“Aggiornamento is back! Paul Turner has updated the first volume of Adrien Nocent’s *The Liturgical Year* in a discrete, respectful, and informed manner, enabling the author’s reflections on the feasts and seasons as well as on the Lectionary to connect effectively with the concerns and interests of present-day readers. I look forward to the next two volumes.”

Patrick Regan, OSB
Author of *Advent to Pentecost*

“Though originating in the postconciliar period, Adrien Nocent’s volumes remain one of the church’s finest commentaries on the Lectionary and contain remarkable up-to-date insights for our times. Thanks to the emendations and annotations of Paul Turner, one of today’s finest liturgical scholars, these volumes will enrich the thoughts of parish liturgists, presiders, homilists, musicians, lectors, theology students, and participants in the church’s liturgy.”

Stephen J. Binz
Author of *Conversing with God in Advent and Christmas*

“Adrien Nocent was truly a remarkable scholar, well ahead of his time! . . . He weaves the paschal mystery, eschatology, and living liturgy daily into a core tool for interpreting Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany in a fresh way. In this reissue, Fr. Paul Turner sensitively respects Nocent’s own voice as he bridges the time after the Council to the present age. . . . This work needs to be on every priest’s, liturgist’s, musician’s, and assembly member’s ‘go to’ shelf.”

Joyce Ann Zimmerman, CPPS
Institute for Liturgical Ministry, Dayton, Ohio

“In 1977 when Adrien Nocent’s book appeared in English translation, I was studying the liturgical year with him at Sant’Anselmo. I remember how moved I was to read his deep reflections after having experienced the new lectionary with its three-year cycle of readings at that point only a couple of times. Now, having experienced the three-year cycle more than a dozen times, I am still moved by his writings. I am delighted that his book has been updated by Paul Turner and is coming into print again.”

Michael S. Driscoll
University of Notre Dame
The Liturgical Year

Volume Three
SUNDAYS TWO TO THIRTY-FOUR IN ORDINARY TIME

by
Adrien Nocent, OSB

Translated by
Matthew J. O’Connell

Introduced, Emended, and Annotated by
Paul Turner

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CL Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy
CSEL Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum. Vienna, 1866–
SC Sources Chretiennes. Paris, 1942–
Series Introduction

When the postconciliar lectionary first fell into the hands of priests, musicians, and parish liturgists in 1970, few could fully grasp the significance of the event. The vast selection of readings, the nimble choice of responsorial psalms, and the blossoming of the liturgical year would become clearer only in time.

One of the first companions to the revised lectionary was composed by Adrien Nocent, a Belgian monk who became a consultor for the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship in 1969. In 1964 he had served as a consultor for the Consilium for the Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council. He was the secretary for the Consilium’s Study Group 17, which worked on the revision of Holy Week, and, among other responsibilities, was part of Study Group 11, which revised the Lectionary for Mass. He drew up the preliminary schemas for Advent, the Sundays after Epiphany, and the Sundays following Pentecost.

For Nocent, a commentary on the lectionary could not be a mere commentary on a book but an exploration of the dialogue between the Word of God and humanity in every culture and time. The Church had been through only one complete three-year cycle of the lectionary when Nocent was writing this book. He shared his vision of this project for eager readers, students, and worshipers.

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Liturgical Press is proud to reissue Nocent’s work. I was deeply honored at the invitation to contribute annotations—honored because when I was in the seminary, *The Liturgical Year* was the main resource I consulted to prayerfully approach my participation in the Sunday Mass; honored because as a young priest, I used *The Liturgical Year* to help prepare my homilies; honored because as a liturgical catechist, my brain had been hardwired to Nocent’s approach to the lectionary: Start with the gospel, then look at the first reading, then the psalm, and be ready to discard the second reading from your treatment of the Sunday lectionary.
Readers today may criticize Nocent’s approach as too “thematic” in content. He presumes that each Sunday carries a theme and that he knows what it is. In reality, there is no single theme, and the second reading deserves its place in the sun. Still, in practice, Nocent’s ability to explain the layout of the lectionary is still vital. Although a specialist in liturgy, he reveals himself as a most capable biblical exegete; although a man of philosophical depth, he constantly returns to the question of relevance: What does this passage have to say to us today? I have added a few annotations where I thought the reader needed a bridge between Nocent’s day and our own, but I have kept these at a minimum to let the author’s voice speak.

