

# The Lector

## What's in a Name?

This work has been written for all who read the biblical texts during the Liturgy of the Word, including those who proclaim the gospel. It is offered to those who have been doing it for a while, those who are about to begin, and even those who might be considering such a commitment to the liturgical life of the community and want to know what it involves. As with so many of the things we do in life, there are different ways we might think about and approach the role of the lector in the liturgy. Three such ways, not meant to be mutually exclusive, will now be considered.

### A Job

You might react to the word *job* as being too pedestrian, too mundane, not worthy of this liturgical office, even possibly undermining the reverence that should inform our attitude to this important task. But I would propose that it is not being disrespectful to recognize that the public reading of the Scriptures is *work*; it is an important *job* that needs to be done with competence and skill in order that the worship of the community can take place. Liturgy literally means the *work* of the people—from the Greek *leitōs* (people) and *ergon* (work). Within that context of a community of faith gathering to do its most important work—the celebration of the Eucharist as an act of praise to God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit—reading the Scriptures is a labor of love. It requires having both knowledge and certain skills for the work to be done in a manner satisfying to all. So, as a starting point, I invite you to think of the office of lector as a job. And, as they say, “Somebody’s got to do it.” Unless the Liturgy of the Word is done well, the foundation will not be laid for what follows in the liturgy of the sacrament.

The reform of the Roman Catholic liturgy, most notably the Liturgy of the Eucharist, brought out the different tasks involved when the community gathers for liturgy. Certain distinct roles need to be filled: presider, deacon, acolyte, lector, cantor, choir, usher, and eucharistic minister. The work of the lector involves reading the biblical texts during the Liturgy of the Word. To be an effective lector calls for adequate preparation that includes study, prayer, and practice. A lector is given the task of approaching with reverence that complex body of sacred literature we call the Scriptures, once described by no less a light than St. Augustine as “of mountainous difficulty and enveloped in mysteries.” Furthermore, while anyone might be able to read, I would suggest that not all who can read are able to lector—at least not right away. You only have to go to a liturgy when someone is plucked out of the congregation to realize that, or to a wedding or funeral when a member of the family has been chosen to read simply

because he or she is a member of the family, often resulting in a halting, hard to hear, rushed reading.

These last statements are not meant to be elitist. Saint Isidore of Seville, a doctor of the church, wrote that a lector should be “deeply versed in doctrine and books, and thoroughly adorned with the knowledge of meanings and words” so that the reading would “move the minds and feelings” of the listeners.<sup>1</sup> 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. So the work of the lector is essential, and it cannot be assumed that all have this talent. “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts . . . ,” as Paul reminded the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:4). We might add to the gifts Paul names in that letter those important for the worship of the community: presiding, preaching, serving, singing, and, especially, considering its place at the outset of every liturgy, proclaiming the Scriptures. All these are gifts given for the sake of the Body, the church, which brings us to the second understanding of the lector’s task.

## **A Ministry**

The office of lector is also a ministry. 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. 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” (59). 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 ministries of reader and acolyte were restored by Pope Paul VI in the apostolic letter *Ministeria Quaedam* in 1972. In this letter Pope Paul wrote that these ministries “may be committed to lay Christians; hence they are no longer reserved to candidates for the sacrament of orders” (6). The Introduction to the *Lectionary for Mass* comments on the importance of this ministry: “In the hearing of God’s word the Church is built up and grows” (7). The readings within the liturgy serve to nourish and sustain the Body of Christ. In the formal rite of institution of readers, the bishop gives the Bible to each candidate and says, “Take this book of holy Scripture and be faithful in handing on the word of God, so that it may grow strong in the hearts of his people” (7).

It can be helpful for all lectors to meditate on the words in the rite of institution for the conclusion of the bishop’s homily on this occasion:

. . . through his Son, who became man for us, God the Father has revealed the mystery of salvation and brought it to fulfillment. Jesus Christ made all things known to us and then entrusted his Church with the mission of preaching the Gospel to the whole world.

As readers and bearers of God’s word, you will assist in this mission, and so take on a special office within the Christian community; you will be given a responsibility in the service of the faith, which is rooted in the word of God. You will proclaim that word in the liturgical assembly . . . Thus with your help men and women will come to know God our Father and his Son Jesus Christ, whom he sent, and so be able to reach eternal life. (4)

The ministry of lector continues the mission of preaching the Word by proclaiming it in the liturgical assembly. 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 he [or she] is carrying the *Book of the Gospels*, he [or she] approaches the altar and places the *Book of the Gospels* upon it. Then the reader takes his [or her] own 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.

## **A Vocation**

The universal call to holiness and witness to Christ in the world comes to fulfillment differently in each of us. One expression of this universal call can be found in the ministry of reader. While baptism and confirmation in the Spirit have made all of Christ’s faithful into messengers of God’s word and all are to be bearers of that word both in the church and in the world, at least by the witness of their lives, lectors carry out this task in a unique way by entering into an intimate relationship with the sacred texts so central to the worship life of the community. They 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. Drawing closer to our God who speaks through the Scriptures is an invitation this ministry offers to you. Listen again to the rite of institution and its concluding words:

In proclaiming God’s word to others, accept it yourselves in obedience to the Holy Spirit. Meditate on it constantly, so that each day you will have a deeper love of the Scriptures, and in all you say and do show forth to the world our Savior, Jesus Christ. (4)

As God called to Moses from the burning bush, so God calls to you from the sacred book: “Come, draw closer. Meet me in my word.” As God called to Mary to en flesh the divine Word, so God calls every lector to allow once again the Word to become flesh, *your* flesh. God waits on your response: “Let it be done to me according to your word.”

## **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.