

# HANDBOOK FOR LECTORS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

**The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the Body of the Lord, in so far as she never ceases, particularly in the sacred liturgy, to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ. She has always regarded, and continues to regard the Scriptures, taken together with sacred Tradition, as the supreme rule of her faith... In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them. And such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigor, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life. (Divine Revelation, No. 21).**

With these powerful words, the Bishops of the Second Vatican Council point to the centrality and importance of the Scripture in the life and worship of the Church. Since that Council in the 1960's Catholics have been nourished and strengthened by greater access to the Bible, as part of the Mass, and in their homes. It now plays a significant role in our prayer life. Reading it daily should be a part of our lives. In this context, the Church calls forth lay men and women, lectors also known as lay readers, to read the Scriptures at Sunday and daily Mass. These lectors have the responsibility to make the Word of God better known in the Mass, and indeed beyond the Mass, to all the Catholics in their congregations.

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## 2. JESUS PROCLAIMS THE SCRIPTURES Luke 4: 16-22

Lectors or readers today are part of the tradition going back to the Old Testament where religious leaders made the Word of God available to the people by reading it in public. Thus, towards the end of his life Moses instructs the leaders to read aloud the law: "Assemble the people, men, women and children as well as aliens – that they may hear the law and learn it and so fear the Lord, your God, and carefully observe all the words of the law" (Deut. 31:12). Another beautiful example of this is when Ezra the scribe and priest read the law to the people. Ezra, the priest, "read out of the book from daybreak until midday, in the presence of the men, the women, and those children old enough to understand; and all the people listened attentively to the book of the law" (Nehemiah 8:3). At the end, "the people their hands raised high answered Amen, Amen" (8:6), renewing their commitment to keep their covenant with God.

In the New Testament, at the beginning of his public mission, Jesus comes to Nazareth, to the synagogue. "He stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.... All wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth" (Lk. 4: 16-22).

Jesus, known simply as the son of Joseph to the people of Nazareth, was a layperson, not a priest or Levite, not a Scribe. As a lay reader in the synagogue he proclaims the word of God from the Old Testament, from the prophet Isaiah. He read very well because it says that “the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him” (Lk. 4: 20). Then Jesus says to them: “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk. 4:21).

Lectors today carry on that tradition. Of course, we cannot say as Jesus did that the scripture is fulfilled in our own case. But our task is to proclaim, break open the Scriptures so that our congregation, young and old, rich and poor, can hear and respond to the Word of God, the word that gives life.

### **3. THE WORD OF GOD PROCLAIMED TODAY THROUGH LAY READERS**

The Mass has always been supremely important for Catholics. Yet in history, there have been changes in emphasis. One change was to put more focus upon the priest than upon the entire worshipping community. Indeed, the church was seen as “Father’s Church.” The Mass was celebrated in Latin, and thus not easily understood or followed by the lay person. The Second Vatican Council changed this. It returned to the early traditions of the Church where the Mass was a gathering of the people, with their priest, a gathering where the people actively took part and shared in the various parts of the Mass. While reminding us of the beauty of Latin, and the universality that it points to, the Pope and Bishops urged that the Mass be made more understandable by using the local languages. In this way, the Scripture would be more readily understood. New translations of the Bible into the vernacular were published, and much energy went into trying to make sure that the Bible was accessible, read, and prayed by all Catholics, lay men and women...

As part of this process and movement, the Church reintroduced the custom of lay persons reading the Scriptures at Mass. Not only should the laity read, study, and pray over the Scriptures, but now they are invited to assist the Church, to work with the priest in the parish in opening up the Scriptures for the people of God as lectors or readers.

The Church calls for collaboration and cooperation between priest and lay persons in the many aspects and works of the parish. Thus, in addition to altar servers, ushers or Church wardens, there are now Special Ministers of Communion and lectors. Each contributes to the building up of the parish. This new model of Church calls forth the gifts, talents, faith of the laity to work with the priest in the liturgy, in catechesis, and in the overall multi-faceted mission of the parish.

Lectors or readers are part of this movement, with the special responsibility for the public reading or proclamation of the Scriptures. They play a key role in the very important part of the Mass – namely the liturgy of the Word.

### **4. THE MINISTRY OF LECTORS**

It was in the mid 1960's that lay readers were reintroduced into the Catholic Church. One announcement of this shift is found in the document of the Second Vatican Council *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*: There we read:

**Servers, readers, commentators, and members of the choir also exercise a genuine liturgical function. They ought, therefore, to discharge their offices with the sincere piety and decorum demanded by so exalted a ministry and rightly expected of them by God's people. Consequently they must all be deeply imbued with the spirit of the liturgy, each in his own measure, and they must be trained to perform their functions in a correct and orderly manner. (No. 29).**

Clearly the Church sees the work of the reader as a vocation and a ministry, not simply a job or function. The readers of the parish do not form another parish society. Rather they are called in a special way to serve the entire parish community. Their ministry is to be a key part of the central act of worship of the parish, by proclaiming the Word of God at Holy Mass. Their mission is not taken up on their own initiative, but they are chosen and called by the priest and the parish community to serve the community.

Another description of the ministry of the reader is found in the writing of Pope Paul VI. What he says here applies most directly to those who are officially installed into the office of lectors. This is not what most parish lectors receive, yet what it says about the office of lector applies very much to the lector who is not officially installed by the bishop or superior, but is commissioned by the parish priest for that ministry.

**The office of the lector, and it is proper to him, is to read the word of God in the liturgical assembly.... He should meditate assiduously on the sacred scriptures so that he may more fittingly and perfectly fulfill these functions. The lector should be mindful of the office he has undertaken and should do all in his power to acquire increasingly that sweet and living love and knowledge of the scriptures that will make him a more perfect disciple of the Lord.** (*Ministeria Quaedam*, Pope Paul VI, 1972, No. 5).

Lectors are to be disciples of the Lord. A disciple is one who learns from the master, and one who follows the example and way of life of the master. All Christians are called to be Disciples of Christ, but lectors, commissioned to proclaim the Scriptures in the Church, are called in a very special way to follow Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh. Thus the ministry of lector is a gift and a task. It is a privilege that also involves responsibility and disciplined training.

## **5. THE NEED FOR TRAINING - THE PURPOSE OF THIS HANDBOOK**

As indicated above, the Church insists on proper training for those who will be assigned to read the Scriptures at Mass. In the Introduction to the Lectionary, we also read:

**So that the faithful may derive a keen appreciation of Holy Scripture by listening to the readings, it is necessary that those who read it to them, whether commissioned readers or not, should be competent and carefully prepared for the task (Introduction to the Lectionary, No. 55).**

**The preparation should be primarily spiritual, but technical training is also needed. The spiritual preparation presupposes at least a biblical and liturgical formation. The biblical formation should aim at imparting an understanding of the readings in their context and a grasp, by faith, of the central point of the revealed message. The liturgical formation should give some understanding of the meaning and structure of the liturgy of the word and the relationship between the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. The technical training should teach how to read in public, with and without an amplification system (Introduction to the Lectionary, No. 55).**

In this booklet we will touch upon the various aspects mentioned in the official documents. Thus we will indicate how the Liturgy of the Word is an essential, important part of every Mass, we will provide some introduction on how the Lectionary is composed, how the Catholic reads, prays and understands the Bible. We will also make suggestions on how one prepares oneself and conducts oneself when one is appointed as the reader. Finally we will give ways to train and improve one's voice.

