

# Especially for Lay Ministers

## The Scripture Readings: Some Problems

It would be interesting to conduct a random survey of people leaving church after Sunday Mass. Stop 10 of them in the parking lot and ask if they could give you a gist of the three Scripture readings. My bet is they would get a D-minus.

No need to take my word. Give it a try. I did, and most people remembered nothing.

Of course, it really isn't their fault. There are some problems in the Liturgy of the Word.

Here are some of them:

- The readings are often very, very heavy. Great care and preparation are necessary if they are to have any impact on the congregation. Those who read them (both lectors and presiders) often do not seem to be aware of the exceptional skill and preparation required.
- Besides being heavy, the readings (especially the first two) are excerpts taken out of context. Unless you understand their background, you often cannot make head or tail of them. It would be like standing up and reading a brief excerpt right out of the middle of one of Shakespeare's plays. It would come from nowhere and end abruptly—as do many of the readings at Mass.
- All in all, there are a lot of words at Mass. Perhaps three readings (plus usually a psalm in between) are too many.
- Many PA systems are inadequate or poorly used.
- The presider, the ministers and the congregation do not seem to appreciate the sacredness of the Liturgy of the Word.

On this last point, it is interesting to note the difference in atmosphere during the Scripture readings and during the Consecration. Keep in mind that the presence of the Lord is just as real as under the form of bread and wine. In some Eastern rites the book of Scripture is treated with as much reverence as the tabernacle. In whatever rite, the moment when the Scriptures are read is sacred.

At most Sunday Masses, you'd never know it. During the Consecration a perceptible stillness comes over the whole congregation. Movement and crowd noise cease. If the ushers are standing in the back, they suddenly kneel on the floor.

It's a different story during the Scripture readings. Crown noises are usually at a very high level. People are still arriving and walking down the aisle to their seats; few would do this during the Consecration. Ushers are walking around doing their chores. The presider himself may be leaning over whispering instructions to one of the servers; I've caught myself doing this. Musicians are busy preparing for the song between the readings.

Perhaps the biggest reason for the apparent failure of the readings to make an impact is the failure of many to realize how important they are. We haven't yet emphasized this part of the Mass enough. It is still, for many, the part of the Mass you can miss without committing a mortal sin.

## The Approach of the Old and New Catechism

The other day I looked up the section on the Mass in the old *Baltimore Catechism*. There is no mention whatever of the Liturgy of the Word. Here, for example, is the definition of the Mass that we all learned:

Question 357: What is the Mass?

The Mass is the sacrifice of the New Law in which Christ, through the ministry of the priest, offers himself to God in an unbloody manner under the appearance of bread and wine.

By contrast, the new *Catechetical Directory* speaks of the Lord's presence not only in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, but also in the reading of the Word. It then goes on to say that we must "help people understand the importance and significance of the Liturgy of the Word."

It will take a while for this to seep into our bones. And when it does, the reading of the Scriptures at Mass will be a very moving experience.

## The Scripture Readings: Some Suggestions

One of the assistant bishops of Detroit was celebrating confirmation and trying to say a word or two to each youngster who came up. One little boy approached and said that his Confirmation name was Zaccheus. The bishop was impressed. "That's a good biblical name," he said. "Why did you pick it?" The boy answered, "It's my dog's name." So much for biblical roots.

WE Catholics are gradually developing a love for Scripture, but we're still weak in this area. That probably has a lot to do with the weakness of the Liturgy of the Word at Mass. In the last section, I talked about some of the problems. Now I'd like to offer a couple of suggestions.

## Treating Lectors as Ministers

Lectors should be treated as ministers not just in name, but in fact. This has many implications. For one thing, candidates for ministry in the Church traditionally have to go through a process of selection preceded by careful training and then a trial period. Not everyone who volunteers makes it through ministerial training programs. If ministry really is for service of others rather than the ministers' own fulfillment, then all the goodwill in the world will not substitute for skill.

The general failure to regard lectors as carefully selected ministers of something very precious to us (God's Word) is often evident in planning weddings. At the rehearsal the couple announces that Uncle Fred is going to do the first reading. Most of the time, the reason why they chose Uncle Fred is because they couldn't figure out how else to work him into the wedding. Sometimes I ask, "Is he at good public reading?" They hadn't particularly thought about that (anybody who can read can read publicly), but they do want Uncle Fred. Come the wedding Mass, Uncle Fred is a nervous wreck. When it's time for the first reading, he bolts to the lectern, forgets to announce where the reading is taken from, races through it on a hysterical pitch and at an incoherent pace, and then, without any ending ("this is the Word of the Lord"), dashes back to his pew.