I have also refrained from changing too much of Matthew J. O’Connell’s fine original translation. He wrote before issues of gender-inclusive language became important, however, and I felt that the book could not be reissued without attention to this detail. The greatest number of changes I introduced to the translation have to do with this concern. I have also emended O’Connell’s work where I thought it needed greater clarity due to the length of sentences, obscure vocabulary, or theological imprecisions. Otherwise, again, I wanted his voice to win.

Nocent’s seven-volume work in French, which had been rearranged into four volumes in English, is now redistributed again into three. All the material is here, along with Nocent’s desire to share his profound faith and scholarship. I am confident that you, the reader, will meet a friend, a spiritual father, and a compelling mentor in Adrien Nocent.

Paul Turner
1. The Organization of Ordinary Time

The final volume in this series of commentaries on the liturgical year will be different in format from the first two. This is because the material to be handled is quite different. Each of the special seasons—Advent, Christmas–Epiphany, Lent, and Easter—has its characteristic theology, but the “Sundays after Pentecost” have no special coloring of their own. These Sundays simply celebrate the paschal mystery as it is being fulfilled in the Church and the world. Consequently, except for the theology of Sunday, there is no question of elaborating a special theology for Ordinary Time. Nor is there any point in drawing up tables that would show how the Sundays of Ordinary Time were organized at other periods of history or in other Churches. Since Ordinary Time follows no special line, the choice of readings and prayers has varied without following any pattern.

This volume, then, will be very simple in format and will limit itself almost entirely to commentary. Doubtless such comment could have been organized in various ways. May the one we have chosen serve its purpose to the reader’s satisfaction.

1. Work of the Commission for Reform of the Missal

If readers are to understand what we have attempted to do in this book, they must first be made aware of how the commission for the reform of the Missal understood its role and how it went about achieving the goal it set for itself. The work of the commission is doubtless not beyond criticism, and some of the norms it followed are questionable, but the commission certainly took great pains in its work.

Enrichment of the Lectionary

The first task of the commission was to greatly expand the lectionary. We need only run our eye over the list of readings in the older lectionary to see that it was quite impoverished. The Second Vatican
Council, therefore, was very insistent in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy that a richer fare be provided (51). In responding to this strongly worded desire, however, the commission found itself faced with a complicated and ticklish situation. We shall point out some of the complexities so that readers may understand that no completely satisfactory solution was possible.

A Central Theme for Each Sunday?

The celebrations of the major liturgical seasons have always been so constructed, even in the early Church, as to illustrate a broadly conceived theme. This is evident when we examine, for example, the liturgies for the Sundays of Lent. In the judgment of many, such celebrations organized around a theme are pastorally successful, since the attention of the faithful is not easily dispersed in several different directions. From Advent to Pentecost the congregation is therefore accustomed to hearing readings on a particular mystery, while the chants and prayers likewise call attention to a limited range of ideas. Would there not be an advantage, then, in following a similar pattern for each Sunday of Ordinary Time?

Obviously, the commission asked itself that question. The exegetes, however, did not care for the idea. There is always a danger of telling the texts what they must say and of using them in a subjectivist manner to make them fit into a predefined framework; it cannot be said that the liturgy has always resisted such a temptation. The exegetes’ warning was well-grounded, and it would have been imprudent to neglect it. In this day and age, we cannot ignore the scholarly study of Scripture, which has made such great advances. We must indeed respect the special nature of liturgical proclamation, but we must also respect the objective meaning of the texts and not force them into an alien mold.

The members of the commission were in agreement, then, that the Sunday celebrations could have themes only if these were loosely and flexibly conceived. It was possible, for example, during some weeks and on some Sundays, to bring together texts among which there was an objective correspondence; it would be almost impossible, however, to do this for a very large number of celebrations. Experience with “Masses on a theme” had shown that the biblical texts ended up being distorted in the effort to pursue a narrowly conceived theme. The commission therefore rejected outright any effort to implement themes
that would have to run through all the texts; they allowed, however, for the possibility of themes conceived more in the Semitic manner and not requiring a material parallelism between the texts.