## **6. THE LITURGY OF THE WORD IN THE CELEBRATION OF MASS**

We have seen that in the Jewish tradition the Word of God was proclaimed to the people when they assembled to pray. As we see in the story of Jesus reading in the synagogue in Nazareth, the Jewish people read from the Scripture at their services. In the Acts of the Apostles, we see that the first Christians continue this tradition. Eventually the New Testament is formed, with the gospels, and the letters of St. Paul, and the other writings. These are read out to the people when Christians gather for the breaking of bread, for Holy Mass. According to church historians, at first they read directly from the Bible. Gradually, special books were put together with those parts of the Scripture that would be read at Mass. This is the origin of the book of readings we use today, called the Lectionary.

The writings of St. Luke give us several examples where we see how the earliest celebration of Christian sacraments always involved the reading of the Scriptures. Word and sacrament are inseparable. Thus before the two disciples on the road to Emmaus sit down with Jesus and break bread with him, they have explored and prayed over the

Scriptures, in this case, the prophet Isaiah (see Lk. 24:27-31). In the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 8:26-40), before Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch, he helps him to understand the Old Testament passage of Isaiah, showing how it points to Jesus.

The official instruction on the Mass points to this unity of word and sacrament when it states:

**The Mass is made up of two parts: the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. These two parts are so closely connected that they form but one single act of worship. For in the Mass the table of God's word and of Christ's body is laid for the people of God to receive from it instruction and food.... *General Instruction of the Roman Missal, No. 28***

Note the change from the earlier, pre-Vatican II explanation of the Mass. There we spoke of the three main parts as the offertory, consecration, and communion. We did not give sufficient emphasis to the Scriptures, the Liturgy of the Word. Now, we speak of two main parts of the Mass, liturgy of the Word and liturgy of the Eucharist. And we no longer speak of, or even use the word "offertory" but speak of the "Preparation of the Gifts." The reason for this is that the real offertory takes place as part of the canon, or Eucharistic prayer. There we offer Jesus Christ to the Father, and unite ourselves to Jesus in this offering. This reaches its climax in the "Great Amen" at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer.

In another passage the Instruction on the Mass points to the Scripture as a principal element of the liturgy, where God himself speaks to his people.

**When the Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself is speaking to his people, and Christ, present in his own word, is proclaiming the Gospel. The readings must therefore be listened to by all with reverence; they make up a principal element of the liturgy. In the biblical readings God's word addresses all people of every era and is understandable to them, and a fuller understanding and efficacy are fostered by a living commentary on it, that is to say, by the homily, understood as an integral part of the liturgical action (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal 29*).**

How important it is for the reader to be well trained and prepared! The reader is an instrument of God. God is speaking to the people through the voice of the lector. The Scriptures will be understandable to the people only if they are clearly, forcefully proclaimed by the lector.

We note too that in the responsorial Psalm and the chants, God's Word is also being proclaimed.

**Readings from Scripture and the chants between the readings form the main part of the liturgy of the word... In the readings, explained by the homily, God is speaking to his people, opening up to them the mystery of redemption and salvation, and nourishing their spirit; Christ is present to the faithful**

**through his own word. Through the chants the people make God's word their own.... (General Instruction on the Roman Missal, No. 33)**

In addition to giving more emphasis to Scripture as part of the Mass, the Church wishes that the chants and hymns sung at Mass or at Benediction should be based upon, faithful to, rooted in Scripture. The Psalms, in fact, are the key Christian hymn book. Other hymns should take their inspiration from the Psalms or other parts of the Bible.

## **7. REVERENCE FOR THE WORD OF GOD**

When we think of how Jesus Christ is present at Mass, we normally first think of his presence in the Blessed Sacrament, in the bread as the Bread of Life, received in Holy Communion. But as we read in the Instruction on the Mass, Jesus Christ is present in four ways, namely (1) in the people who gather (where two or three gather, I am in your midst), (2) in the person of the priest, (3) in the Word of Scripture, and (4) in the consecrated bread and wine, which is the Body and Blood of Christ.

**Christ is really present in the assembly gathered in his name; he is present in the person of the minister, in his own word, and indeed substantially and permanently under the Eucharistic elements (No. 27).**

Thus the lector is handling and proclaiming something very sacred and worthy of reverence, namely the Word of God. In passage we already referred to, but which bears repeating, the bishops of the Second Vatican Council make this point very strongly. We read:

**The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since from the table of both the word of God and of the body of Christ she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life, especially in the sacred liturgy. (Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, No. 21).**

Indeed, as we have seen, in our churches, there are two tables at Mass in the sanctuary – namely the altar and the lectern. We are strengthened and fed from both of them. We receive the Word of life and the Bread of life.

Writing in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the theologian Caesarius of Arles shows us what respect and reverence is due to the Word of God:

**Tell me which seems the greater - the body of Christ or the Word of Christ? If you wish to answer accurately, you must say this: the word of God is not less than the body of Christ. Therefore, as the solicitude which we observe when the body of Christ is ministered to us is such that not a particle of it falls from our hands to the earth, so too, with as much care should we see to it that the**

**word of God, which is his gift to us, does not perish from our heart, while we're thinking or talking about something else. Because we will be no less guilty.**

The Word of God is very precious, so much so that not one word should be lost. Our proclaiming of the word must be so clear, and well-prepared that not one word of the Scripture is lost or not heard by God's people. Further ways that the Church shows special reverence to the Word of God is by carrying the Book of the Gospels, held high, in the procession at the beginning of Mass. So too, the Gospel may be incensed before it is proclaimed. And the introduction to the reading of the gospel ("A reading from the holy gospel...") and the refrain spoken by the priest after the reading of the gospel ("This is the gospel of the Lord") may be sung. This serves to emphasize the importance of the gospel and to foster the faith of the listener (Cf. *Introduction to the Lectionary*, No. 17).

Finally, to show the reverence due to the Word of God, there is a special place in the sanctuary from where it is proclaimed, namely the ambo or lectern. This should be prominent, and "suited by its design and high quality to the dignity of the word of God, a clear reminder to the faithful that in the Mass is the table of God's word and the table of Christ's body" (*Introduction to the Lectionary*, No. 32).

As we read in the Instruction on the Roman Missal (No. 309).

