

The *Lectionary*

“It’s that really big Bible they read from at church.”

“It’s the book they read during the Mass.”

“It’s a shortened version of the Bible for the Mass.”

These are just a few answers we may hear to the question, “What is the *Lectionary*?” It is indeed a book—a rather large book, in fact. The *Lectionary* does indeed contain passages from the Scriptures. But why don’t we just read from the Bible at the Mass? Why the *Lectionary*? How did it take its shape? How do we use it?

The *Lectionary* is an ordering of, or putting together in a specific sequence, selections from the Scriptures in a way that sustains the Church through the cycle of the seasons and years. Instead of reading the Bible in its entirety beginning with Genesis and reading through Revelation and then starting again, the *Lectionary* draws together different Scripture passages that correlate with one another or may share common themes. This ordering of readings according to similar themes allows the Church to enter more fully into the great history of salvation. The readings selected may focus on the mystery of the life of Christ, they may remind us of the lives or teachings of the saints, they may focus on the seasons of the Church year, or they may focus on one of the Sacraments being celebrated. The *Lectionary* provides selections of readings for each Sunday and weekday Mass as well as for the celebrations of other liturgies such as Baptism, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage, funerals, rites of blessings, and many others.

On Sundays, major Solemnities, and certain feast days, four Scripture passages are proclaimed. On weekdays and for the other Sacraments, like Baptism and the Anointing of the Sick, three passages, or sometimes even fewer than three, are proclaimed. The first reading is usually a selection taken from the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Scriptures. A selection from the Book of Psalms is then chanted, sung, or recited. Following the Psalm, another reading selection is taken from the New Testament, usually from the epistles of Paul, the other epistles, or the Book of Revelation. Finally, a passage from one of the Gospels is proclaimed.

The Word of God and the People of God

During the Liturgy of the Word, which is the first major part of the Eucharistic Liturgy and any other sacramental celebration, the Scriptures are proclaimed to the gathered assembly. During the Liturgy of the Word, Christ is present to his Church through the Holy Spirit. For this reason the bishops of Vatican II called the Scriptures “the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her children, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life.” (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation [Dei Verbum, 1965], 21*). When the Scriptures are proclaimed, it is Christ, the Eternal Word of God, who is truly present. As the Church is nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ, so too is the Church nourished by the Scriptures. The readings and the homily that follows the proclamation of the Gospel are intended to provide nourishment, inspiration, and guidance by opening the hearts and minds of those gathered to the mystery of Christ’s saving work of redemption.

The Church is formed, shaped, challenged, and comforted by the Word of God. The Scriptures proclaimed at liturgy remind us of who we are as God’s People as we hear the stories of our ancestors of faith and of the fulfillment of the Covenant through Christ. At times we may also hear the prophet’s call to repentance and a return to holiness. We may sometimes hear words of comfort, assurance, and healing. At other times we may hear Scripture readings that remind us to welcome the stranger, attend to the widows and orphans, and to reach out to the lowly. In the proclamation of the Gospel, we hear the teachings of Christ exemplified by parables and in stories of miracles. Hearing the Word of God reminds



us of the marvels that God has done, calls us to remember and renew the Covenant, and points our minds and hearts to the fulfillment of God's promises. Then in the homily, the Scriptures are interpreted and related to the needs of today, and we are exhorted to live as faithful followers of Christ, following the examples of the stories proclaimed. Through the Scriptures proclaimed during the Liturgy of the Word, the Church grows in wisdom and grace and is prepared to receive Christ in the Eucharist.

The richness of the Scriptures is now readily available to anyone by picking up any copy of the Bible. In the past, however, the majority of biblical literacy relied heavily on hearing the Scriptures at the Mass. Before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the Church relied on a few select readings, mostly from the New Testament epistles and Gospels but rarely from the Old Testament. The same sets of readings were used each year. People attending the Mass would hear only a few of the Scripture stories, and hear them year to year, limiting their general knowledge and understanding of the Bible. After the revisions of the liturgy, an emphasis was placed on the importance of the Word of God. As a result, more selections from the Old Testament were incorporated into the new *Lectio*ary. The result has been a growing awareness of the Scriptures in the life of the Church and in the life of each believer.