**How Organize the Readings?**

Once this decision had been made, the commission faced another complicated problem: What type of readings was to be offered on these Sundays? The question gave rise to endless discussions and a large variety of views. The end sought was to foster contact with Scripture as proclaimed by and in the Church. Was this goal always pursued in a measured way? We shall see. At this point, however, we may say that perhaps the commission was excessively conditioned by its desire to achieve that goal and that the abundance, indeed the superabundance, of the texts proclaimed did not always yield the expected result. We may even say that the goal of proclaiming a great number of texts may have caused distortions in the individual celebrations.

**A Single-Year Cycle**

We shall advert briefly to a few of the tendencies at work in the reform commission. Some members wanted a single-year cycle of readings. They argued that the faithful cannot easily digest a large number of varied passages from the Bible and that the repetition of the same passages year after year was therefore not a bad thing in itself. If the commission chose to have a single-year cycle, however, it would not be meeting the wishes of Vatican II. The material of Scripture was so vast that a single set of selections for about thirty Sundays would be entirely inadequate, even if further readings were introduced for each weekday. Once this was realized, the only question to be answered was this: How many years in the cycle would be needed for a “more abundant” reading of Scripture? The number of years did not have to be the same for Sundays and for weekdays.

**The Gospel**

Since the gospel is the climactic stage in the proclamation of the word, the distribution of the gospel texts was the necessary starting point for the commission’s work. How many years would be needed—two, three, or even four—for an adequate distribution with ever-new texts?
Some of the experts felt that the Sunday proclamation of the gospel should be limited solely to the logia or *ipsissima verba* of Christ, that is, to what contemporary critical exegesis regards as the words of Jesus himself; the whole framework added by the evangelists should be dropped. The pericopes would then admittedly be very short, but they would have the striking force of a slogan and would thus prove a valuable pastoral tool. Others, however, were of the opinion that short sentences cannot be thrust upon the faithful without any context and that when thus read in isolation, the sentences do not stick in the mind. Moreover, from the ceremonial viewpoint, how could the solemn ceremonial surrounding the reading of the gospel be maintained if the text proclaimed were, for example, only a single sentence or even less than that?

There was an even more important objection to the idea, for what the idea represents may at times be only an exegetical hypothesis, not something certain, and it is difficult to involve oneself deeply in a liturgy that rests on such a fluid base. In addition, there is a material stumbling block: the limited number of such pericopes would have made it impossible to proclaim the Old Testament, the text of which is far more extensive than the New, even when the latter is taken in its totality. Other members of the commission, therefore, asked whether, instead of getting involved in exegetical hypotheses, it would not be far better to proclaim almost the entire text of each gospel. That was the choice the commission finally made.

*A Three-Year Cycle: The Synoptic Gospels*

The decision required new choices. Ancient tradition has the Church read the Gospel of John during Lent and Easter Time. It would therefore not be appropriate to begin the reading of John all over again later in the year. Once it was decided to have three cycles, it was also decided to exclude the Gospel of John, inasmuch as it is proclaimed yearly at certain times. To fill out the Gospel of Mark, however, which is shorter than the other two Synoptics, certain passages of John would be introduced into the Sundays of Ordinary Time. Thus, for practical purposes, one of the three Synoptics would be read in each year of the three-year cycle. For weekdays, a two-year cycle proclamation of the gospel was envisaged.
There was no thought of attempting a continuous reading of the Old Testament, for it is simply too long. A number of the experts, however, did want all the other books of the New Testament to be read in the course of the year; the second reading on the Sundays of Ordinary Time was to help in achieving this goal.

The Second Reading

The decision gave rise to difficulties, however, as we have by now come to experience. The chief difficulty is the following: Since there is no continuous reading of the Old Testament on these Sundays, the reading for each Sunday is chosen with an intelligent eye on the gospel reading for that day. But the second reading consists of a quasi-continuous reading of the letters; thus, an element that usually has no relation to the other two readings is introduced into each Sunday’s liturgy. When such a relation does exist, it does so only by accident.