**The dignity of the word of God requires the church to have a place that is suitable for proclamation of the word and is a natural focal point for the people during the liturgy of the word. As a rule, the lectern or ambo should be stationary, not simply a movable stand. In keeping with the design of each church, it must be placed so that the ordained ministers and readers may be easily seen and heard by the faithful.**

When we look from the pews of the Church to the sanctuary, three items should be prominent. These are the altar, the lectern, and the presidential or priest's chair. Everything else is secondary and of less importance. The lectern – traditionally called the pulpit – should be prominent, perhaps raised a bit, and clearly visible to the entire congregation.

The books from which the readings are taken should be "of high quality, tastefully and even beautifully produced" (*Introduction to the Lectionary*, No. 35). This same official document reminds us that "the dignity of the word of God demands that the books of readings which are used in the celebration should not be exchanged for other pastoral aids, such as leaflets designed to help the faithful prepare the readings, or to be used by them for their own meditation" (No. 37).

## **8. FUNCTIONS AND BEARING OF THE LECTOR**

## FUNCTIONS OF THE LECTOR

These are found in the Introduction to the Lectionary. We cite four descriptions of those functions.

**The readings lay the table of God=s word for the faithful and open up the riches of the Bible to them.... A reader proclaims the other readings (other than the gospel) (Introduction to the Lectionary, No. 34)**

Note that the reader does not read, but PROCLAIMS the readings. There is a difference! Proclaim does not mean shout, but to “announce, declare publicly, solemnly, officially, or formally.”

**The reader is instituted to proclaim the readings from Scripture, with the exception of the gospel. He may also announce the intentions for the general intercessions, and in the absence of the psalmist, sing or read the psalm between the readings.**

**The reader has his own proper function in the eucharistic celebration and should exercise this even though ministers of a higher rank may be present. Those who exercise the ministry of reader, even if they have not received institution, must be truly qualified and carefully prepared in order that the faithful will develop a warm and lively love for Scripture from listening to the reading of the sacred texts (No.66).**

Note the very special role of the reader. Even if an Archbishop or the Pope or ten priests or deacons are present, it is still the mission and responsibility of the lector to proclaim the first and second readings. Only the Gospel is reserved for the priest or deacon.

**It is his function to carry the Book of the Gospels (if there is one). Then he takes his place in the sanctuary with the other ministers (Nos. 148-9).**

Depending upon local custom, the lector may also be seated with the congregation and then come forth from them to do the readings. The local custom may be, for example, that the Special Ministers of Communion also take their places not in the sanctuary but with the congregation.

Note too that the Lectionary is not carried in the procession, but only the Book of the Gospels. The Lectionary should already be in its place on the lectern as the Mass begins. The Book of the Gospels, if carried in the procession by the Lector, is placed on the altar.

**At the lectern the reader proclaims the readings that precede the gospel. If there is no cantor of the psalm, he may also sing or recite the responsorial psalm after the first reading (No. 150).**

Obviously, the reader should only be called upon to sing the responsorial Psalm a) if there is no cantor, and b) if he or she has a good singing voice. Otherwise, the psalm is recited.

### BEARING AND PRESENCE OF THE LECTOR

Body language is very important and you communicate much even before you open your mouth to read. You should approach the lectern with reverence. You are going to a holy place, the lectern, to read from the holiest of books, that of Scripture. Just as you approach with reverence the altar, the table of the Lord from which we receive the bread of life, so you approach with reverence the lectern, the table from which we receive God's Word.

You should stand tall, dignified, and confident; and walk deliberately before and after you read. Note that the people will automatically be looking at you, so look your best. Dress in a way that is dignified but not distracting. Depending upon the parish, there may be special dress for the readers.

Eye contact is very important and does not come automatically. Before you begin, look at the congregation for a second. This will get their attention and focus it on the Scripture. Keeping eye contact with them once in a while will encourage them to listen more attentively. It is important to look at them, even if they do not seem to be looking at you.

During the reading, at some pauses, look at them. Make them feel and see that you are speaking to them, sharing God's Word with them. This eye-contact should be and appear to be natural. Thus not too much or at the wrong time. Good times would be, for example, when you begin a new paragraph, when the text switches from principle to application, or when a question is addressed to the listener. Eye contact in a word, is one important way or means to connect with, communicate with, and establish more personal contact with the congregation. In this way, the reading becomes more effective.

While reading, place your hands on the lectern rather than at your sides. You should stand straight but not rigid, and not bent over to reach the microphone. While reading, you can keep your index finger running down the side of the page so that you do not lose your place – and this will enable you to have eye contact with the congregation every few sentences.

As you read, focus and concentrate on the Word of God and the people you are proclaiming that Word to. Do not think or worry about yourself.

Silence is not just the absence of noise, absence of singing or reading. It is a positive time for prayerful reflection. After the first reading, pause for a second, and then say: "The Word of the Lord." Then pause again at the lectern, before you go on, or before you move away from the lectern. Your pause should indicate that you yourself are beginning to reflect on what was read, and this should encourage the congregation to

reflect in the same manner. If you continue with the responsorial Psalm or Alleluia then pause again for a moment after you complete it and then proceed back to your place with dignity.

If you have to cough during the reading, turn to the side, especially if you are using a microphone. Best way to test the microphone to see if it is working is to rub or scratch it with your fingernail. Of course this should be done before the Mass begins!

A problem with fear or anxiety as you read? That is natural. But more importantly, you should have a deeper confidence and trust that the Spirit is with you, to help and guide you. You have been called and chosen to perform this ministry and the Lord is with you.

## **9. OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES, CHALLENGES TO THE LECTOR**

### **RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE WORD AT HOME AND IN THE PARISH**

Baptism and Confirmation have made every Catholic to be a messenger of God's word. Not only has every Christian heard God's Word, but each and every Christian is to be one who carries, lives, and shares that Word of God wherever he or she may be, both in the Church and in the world. If this is true of all Christians, how much more true of lectors, those especially chosen to be proclaimers of the word at Holy Mass!

As lector you have official responsibility for the proclamation of the Word of God as part of the liturgy. But your responsibility does not end there. You are called to do your best to assure that the word of God plays a vital role in the parish, in the parish community, and in the homes of parishioners.

The priest and Special Ministers of Communion have special responsibility for Holy Eucharist, assuring that it remains central to the parish, that it is available to the sick, and that proper reverence is given to it. So too, readers or lectors exercise special care for the Word of God. Let us suggest a few ways in which this might be done.

- Support and urge the study of Bible in the parish in study groups. Here you assist the priest in this direction. If possible, attend or even lead these bible study sessions.
- Recommend that parish societies use Scripture regularly as part of their prayer, or as an important input for their meetings.
- Encourage the lay faithful, like the priest and religious, to pray parts of the Divine office – morning or evening prayer - in the parish church in groups, or in homes as families, or as individuals.