We need to start taking lectors seriously as ministers.

## Creating a Climate of Reverence

Everyone who has a leadership role in the Mass (e.g., ushers, servers, musicians) must work hard to create a climate in which the readings can be appreciated. It simply cannot be done without their assistance.

Ushers, for example, should gently hold latecomers in the vestibule while any of the Scripture readings is actually proclaimed. The people could be seated between the readings. This would do wonders for the atmosphere and would be a reminder to all of us of the importance of that part of the Mass.

The servers and musicians too should display hushed attentiveness to the readings. Their witness would have an effect on the congregation.

## Introducing the Readings

All three readings (but especially the first two) usually need some sort of introduction. Some explanation of their historical background and identification of unfamiliar names and places is sometimes necessary just to comprehend what is going on. For example, the following reading is from the regular Sunday cycle. Read it now without any introduction—just as the congregation would hear it.

A reading from the book of the Prophet Hosea:

“Let us know, let us strive to know the Lord;  
as certain as the dawn is his coming,  
and his judgement shines forth like the light of day!  
He will come to us like the rain  
like spring rain that waters the earth.”

“What can I do with you Ephraim?  
What can I do with you Judah?  
Your piety is like a morning cloud,  
like the dew that early passes away.  
For this reason, I smote them through the prophets,  
I slew them by the words of my mouth;  
For it is love that I desire, not sacrifice,  
and knowledge of God rather than holocausts.” (Hosea 6:3-6)

There are not really any strange terms in this reading; the words are simple enough. But when you read it or hear it without any background, you have no idea what is going on.

Try the following introduction:

“This reading from the prophet Hosea presents two speakers. First, the Israelites speak of their trust in the Lord. The words sound very good, but it is no more than lip service. In the second half of the reading, God is the speaker and he criticizes their shallow piety.”

Now go back and see if the reading makes any more sense.

It might also be noted that the meaning of a particular passage would be greatly clarified if the lector made a deliberate pause in the middle to help the people know when the shift in speakers takes place. That would require a good understanding of the text on the part of the lector, and that is crucial. Little pauses and inflections based on understanding can make worlds of difference in what people hear.

The introductions that I have seen published for Sunday use are not, in my opinion, very good. They often violate the following criteria:

1. Introductions should be very brief. Four sentences should be the limit. It is dangerous for a priest or lector to ad-lib them; it is too easy to go on and on, making the introduction longer than the reading itself.
2. An introduction should not summarize all that the reading is going to say. This is needless repetition, and repetition drives people crazy. The sole purpose of an introduction is to give background, to help set up the reading *so that the reading can speak for itself*.
3. Introductions should never be preachy. Once again, their purpose is to provide information about the reading. Introductions are not opportunities for mini-sermons.

## Providing Breaks between Readings

Those who put the new liturgy together provided breaks between readings, but these breaks usually get lost in the shuffle. In most places the first reading, responsorial psalm, second reading, Alleluia and Gospel are all strung together in an unbroken chain of words.

There is supposed to be a brief period of silent reflection after each of the first two readings—before the responsorial psalm or the Alleluia is begun. We need such a break in order to absorb what was read to us. It might also be pointed out that we don't always have to do the responsorial psalm or the alleluia. These are simply suggestions, and they themselves are meant to be reflective. (Usually they come off instead as the 'next thing you're supposed to read.')

Occasionally omitting one or the other in favor of extended silence or background music can help to highlight the readings themselves.

## Creating the Ministry of “Critic”

Someone should be appointed in each parish to critique the Liturgy of the word regularly. This would be a ministry in itself, and a very difficult one at that. But what a difference it could make! How else will the truth really be told—to the priest, the lectors, the ushers, the musicians, the planners?

Jack Nicklaus would be rightly insulted if you told him that you thought you knew more about golf than he did. Yet, he has someone look at his swing and critique it regularly. So does every other professional golfer. This kind of criticism makes such good sense, yet we so seldom arrange for it.