The Structure of the *Lectio*ary and the Liturgical Year

The order and selections of readings from the *Lectio*ary are arranged according to a set cycle—a three-year cycle for Sundays and a two-year cycle for weekdays. Each year of the Sunday cycle corresponds with the Gospel that will primarily be used during that year. During year A the Gospel passages for Sunday liturgies will come mostly from Matthew. Year B will be from Mark. Year C corresponds to the Gospel of Luke. Because the Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the four, there are not enough passages to fill the Sundays in Ordinary Time during the year. Thus, during year B, there are many Sundays where a selection from the Gospel of John is proclaimed. There is not a year in this cycle exclusively devoted to John. However, because the Gospel of John contains many of the passages that draw us more deeply into reflection on the significant events of the life of Christ, this Gospel is used for the major celebrations during Lent, the Triduum, Christmas, and Easter. On Good Friday, for example, the Passion account is always taken from the Gospel of John. Palm Sunday, on the other hand, uses the Passion account from the given year in the cycle. At Advent a new cycle of Sunday readings, as well as a new liturgical year, begins.

The weekday readings are arranged in the *Lectio*ary according to a two-year cycle. Year I readings are used on years ending in odd numbers (2011, 2013) and Year II readings are for even number years (2012, 2014). The Gospel selection assigned for each weekday remains the same from year to year, but the first reading and the Psalm follow the two-year cycle. On days that commemorate the feast of a saint, there are readings appointed that relate to the life or teaching of the saint. On lesser feasts and other votive or ritual Masses, there are several options of appointed readings from which to choose.

The process of choosing and ordering passages from the Scriptures is primarily based on two principles. The principle of "harmony" describes the many instances where Old Testament readings naturally harmonize with the Gospels. Often the readings correspond to one another. For example, there are several references to the prophecies of Isaiah in the Gospels (see Matthew 4:15–16). The times when that particular Gospel is used, the first reading will be from the prophecy quoted by the Gospel. At other times Jesus may make mention of a character in the Old Testament and so the corresponding reading about this character will be paired with the Gospel. At other times Jesus' teaching is related to a teaching or a law from the Old Testament. And yet at other times, there may be a harmony that exists for a



liturgical season. Readings chosen for Advent, Lent, Christmas, and Easter reflect the distinctive natures as well as the unity of those liturgical seasons.

Another principle is that of “semi-continuous” reading of a particular book or letter from the New Testament. During the Easter season, for example, a continuous selection from the Acts of the Apostles is read as the first reading at the Mass. During the Sundays of Ordinary Time, the first reading and the Gospel tend to be in harmony with each other while the second reading is read semi-continuously from Sunday to Sunday.

The seasons of the liturgical year play a significant role in determining the readings chosen for a particular day. The liturgical season and the selections of reading have a strong relationship. The season of Christmas, for example, relies heavily on the prophecies relating to the coming of the Messiah and the infancy narratives of the early life of Jesus. The selections of readings during the Easter season make use of the Resurrection stories and the stories of the beginnings of the Church. During Lent the selection of readings corresponds to and reflects the baptismal and penitential nature of the season.

The *Lectionary* is most often published in English as four volumes. Volume I contains the three-year cycle of readings for Sundays and Solemnities. Volumes II and III of the *Lectionary* contain the two-year cycle of weekday readings as well as the readings for the feast days of the saints. Volume IV contains many selections and options for the readings of feast days that do not have specifically assigned readings or for other Masses such as for Confirmation, weddings, ordinations, or Masses for the dead.

Although the *Lectionary* contains the Gospel readings given for each day, another book, the *Book of the Gospels*, is also used. This larger book, most often beautifully bound, is the collection of the Gospel selections for Sundays and Solemnities as found in the *Lectionary*. The *Book of the Gospels* is carried in procession, placed on the Altar, processed to the place of proclamation (led oftentimes by candles and incense), kissed by the priest or bishop, and sometimes used to bless the assembly. In many communities people often bow as the *Book of the Gospels* is carried in procession. A long tradition within both eastern and western Christianity is to use and reverence the *Book of the Gospels* as an act of reverence to Christ, the Word of God, whose words and teachings are contained within the book. Ancient art sometimes depicts Christ enthroned, holding the *Book of the Gospels*, teaching and blessing the Church.

The *Lectionary* is grounded in the Paschal Mystery, the death and Resurrection of Christ. It is this mystery and the unfolding of this mystery each year through the cycle of the seasons that gives the *Lectionary* its shape. It is through the selections of readings found in the *Lectionary* that the Church enters into a reflection on the life of Christ. The great story of salvation is proclaimed and unfolds as the year unfolds.

Formed by the Word

The Scriptures nourish and give life to the Church. As the Church journeys through the year, Sunday by Sunday, season by season, the selections and ordering of readings provided in the *Lectionary* act as a guide. The readings appointed in the *Lectionary* allow the People of God to reflect, each time we gather together, on the stories, teachings, and examples found in the Scriptures in order for us to not only encounter the words of the Scriptures but to also enter into a deeper relationship with the Word Made Flesh.



(The quotation on page 1 is from *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*, number 21, at www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.
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