- Encourage the parish bookshop to have Catholic bibles for sale, and also prayer books that take their inspiration from the Scriptures. For example, *Christians at Prayer*, this is suitable for schools but also for parish groups and for family prayer in the home.
- In your own home, the Holy Bible should be in a prominent place, and read regularly as part of family prayer.
- When reciting the Rosary, you might add, as many prayer books do, some Scripture passages to accompany the mysteries of the Rosary.
- Benediction in the Parish should also include reading some selection from Scripture, as well as time for quiet prayer.

Someone wisely remarked: “the Bible does not walk.” It must walk and be seen in the lives of Christians. Those chosen and commissioned to be lectors should take the lead, and be servants or ministers of the Word of God, encouraging fellow Catholics in their homes and in the parish to draw even more deeply from the treasures of the Bible.

## **10. FORMED BY THE WORD OF GOD - A SPIRITUALITY FOR LECTORS**

Note. For this section, I am most heavily indebted to Rev. Fr. James Sheerin, S.P.S. who gave a lecture on this topic at a seminar for Lectors.

**IN THE SCRIPTURES, BY THE SPIRIT,  
MAY WE SEE THE SAVIOUR’S FACE,  
HEAR HIS WORD AND HEAR HIS CALLING,  
KNOW HIS WILL AND GROW IN GRACE.**

This hymn, from the Divine Office readings of Tuesday, Week I, sets out a spiritual agenda for all who read or proclaim the Scriptures. For you as lectors, this is especially important because you are called to the special ministry of the word. For this you need a spirituality that relates the Scriptures you proclaim to your daily lives. How can we develop this spirituality, this way of life?

We will suggest three points as essential in leading to a spirituality of lectors. 1) a way of Praying with the Scriptures, 2) Specific Scripture texts that remind us of the power and importance of Scripture, and 3) the importance that the Church gives to Scripture.

### **1) A Way of Praying with the Scriptures, Lectio Divina**

Reading the Scriptures has been the great way of creating faith-filled people, following the Lord’s commands in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. In the

Synagogue the word was sacred. Jesus proclaimed it in the small synagogue in Nazareth (Lk 4). Before it was read it was carried in solemn procession to prepare the hearts and minds of the people present for that truth that would nourish their lives. In the Catholic liturgy, the Lectionary has a revered place and is often carried in procession with lighted candles before the Gospel, and then the candles accompany the Gospel reading.

But what of the Bible in our personal lives? Is it a closed book from one Sunday to the next? Do we have personal copies of the Bible from which we pray daily? Have we as great a devotion and love for the Bible as Christians of other traditions? Until recently, we had lost one of the oldest spiritual practices of the Church, namely that of *Lectio Divina* – *Holy Reading*. This goes back to the early Church, to the Fathers and Mothers of the Church. Holy Reading is distinguished from scholarly study of the Bible. It is the reading that nourishes private prayer and meditation. It involves reading, reflection, and repetition on Scripture texts as a stimulus to personal prayer. The end sought is that a person would have his or her whole life molded or shaped by the Word of God. As blood flows in our veins, so the word of God should flow in our consciousness. St. Benedict in Chapter 48 of his famous Rule, states that without the word of God, the monk was in danger of becoming lazy. Thus a section of the Scriptures was to be read regularly by the monks, individually and in common. Today many parishes promote groups who meet for spiritual reflection on Scripture. It would be expected that lectors would take part in, or indeed be leaders of such groups.

Lectio Divina, Holy reading, should lead to prayer as conversation with God, and to personal friendship with Jesus Christ. As the Holy Spirit assures us through Isaiah: “So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it.”

#### Aspects of Lectio Divina.

- a. It is not trying to cover a specified amount of Scripture, and it thus does not necessarily stop at any particular point. One is led by the Spirit.
- b. At bottom it is listening in faith to the word of God, making ourselves open to that word, and responding in love. It can be done by an individual alone, or in a group.
- c. It involves the whole person. We assimilate the truths of faith through reflection using our minds and imaginations. We pray from a full and generous heart. And so we come close to God, the author of Scripture, and dwell prayerfully on the great truths we have reflected upon. As a result, our lives are more focused on the person of Jesus Christ. As St. Jerome has written: “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.”
- d. Our aim, in the words of St. Paul, is to have “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor.2:16). The letter to the Hebrews shows the power of Scripture: “God’s word is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates and divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the reflections and thoughts of the heart” (Heb. 4:12-13).

- e. Jesus equates following the Scriptures with freedom. “If you live according to my word, you are truly my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8: 31-32).
- f. The Church reminds us of the effect of Scripture. “Let the word of God enlighten your mind, strengthen your will, and set your heart on fire with the love of God” (Constitution on Divine Revelation, No. 23).

A Method of doing Lectio Divina. While we should be led by the Spirit, it helps to learn from Christian tradition how to reflect on and use the Scriptures. Here is one way that need not be followed exactly, but indicates different aspects and movements in Lectio Divina. This approach has four elements: reading, reflection, prayer, and contemplation.

1. Reading. Sit quietly in the presence of God. Choose a passage – perhaps from the Scripture readings for the Mass for that day. Ask the Spirit of Jesus to open up his word to your understanding, so that you receive nourishment. Begin to read slowly.

2. Reflection. Listen as you read, and ask questions about what you read. If a passage or verse or image strikes you, pause over it and let the Spirit speak to you. Reflect, think over the passage. Note what it is saying to your heart and challenges you to be or to do. Note what it means for your life.

3. Prayer: Begin naturally to speak to God about what you have discovered. Let God console, admonish or exhort you as the case may be. ASK God to help you to live in the way his Word is calling you to live. PRAISE and thank God for working in your life already in many ways.

4. Contemplation. Rest in the deep awareness of God’s presence before you. Enter into a moment of WORDLESS PRAYER. Return to your reading if you discover that your mind is starting to wander away to something other than God.

We add here two further ways of praying with the Scriptures, based upon the writing of St. Ignatius Loyola, and found in his book of *Spiritual Exercises*.

- a. One method, called the Second Method of Prayer by St. Ignatius, is to take a familiar passage of Scripture, such as the Our Father, the Magnificat of Mary, or a Psalm such as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Here is how it works with the Our Father. We say the words “Our Father,” and continue to reflect or meditate on these words as long as we find meaning, nourishment, consolation in them. Then we move on to the next words or phrase, “Who art in heaven,” and do the same phrase by phrase, until we come to the end of the prayer. Ignatius notes that if we find fruit, food for thought in just one or two words or phrases, we should not be anxious to go on, but spend the whole time – 30 minutes for example, with those words.
- b. Another method put forth by St. Ignatius is called the Third Method of Prayer. We take a familiar prayer from Scripture such as the Our Father, Benedictus, or a Psalm, or prayer of Jesus from the Gospel of John, Chapter or from St. Paul. With

each breath we pray mentally while saying one word or a few words. We think of what the passage says, of who says it, or what it says to me. Then, with the next breath, we take the next word or groups of words. In this way, observing this measure of time by our breathing, we go through the whole passage or prayer.

