sacrifice is offered.

Christ's Fourfold Liturgical Presence

“Christ is always present in the Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations” (SC 7). In the Mass, “**Christ is really present** in the very liturgical **assembly** gathered in his name, in the person of the **minister**, in his **word**, and indeed substantially and continuously under the **Eucharistic species**” (GIRM 27).

God Speaks: Liturgy of the Word

“For in the **readings**, as explained by the **homily**, **God speaks to his people**, opening up to them the mystery of redemption and salvation, and offering spiritual nourishment; and Christ himself is present through his word in the midst of the faithful. By **silence and singing**, the people make the divine word their own, and affirm their adherence to it by means of the **Profession of Faith**; finally, having been nourished by the divine word, the people pour out their petitions by means of the **Universal Prayer** for the needs of the whole Church and for the salvation of the whole world” (GIRM 55).

The word of God is proclaimed from the **ambo** (“elevation”) in “harmonious and close relationship. . . with the altar (LMI 32). The ambo “is reserved for the readings, the responsorial psalm, and the Easter Proclamation (the *Exsultet*). . . [and] may rightly be used for the homily and the prayer of the faithful (LMI 33).

Further, “the Liturgy of the Word is to be celebrated in such a way as to **promote meditation**, and so any sort of haste that hinders recollection must clearly be avoided. During the Liturgy of the Word, it is appropriate to include **brief periods of silence**, accommodated to the gathered assembly, in which, at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response through prayer may be prepared. It may be appropriate to observe such periods of silence . . . **after the first and second reading**” (GIRM 56), “so that all may meditate on what they have heard” (GIRM 128).

“When the sacred scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his own word, proclaims the Gospel” (GIRM 29). God speaks to his people—in the present tense—through his Son, in the Holy Spirit. The People of God respond to God’s “living and active” (Heb 4:12) word, listening and adoring “in Spirit and truth” (Jn 4:23) so as to become “doers of the word and not hearers only” (Jas 1:22). God speaks through the proclamation of the word, not in the common silent reading of the word. “The word of the Lord” is the sound that was proclaimed, not the book containing the words. The assembly acclaims, “Thanks be to God” to what they have heard. Thus, the lector’s voice must carry God’s voice, “and the effectiveness of [his or her] proclamation depends significantly on [his or her] conviction, preparation and delivery” (*Introduction to the Order of Mass* [IOM] 14).

Lectionary for Mass

Editions:

- first Latin edition (*editio typica*) – 1969
- first English edition – 1970
- second Latin edition – 1981
- second English edition – 1998 (Sundays); 2002 (Weekdays)
 - arranged by “sight-lines”
 - minimizes page-turning

Volumes:

- Sundays, Solemnities, Feasts of the Lord and Saints (cycles A, B, C)
 - sometimes published as three volumes (cycles A, B, C)
- Weekdays, Year I (odd-numbered years)
- Weekdays, Year II (even-numbered years)
- Common of Saints, Rituals, Votives, Various Needs and Occasions

Sunday Readings:

- **First reading** – usually from OT (from the Acts of the Apostles in Easter) following the **principle of harmony** (in Ordinary Time, it is thematically connected to the Gospel; otherwise its theme is related to the season)
- **Responsorial psalm** – usually from the Psalms (sometimes from OT or NT canticle); its theme is generally connected to the first reading and sometimes to the Gospel or the season
- **Second reading** – always from the NT (mostly Paul’s letters) following a **semi-continuous reading** pattern (*lectio continua*)
- **Gospel** – **Year A** – Matthew; **Year B** – Mark (and some John); **Year C** – Luke; (John is mostly used in Lent and Easter); in Ordinary Time, it follows a semi-continuous reading pattern; otherwise its theme is related to the season

- Total biblical texts used on Sunday, vigils, and major feasts in the pre-Vatican II Roman Missal: 22% of the Gospels, 11% of the other NT writings, and only 0.8% of OT (excluding the Psalms)
- Total biblical texts used on Sunday, vigils, and major feasts in the post-Vatican II Lectionary: 58% of the Gospels, 25% of the other NT writings, but still only 3.7% of OT (excluding the Psalms)

Weekday Readings:

- **First reading** – alternates between OT and NT on a two-year cycle following a semi-continuous reading pattern
- **Responsorial psalm** – usually from the Psalms (sometimes from OT or NT canticle) on a two-year cycle
- **Gospel** – semi-continuous readings from Matthew, Mark, and Luke on a one-year cycle

Lectio Divina (“divine reading”)

- **lectio** (read) – read the text slowly and gently; choose a word or phrase to pray
 - “which text says, ‘I am for you today?’”
- **meditatio** (meditate) – slowly repeat the word or phrase; ponder its meaning
 - “what is God saying to me through this text?”
- **oratio** (pray) – interact with God
 - “what do I say to God in response to this text?”
- **contemplatio** (contemplate) – rest in God’s presence

“The Church in America should give high priority to prayerful reflection upon the sacred scripture by all the faithful. This Bible reading, accompanied by prayer, is known in the tradition of the Church by the name *Lectio Divina*, a practice that should be encouraged among all Christians” (John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 1999, 31).

“I would like in particular to recall and recommend the ancient tradition of *Lectio Divina*: the diligent reading of sacred scripture accompanied by prayer brings about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and in praying, responds to him with trusting openness of heart. If it is effectively promoted, this practice will bring to the Church—I am convinced of it—a new spiritual springtime” (Benedict XVI, *Address to Participants in the International Congress for the 40th Anniversary of Dei Verbum*, 2005).

“Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ” (St. Jerome).

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3:9).

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105).

“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (Rom 10:8).

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. . .” (Col 3:16).

“. . . When you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word” (1 Thess 2:13).

“. . . The word of God is not chained” (2 Tim 2:9).

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching. . .” (2 Tim 3:16).

“. . . He sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3).

“Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. . . it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12).

“Be doers of the word and not hearers only” (Jas 1:22).

“You have been born anew. . . through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet 1:23).

“. . . The word of God endures forever” (1 Pet 1:25).

