

Collegeville Ministry Series

THE MINISTRY OF LECTORS

Second Edition

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*To the lectors at Holy Trinity Parish,
Georgetown, Washington, DC,
in gratitude for their service
to the people of God*

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Preface

I find it hard to believe that *The Ministry of Lectors* was first published thirty-five years ago in 1981. At that time it was a slim forty-five-page booklet. A second and enlarged edition followed in 2004. Over the years it has been translated into Spanish and Italian and, before these translations, there was even a movie—well, a video! This book aims to inform, encourage, and inspire both new and experienced lectors—and deacons and presiders—to take up the important task of proclaiming God’s word during the liturgy with dedication, understanding, enthusiasm, and joy.

In his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of an adequate preparation by preachers in order to fulfill their responsibility of communicating the word of God during the eucharistic celebration. Much of what he says there can be applied to lectors, especially the need for deepening the awareness that God truly intends to reach out to others through the biblical word and that their collaboration with God for the sake of an effective Liturgy of the Word requires study, prayer, reflection, and practice, along with a pastoral creativity that makes the communication of God’s word an energizing experience for all concerned.

In a world clamoring for our attention in so many ways, seeking more often to entertain and distract us rather than to enlighten and engage us in the work of caring for others and for the world entrusted to us, the lector stands up to proclaim God’s

word. Sometimes it can seem daunting even to try to hold the attention of any gathering often marked by diversity in culture, ethnicity, education, and age. Yet, more than ever do people need to hear clearly and passionately a word that is life-giving, that has the power to evoke faith, hope, and love, and that can lead a congregation from autonomy to community so as to engage them more wholeheartedly in the worship of the God who gathers them together as one Body with Christ as their head.

I am grateful to Liturgical Press, which has continued to offer this work for over three and a half decades. I am also grateful to the many lectors with whom I have worked and celebrated the liturgy over the last forty-six years. Their love of the word of God has been an inspiration; their passionate proclamation of it has led to its being heard in ever new and fruitful ways. May the word they have sown so well in the lives of others continue to bear a rich harvest in their own.

I pray that the words of this little work will achieve the end for which they were set down: God's glory and the awakening of a lively response from the hearts of God's people to the ever-living Word of the Lord, Jesus Christ. May the Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, come upon you and bless you, empowering your efforts to sow the seed of God's word.

James A. Wallace, CSsR
Easter 2016

Introduction

In one of the best lines from the Oscar-nominated screenplay for *Shadowlands*, C. S. Lewis (played by Anthony Hopkins) tells a new student that people read to know they are not alone. Indeed, reading brings us into worlds real and imaginary, introduces us to people wise and foolish, and provides us with knowledge and insight. Reading brings to us other voices with different perspectives. The American novelist Eudora Welty wrote that from the time she was a child and was introduced to the world of books, she knew that, whether her mother read to her or she was reading to herself, the voice she heard was not her voice or her mother's but the voice of the text. This is a wonderful insight. A text has a voice—sometimes more than one—that speaks to us and, when we read to others, it speaks through us. A good book begins as the dark markings of print on a page but ends as a companion with whom we have spent hours and whose voice might well have an enduring impact on our lives. Then, too, there are those great books, or passages in a book, that we return to again and again, to savor, learn from, delight in, or lean against for comfort and consolation in times of distress and sorrow.

Such a book is the Bible. It is really a collection of books, some of which have been around close to three thousand years. It brings us stories of beginnings and visions of endings, sagas of ancestral lineage, and tales of royal families whose men and women listened for the voice of God over the call of their own

desires. Within its pages are snippets of wisdom in couplet form and prophetic utterances in poetic meter, letters of instruction and advice, homilies of theological depth and emotional appeal, prayers of longing and lament, and songs of praise and exaltation.

From the pages of the Bible, selections have been made for the worship life of many Christian faith communities and put into a book called the Lectionary. There are a number of such lectionaries at present. In the United States the two principal ones are the *Lectionary for Mass* used by Roman Catholics and the *Revised Common Lectionary* used by many churches in the Protestant tradition. Whenever these communities gather, whether on Sundays or to celebrate other special acts of worship and praise, men and women educated to the task are called upon to read the sacred texts. The name given to those who perform this work is “lector,” a word rooted in the Latin word *legere*, which means “to read.”

This book for lectors is divided into four chapters. The first chapter considers three different ways of understanding the role of the lector: as a job, a ministry, and a vocation. The second chapter reflects on the mystery of the word of God. Our God speaks *to* us in the Scriptures. Whether a community reads from a Bible or from a Lectionary, the word of the Lord comes once more to dwell in our midst, to take up residence in our hearts and minds, so that it might bear fruit in our lives. God continues to speak to us through human words. As in the past, God calls men and women in our own day to help bring this divine self-revelation about. The third and fourth chapters will then focus on how we can cooperate in bringing to fulfillment God’s decision to speak not only *to* but also *through* us. Here we get down to practical matters by looking at the two areas of spiritual preparation and speaking preparation. The former will suggest a process for opening one’s mind and heart to the word, while the latter will consider the requirements for a satisfying public reading that are located in the needs of the text, the listeners, and the liturgical setting. In conclusion, suggestions for ongoing development as a lector are given.

Both spirit and flesh are involved in the preparation to lector. The spirit of the lector is called to surrender to the Spirit of the Lord who truly gives us words to speak. The Holy Spirit is at the heart of the word's bearing fruit: "The working of the Holy Spirit is needed if the word of God is to make what we hear outwardly have its effect inwardly. . . . The working of the Holy Spirit precedes, accompanies, and brings to completion the whole celebration of the Liturgy" (Introduction to the *Lectionary for Mass*, 9). As it was from the beginning, the Holy Spirit continues to come upon those called to serve and to work through their very being. Thus, the body of the lector—which includes the entire person: mind, imagination, and feelings, as well as facial expression and muscular response—is invited to submit to the body of the text and to embody its thoughts and feelings as faithfully and fully as possible.

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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.¹ 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.