**2) Suggested Scripture Texts.** These texts are chosen and presented because they emphasize and explain the grace and power of the Word of God. These are taken from the official Lectionary, and are suggested for use during a Mass or prayer service at which lectors are officially instituted. Thus they are most appropriate for reflection by lectors and for use with the method of Lectio Divina.

## OLD TESTAMENT PSALMS

### 1. Psalm 19: 7-11 Your words are spirit and life

The Law of the Lord is perfect, refreshment for the soul;  
The decree of the Lord is trustworthy,  
Wisdom for the simple  
Thus your servant is formed by them;  
Observing them brings great reward.  
But who can detect his own failings?  
Wash away my hidden faults.

COMMENT. This psalm begins with the splendor and glory of God. His splendor comes to us through his word, his commandments, which are light and joy for the soul.

### 2. Psalm 119: 9-16. I will not forget your word

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.  
I have sworn – and shall maintain it –  
To keep your upright judgments.

COMMENT. This is the longest Psalm in the Bible, and it repeats without tiring that to follow the word of God is the way to life and happiness. Pope John Paul II preached on this Psalm in 2001.

### 3. Psalm 147: 15-20 His word runs swiftly

Praise God - it is good to sing psalms to our God  
How pleasant to praise God.  
God, Builder of Jerusalem!  
He gathers together the exiles of Israel, heals the broken hearted,  
And binds up their wounds.  
He counts the number of the stars, and gives each one a name.

COMMENT; God protects the people of his Holy City and gives his word that he will attend to the pains and sores of the little ones, just as he attends to the details of the stars and the universe.

## OLD TESTAMENT READINGS

1. Deuteronomy 6: 3-9. Keep these words in your heart. The Ten Commandments are also called the ten words of God.

Listen, then, Israel, keep and observe what will make you prosperous and numerous, as the God of your ancestors has promised you, in giving you a land flowing with milk and honey.

COMMENT: This text was the creed of the Jewish people, to be recited every day, to be engraved on their hearts, to be repeated to their children, engraved on their doorsteps, because God is a jealous God, jealous in his total love for them.

2. Deuteronomy 30: 10-14. Let the instruction, the words of the Lord be near you.

Look, today I put before you life and prosperity,  
death and disaster. Choose!

COMMENT. This text reminds us of the importance of our free decisions and of God's respect for human freedom. Throughout the book of Deuteronomy faithfulness to God is linked together with his promise of reward here on earth.

3. Isaiah 55: 10-11. As rain makes the earth fruitful, so the word of God is fruitful.

4. Nehemiah 8: 1-10. They read out the law, and the people renew their faith.

5. Numbers 3: 24-27

May God Bless you and Keep you.

May God let his face shine on your and be gracious to you.

May God bring you his peace.

This is how they must call down my name on the Israelites, and then I shall bless them.

This beautiful prayer and blessing from the Old Testament is used at Mass on New Year's Day. St. Francis of Assisi frequently used this blessing. How often have you prayed and reflected on it?

## NEW TESTAMENT --THE GOSPELS

1. Matt. 5: 14-19 Not the smallest letter will be lost. This is from the Sermon on the Mount. You could slowly pray, reflect, read the entire Sermon on the Mount or parts of it.

2. Mark 1: 35-39 Jesus came preaching. Jesus was a teacher and preacher – sharing with his listeners the Word of God

3. Luke 24: 44-48 Jesus, ascends, sends the apostles to preach the Word in his name.

4. John 7: 14-18 My teaching is not mine, but of him who sent me.

#### NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

1. 1 Cor. 2: 1-5 My message is power
2. 2 Tim. 3: 14-17 All Scripture is inspired by God, useful for teaching
3. 2 Tim. 4:1-5 Preach the Good News: fulfill your ministry
4. Hebrews 4: 12-13 The Word of God is like a two edged sword
5. 1 John 1:1-4 We make known to you the Word of life

### **3) The Importance the Church Gives to Scripture**

Perhaps we are not as familiar as we should be with the strong emphasis that the Church gives to Scripture. The Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, on Divine Revelation, has an entire section, Chapter VI, entitled “Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church.” Here are some of the statements of the Council on Scripture and its important place in our lives.

- Scripture “shares with us divine benefits which entirely surpass the human mind to know” (Revelation, No. 6).
- Access to Scripture should be opened wide to the Christian faithful: “The Church with motherly concern sees to it that suitable and correct translations are available in various languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books. If it should happen that when the opportunity presents itself and the authority of the Church agree, these translations are made in joint effort with the separated brethren, they may be used by all Christians” (Revelation, No. 22).
- “All who are officially engaged in the ministry of the word should immerse themselves in the Scriptures by constant sacred reading and diligent study. For it must not happen that anyone becomes ‘an empty preacher’ to others, not being a hearer of the word in his own heart” (Revelation. No. 25).
- “Let them remember, however, that prayer should accompany the reading of Scripture, so that a dialogue takes place between God and man” (Revelation No. 25).
- “There are many links between the message of salvation and culture. In his self-revelation to his people culminating in the fullness of manifestation in his incarnate Son, God spoke according to the proper culture of each age. Similarly the Church has existed through the centuries in varying circumstances in its preaching to spread and explain the message of Christ, to examine it more deeply, and to express it more perfectly in the liturgy and various aspects of life of the faithful” (*The Church in the Modern World, No. 58*).

## **11. UNDERSTANDING THE SCRIPTURES YOU WILL BE PROCLAIMING**

The Bible is a complex book. Actually it is a gathering together of a number of books written over a long period of time. Some of the books are short and simple, others long and complex. Some are poetry, others story, some history, and some prophecy. In order to read correctly the selection from the Bible for the day when you are a reader, it is important to know what type or form of writing you will be proclaiming.

The type of Word of God, the literary form (story, prophet, poem, letter, song, parable, history, law) affects the way one reads it. Different materials require different treatment. Thus you read the theological part of a letter of Paul as if you were conducting an argument. One reads Sirach or Wisdom or much of the Gospel of Matthew (Sermon on the Mount) so as to bring out individual wise sayings. One should read the strong words of the prophets with power, as if you are the prophet speaking to his people. One reads the love poetry of some of the Psalms with passion. If it is a Psalm of praise or joy, show you are joyful, excited too. In general, note that the Psalms are poetry, and so the style and rhythm of reading the psalm is different from reading a story of freedom or liberation from the book of Exodus. Read the laws as if you are a lawgiver, with a clear, no-nonsense voice.

For each reading, you try to discover and determine the central mood or tone of the reading and convey that to the congregation by the way, tone, manner of your reading. This will take some time, practice, and experience.