Here we have a new situation. During Easter Time, for example, the readings may not fit perfectly together, but at least they are all concerned with the mystery of the resurrection, and this gives unity to them. In the case of the Sundays in Ordinary Time, however, the second reading introduces a new factor, being unconnected to the other two readings (unless, of course, one attempts to establish artificial and arbitrary links with them).

The Homily

The lack of unity between the second reading, on the one hand, and the first and third, on the other, creates a real and insoluble problem when it comes to the homily. One must either concentrate on the second reading and say nothing about the Old Testament reading and the gospel, or else say little or nothing about the second reading and concentrate on the Old Testament and the gospel. Where approved by the conference of bishops, it is permissible indeed to have only two readings;* then the first of these, for obvious reasons, must always be from the Old Testament and the second from the gospel.

* In the third edition of the Missal, this permission was removed from what is now GIRM 357, and in its place is found this comment about the three Sunday Scriptures: “These readings should be followed strictly.”
Some celebrants have found a solution that makes it possible to retain the three readings and to comment on them all: Before the beginning of the penitential act, the second reading is proclaimed, and the penitential act then is structured around the theme of that reading. Then, at the proper time, the Liturgy of the Word is celebrated, using only the Old Testament reading and the gospel. In some ways this is a fairly good solution, provided we do not anticipate the Liturgy of the Word by assigning the same solemnity to the proclamation of the second reading.†

The Other Texts

There is this further difficulty: Except for the responsorial psalm after the Old Testament reading and for the Alleluia that introduces the reading of the gospel, the chants, like the prayers, are the same in all three years of the cycle. This means further new elements that, like the second reading, often have no connection with the gospel.

These difficulties are fully real. We had to mention them at the beginning in order to explain why the final volume of this series of commentaries must follow a different format from the first two.

2. The Commentary

Readings

In light of the problems mentioned, how is this commentary to be arranged? The theme of the second reading, as we said, rarely fits in with the broad theme of the given Sunday. In both the second and the third readings we are admittedly dealing with a continuous reading of the text, but the two cases are nonetheless different. Even though the reading of the gospel is continuous or quasi-continuous, we cannot be satisfied with a commentary that is exclusively exegetical. This is because the gospel pericope is related to the first reading, the one from the Old Testament, and this latter reading tells us the point of view from which the gospel should be read and commented on.

The second reading, on the other hand, is self-contained and unrelated to the other two readings. The solution here is to give a com-

† There is no provision for this solution in the rubrics.
mentary that is pretty much a straight exegesis of it and to add a spiritual commentary; the fact that the passage is proclaimed in a liturgy will not cause us to read it from some special viewpoint. All this being so, we think it enough to devote a few lines to each of these second readings, offering some reflections that will serve as a guide to readers and referring them for further developments to some works of exegesis or spiritual commentary on Scripture. As in previous volumes, a heavy line separates the second reading from what precedes in the many instances in which the second reading is not related to the theme of the day’s celebration. And in the outline charts preceding the commentary, an asterisk is used to identify such selections.

**Prayers**

The prayers and chants are the same in all three years, except for the responsorial psalm and the chant that introduces the gospel. There is, therefore, no advantage to be gained by joining the commentary on them to the commentary on the readings for each Sunday. As a matter of fact, the entrance and communion antiphons of Ordinary Time, together with the prayers for these Sundays, form a separate whole that has no necessary relation to the readings. On the one hand, then, the proclamation of the word, the responsorial psalms, and the chants that introduce the gospel form one whole; on the other, the various prayers and the other chants form a second whole. Each of these wholes is independent of the other.

In view of all of this, we judge it better to offer a short general commentary, at least on the prayers, which we shall examine and try to treat synthetically; at the same time, however, we shall be on the watch for the possibility of seeing a given prayer as an integral part of the Sunday to which it is assigned. As for the chants, there would have been little value in attempting a synthesis of them.

There could be no question, of course, of commenting on the liturgy for each weekday of Ordinary Time. To do so would have required several more volumes. Finally, we could, in the course of the commentary, have cited numerous works on the theology of Sunday and especially on the Scriptures. That would only have made the volume unwieldy and would have added little of value, given the nature of the volume.