HERE ARE SAMPLES OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF TEXTS. THEY CAN SERVE AS MATERIAL FOR PRACTICING READING ALOUD.

1. Prophetic Denunciation: Amos 6: 1, 4-7

Woe to the complacent in Zion! Lying upon beds of ivory, stretched comfortably on their couches, they eat lambs taken from the flock, and calves from the stall! They drink wine from bowls and anoint themselves with the best oils. Therefore now they shall be the first to go into exile, and their wanton revelry shall be done away with.

2. Prophetic Denunciation: Amos 5

I hate, I spurn your feasts, says the Lord. I take no pleasure in your solemnities. Away with your noisy songs! If you would offer me holocausts, then let justice surge like water, and goodness like an unfailing stream.

3. Prophetic Warning Joel 2

Blow the trumpet in Zion, sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all who dwell in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. Yes, it is near, a day of darkness and of gloom, a day of clouds and somberness!

4. Humor

Jonah 4

Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry that God did not carry out the evil he threatened. "I beseech you, Lord," he prayed, "is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? This is why I fled at first to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, rich in mercy, and loathe to punish. And now, Lord, please take my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live." But the Lord asked, "Have you reason to be angry?"

5. Letter, Warm Greeting

The Beginning of the letter of Paul to the Romans.

Greetings from Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart to proclaim the gospel of God which he promised long ago... To all in Rome, beloved of God and called to holiness, grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...

6. Exhortation

Isaiah 2

Come, let us climb the Lord's mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob that he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths. He shall judge between the nations, and impose terms on many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

7. Poetic, image-filled

Isaiah 11

Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them. The baby shall play by the cobra's den, and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair. There shall be no harm or ruin on my holy mountain.

8. Prophetic command

Isaiah 58

Thus says the Lord: Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless; cloth the naked when you see them, and do not turn your back on your own. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wound shall quickly be healed...

9. Personal witness

1 Corinthians 2

As for myself, brothers, when I came to you I did not come proclaiming God's testimony with any particular eloquence or "wisdom." No, I determined that while I was with you I would speak of nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified.

## 10. Commands, commandments and threat Exodus 22

You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan. If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry. My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword. Then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans.

## 11. Hope Wisdom 3

The souls of the just are in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them. They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead. But they are in peace. Chastised a little, they shall be greatly blessed, because God tried them and found them worthy of him.

## 12. Dialogue Acts 8

The Spirit said to Philip: "Go and catch up with that carriage." Philip ran ahead and heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He said to him: "Do you really grasp what you are reading?" "How can I," the man replied, "unless someone explains it to me?" With that, he invited Philip to get in and sit down beside him.

## 13. Dialogue A Reading from the first book of Kings

Elijah went to Zarephath. As he arrived, a widow was gathering sticks. He called out to her: "Please bring me a small cupful of water to drink." She left to get it and he called out after her, "Please bring along a bit of bread." "As the Lord your God lives," she answered, "I have nothing baked; there is only a little flour in my jar and a little oil in my jug. When we have eaten this, we shall die." "Do not be afraid," Elijah said to her. "God and do as you propose. But first make a little cake and bring it to me. For the Lord, the God of Israel says, 'The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, until the day when the Lord sends rain upon the earth.'" She left and did as Elijah had said. She was able to eat for a year.

## 14. Instruction, challenge, questions. A reading from the letter of James 2: 14-18

My brothers, what good is it to profess your faith without practicing it? Such faith has no power to save one, has it? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and no food, and you say to them, "Good-bye and good luck! Keep warm and well fed," but do not meet their needs, what good is that? So it is with the faith that does nothing in practice. It is thoroughly lifeless.

To such a person one might say, "you have faith and I have works – is that it?" Show me your faith without works, and I will show you the faith that underlies my works!

## 12. THE LECTIONARY – THE OFFICIAL BOOK OF READINGS

**General Principles:** The Church loves sacred scripture and is anxious to deepen its understanding of the truth and to nourish its own life by studying these sacred writings. Vatican II directed that in the liturgy “there should be more abundant, varied, and appropriate reading from sacred scripture.” “In this way a more representative portion of sacred scripture will be read to the people over a set cycle of years.” (Introduction to the Lectionary No. 1).

COMMENT: Note the contrast with the Mass thirty years ago. In those days, most of the Sunday gospels were from the gospel of Matthew. We heard little of Mark. And of course, the Mass and thus the Scripture was in Latin. Now we have a very broad range of readings over the three year cycle for Sundays and the two year cycle for weekdays – and it is in the vernacular.

Note too that there are two different translations used in the Lectionary – either the New American Bible, or the Jerusalem Bible. Both are good, and officially approved, but it can be confusing to Catholics whose missal or prayer book has a different translation from the one heard and used at the Mass.

**Lectionary for Sundays and Feasts.** There are three readings for each Mass; the first from the Old Testament, the second from the writings of the apostles (from an epistle or from the Book of Revelation), and the third from the gospel.

A three year cycle, thus the same text is read only once every fourth year. A, B, C.

The epistle and gospel readings for these days (Sundays) are arranged semi-continuously, that is, continuing next week where we leave off this week. The Old Testament readings have been chosen because of their relationship to the gospel passages. In each year the readings are chosen from one of the three Synoptic Gospels. Thus

Sundays	Year A	Gospel of Matthew	2002, 2005, 2008
Sundays	Year B	Gospel of Mark	2003, 2006, 2009
Sundays	Year C	Gospel of Luke	2004, 2007, 2010

Note, however that the Sunday readings in the seasons of ADVENT, LENT, AND EASTER do not follow these but have their own special readings in accord with that particular season of the Church Year. For these special times of the year, the cycle of readings from Matthew, or Mark, or Luke are interrupted.

**Lectionary for Weekday Readings:** There are two different sequences, called Year 1 and Year 2.

Year 1 = odd years 2001, 2003, etc.

Year 2 = even years 2002, 2004, etc.

There are two readings for each weekday. The First Reading consists of selections from either the Old or New Testament.

The Gospel is selected as follows:      Weeks 1-9      from Mark  
   Weeks 10-21      from Matthew  
   Weeks 22-34      from Luke

### **Responsorial Psalms**

Do not overlook or underestimate the power of the Psalm, the responsorial Psalm at every Mass. The refrain which the congregation repeats or sings can serve as a mantra or phrase to be recalled during the day to remind us of the Sunday or weekday celebration of Mass.

Many of these responses or refrains are worth memorizing and using as short prayers. A few examples would be these:

- **The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.**
- **The Lord is my light and my salvation.**
- **Here am I Lord, I come to do your will.**
- **Lord, come to my aid.**
- **Blessed be the Lord, my Rock**
- **Create a clean heart in me, O Lord.**
- **The Lord is kind and merciful.**

St. John Chrysostom in the 4<sup>th</sup> century spoke of these short refrains as precious pearls:

**Do not sing the refrain out of routine, but take it as a staff for the journey. Each verse can teach us much wisdom.**

**Even if you are poor, even if you are too poor to buy books, even if you possess books and have no free time, remember carefully at least the refrains of the psalms which you have sung not once or twice or thrice, but so often that you can obtain great consolation from them. See therefore what an immense treasure the refrains have laid open for us.**

**I exhort you not to leave here empty handed, but to gather these refrains like pearls, to keep them ever with you, to meditate on them, to sing them all to your friends. If disquiet invades your soul, anger or any other passion upsets your soul, sing them with perseverance. In this way we shall enjoy great peace in this life and in the next eternal blessedness through the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

**THE ORDO.** This is the annual, official book which instructs the priest on what Mass, what feast is celebrated. It is referred to as the ORDO. Published annually before Advent, the beginning of the Church Year, it is found in most sacristies. You should be familiar with it as it is the best and most accurate way to know what the readings for the Mass will be on any given day. On some week days, there are options, that is to say, the priest can use the readings of the day or the reading of the feast. On these occasions, you should check with the priest on which texts he wishes to be read.

### **13. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT BIBLE**

The 'canon' is the name for the official list of books included in the bible. Canon means the rule of faith. The New Testament canon or list of books for both Catholic and Protestant Bibles is exactly the same. The problem arises with the Old Testament. The Catholic canon and thus the Catholic Bible is longer, having seven books which are not found in Protestant Bibles. These seven books are Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, 1 and 2 Machabees. There are also some sections of Esther and Daniel not in Protestant Bibles. Protestants call these seven books the APOCRYPHAL books, meaning hidden or concealed. Catholics sometimes call them DEUTEROCANONICAL books. This means second-canon, because they were accepted into the Bible at a later date than the PROTO-canonical books.

The reason for the difference is that the Catholic Bible is based upon the books of the Old Testament written in both Greek and in Hebrew, a version called the Septuagint. This Septuagint, with 46 books in the Old Testament, was the bible used by the first Christians, and thus this has a strong basis in Christian tradition. The Protestant Bible, as set forth by Martin Luther in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, includes only the 39 books written in Hebrew. He thus eliminated the seven books listed above.

In general, the difference between the two bibles is not that great. Protestants recognize the importance of the books that the Catholics add, but do not seem them as officially part of the Bible. Only in a few areas do Catholics make use of these extra books for Catholic Church teachings. One example is the Catholic teaching on Purgatory which often refers to prayers for the dead as found in 2 Machabees (it is a holy and wholesome thing to pray for the dead). The Books of Wisdom and Machabees have strong belief in life after death, which is not found at all, or found only in a weak sense in other earlier written books of the Old Testament.

What is important is to remember that Catholic and Protestants agree on 90% of the Bible – and agree entirely on the books of the New Testament. We do have much in common in regard to the Word of God, and this should be a great source of hope for ecumenical unity.

**WHICH BIBLE:** There are two versions of the Lectionary in use in Nigeria. One of them is originally printed in the USA, and the other in England or Ireland. The one from

the USA uses the New American Bible translation. That from the UK/Ireland uses the Jerusalem Bible. Both of these are excellent translations, and are approved by the Church hierarchy for use.

For private use, Catholics should only use a bible approved by the Catholic Church. These would include 1) the New American Bible, (this is published also as *The African Bible*) 2) the Jerusalem and New Jerusalem Bible, and 3) The new Revised Standard Version – Catholic Edition, and 4) the Good News Bible, and 5) the New International Version, and 6) the Christian Community Bible – Catholic Pastoral Edition.

Note that the old and venerable King James Version is not adequate. It does not contain all the books that Catholics have in their bible and the translation is often outdated and inaccurate. And many editions of the Revised Standard Version do not include the Catholic books and so are not fully adequate.

**NUMBERING OF THE PSALMS.** You may note that in some prayer books or bibles, the Psalms might have two numbers or a different number from what you are accustomed to. For example, the Good Shepherd Psalm is now normally called the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, but sometimes was listed as the 22<sup>nd</sup>. The reason for this is that earlier translations of the Psalms were made either from the Hebrew or the Latin texts. And these had different numbers for many of the Psalms. But recent Bibles, both Catholic and Protestant, such as the Jerusalem or Revised Standard, or New American Bibles have all based the number of the psalms upon the Hebrew Septuagint text and thus have the same number. Thus the Good Shepherd Psalm is now Psalm 23.

#### **14. FUNDAMENTALISM AND ROMAN CATHOLICISM.**

There has been a renewal of interest and use of the Bible among Catholics. The Bible plays a more prominent role at Mass, in Church societies, and homes. This is all to the good. But there is one concern. There can be a way of reading and interpreting Scripture which does not free us, does not give us the peace and joy of salvation. This is called a fundamentalist way of using Scripture.

#### **FUNDAMENTALISM – AND INADEQUATE WAY OF USING SCRIPTURE**

Fundamentalism originated with Protestants at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the USA. It has grown and is also found among Catholics. In terms of dogma, Church teaching, it emphasized what it called the “fundamentals”, namely, 1) the Divinity of Jesus Christ, 2) the Virgin Birth, 3) atonement through the sacrificial death of Christ, 4) physical resurrection of Jesus, and 5) bodily return of Jesus at the end of time. But note that it says nothing about the Church, the Trinity, or the Sacraments.

And three very important points. 1) in interpreting the Bible it stress the literal truth, what is called verbal inspiration. It says there is NO error in the bible of any kind –

thus that creation took place in six days as Genesis tells the story. 2) it views the bible as the exclusive way to truth. The Bible alone is our guide to life and the conduct of life. 3) It claims that the bible is clear and simple, and does not require any interpretation. In the following sections, we will respond to each of these claims of the fundamentalist.

WHY FUNDAMENTALISM? It began in a period of rapid change, amid many new movements. Christians searched for stability amid these changes. They saw the world getting worse and turned to God's Word as the only answer. In some ways it is a search for the so-called "good old days."

Fundamentalists see the dangers in the world, and sees the failures of some churches so it turns exclusively to the Bible for the correct way. And fundamentalists often criticize Christians for not explaining the Bible but explaining it away! So they go back to the literal interpretation of the text. Fundamentalists are seeking for some anchor to hold on to amid a sea of difficulties. It might be economic hardship, political insecurity, or poverty that leads people to see for some secure authority, some answers, some hope. So they turn to the Bible (as we all should) but they do not read or interpret it in an adequate manner.

## CATHOLIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE BIBLE - INSPIRED WORD OF GOD AND WORD OF MAN

Catholics see the Bible as the Word of God, written under the inspiration of the Spirit. But equally true and important, it is also the word of man. It was written by human authors, such as Luke, Paul, James, and John. St. Luke speaks about his own toil and effort in writing his account of the life of Jesus (Lk.1: 1-4). These writers wrote for specific times, places, and people. When they wrote, God did not do away with their limited knowledge, nor did God dictate to them every word that they wrote. One result of this is that we do not see the Bible as the immediate, universal answer, as giving simple solutions, to each and every human problems.

## THE BIBLE IS THE INERRANT WORD OF GOD

Yes, the Bible is God's truth for us. And it does not contain error insofar as it teaches us religious truths about God and man. It cannot lead us into error.

But it is important to note that the Bible does not give us correct answers to all questions about the universe, about man, about our world, about human history. It is not intended to give us a scientific account of how God created the world. It does teach us that a good, loving, powerful God did create the world.

## PARTS OF THE BIBLE ARE EASY, PARTS ARE DIFFICULT

Everyone can understand the story of the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, Good Shepherd Psalm. Some parts are difficult and not always consistent. Who killed Goliath? David (1 Sam. 17) or Elhanan (2 Sam. 21:19). What does Jesus mean when he says we should hate our father and mother? Fundamentalists think they have easy answers for these questions.

## NOT ALL PARTS OF THE BIBLE ARE EQUALLY IMPORTANT

The New Testament, and the four Gospels are more significant than the book of Numbers or Leviticus. Fundamentalists tend to see all passages as equal. Parts of the Old Testament are superseded by the New... For example, the book of Job (14: 13-22) and the Book of Sirach (14: 16-17) know of the possibility of afterlife, and reject it! In the Old Testament, God allowed polygamy, but that is no longer the case.

## BIBLE PASSAGES MUST BE READ IN CONTEXT, AND NOT USED IN ISOLATION AS PROOF TEXTS

One case: in Isaiah 2:4, we read that “they shall beat their swords into ploughshares...” In Joel 4:10 we read the opposite: “Beat your ploughshares into swords. Taken out of context, these contradict each other. We must know HOW and WHERE to apply them. Paul says that women should cover their heads, but this is a small part of his message. To make his teaching on headcoverings more important than his teaching on charity and justice is unfair and unfaithful to Paul.

## SCRIPTURE TEXTS WE DON'T TAKE LITERALLY

Fundamentalists claim that they are being most true and faithful to the Bible. They tend to take the Bible literally. To show how this is difficult, impossible, or inadequate, let us list some texts of the Bible which all Christians – fundamentalists or non-fundamentalists have difficulty with – in understanding or in following. We present these to show that the interpretation of the Bible is not as clear and obvious as many fundamentalists would have us believe.

We will not comment on each of them – but it is clear, for example, that Christians today do not literally follow the sayings of Paul on being kind to slaves or on cutting off our right hand if it be an occasion of sin.

- If your right eye is your trouble, gouge it out and throw it away! Better to lose part of your body than to have it all cast into Gehenna. Again, if your right hand is your trouble, cut it off and throw it away... Mt. 5:29-30
- If your hand or your foot is your undoing, cut it off and throw it from you! Better to enter life maimed or crippled than to be thrown with two hands or two feet into endless fire. If your eye is your downfall, gouge it out.... Mt. 18: 8 (Sins of scandal)
- Do not swear at all...do not swear by heaven... or by the earth, or by Jerusalem... Mt. 5:34

- Do not call anyone on earth your father. Only one is your father, the One in heaven. Avoid being called teachers. Only one is your teacher, the Messiah. Mt. 23: 9-10
- When someone slaps you on one cheek, turn and give him the other.. Give to all who beg of you... Lk. 6:29-30
- A bishop must be married only once... He must be a good manager of his own household, keeping his children under control... 1 Tim 3: 2 and 4
- A presbyter (=priest, church leader) must be irreproachable, married only once, the father of children who are believers... Titus 1:6
- All under the yoke of slavery must regard their masters as worthy of full respect. 1 Tim 6:1
- Slaves are to be submissive to their masters... They should try to please them in every way... Titus 2:9
- You slave owners, deal justly and fairly with your slaves, realizing that you too have a master in heaven. Col. 4:1
- Any woman who prays or prophecies with her head uncovered brings shame upon her head...A man, on the other hand, ought not to cover his head. 1 Cor. 11: 5 and 7
- Does not nature teach you that it is dishonorable for a man to wear his hair long, 1 Cor. 11:14
- I do not permit a woman to act as teacher or in any way to have authority over a man. She must be quiet. 1 Tim 2:12
- According to the rule observed in all the assemblies of believers, women should keep silent in such gatherings. They may not speak. ...It is a disgrace when a woman speaks in the assembly. 1 Cor. 14, 33-35

The point here, as we have indicated, is that we must read the Bible with common sense, with a sense of history, and with intelligence. We must be careful about proof texting, or interpreting it literally on all occasions.

## JESUS AND THE BIBLE

We see Jesus at the age of twelve, in the temple, asking and answering questions. Surely he came to know the Scriptures from his earliest years, from Mary and Joseph. How did Jesus use and interpret the Bible? He had trouble with narrow, literal interpretations of the Bible. He used his own common sense to disagree with the Pharisees who thought that the Scriptures forbade him to heal on the Sabbath. He said that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. He also indicated that there is a development or growth in the Scriptures from the Old to the New. Several times in the Sermon on the Mount, he quotes from the Old Testament, but then adds something new, something more. "You heard the commandment, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' But what I say to you is offer no resistance to injury..." (Mt. 5:38-39).

## THE BIBLE AND LIFE

Some forms of fundamentalism get so caught up in the Bible that the Bible substitutes for life. I would like to compare the bible to eyeglasses. We do not look AT, but THROUGH eyeglasses to see more clearly, to see well. So too, the Bible helps us to

see life, God's world, God's love and presence in our world. We do not just look AT the Bible, or get lost in it, but use it to see and interpret how God is active and present and calling us in this world today. It is important to note that even before we pick up or read the Bible - even before we can read – God has entered our lives with his loving presence and grace, with his truth.

CONCLUSION. The positive value and contribution of the fundamentalist is that he or she takes the Bible very seriously. We can learn from them. Thus we encourage Catholics to be familiar with, to pray with, to learn from and be challenged by the Bible. But, to do this in a Catholic way rather than a fundamentalist way. In addition to the Bible, we have the Catholic community, the priests, bishops and teachers, we have the sacraments to guide and strengthen us on our journey. We should remember that the Bible arose from the Jewish and Christian communities. And the Bible is best prayed, studied, and read in those Christian communities under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In some ways, the goal is that we put on the mind of Christ, we become the living Gospel. As the Word of God took flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, so too, led by God's Spirit, God's word comes alive and takes flesh in us, the Christian community today.

## **15. STEPS IN PREPARING FOR YOUR ASSIGNMENT** **AS LECTOR**

Your goal is to become an effective reader – that you know what you are talking about, and that you believe in what you are saying! For this to happen there must be study, prayer, and practice. Here are many of the elements of the process by which one becomes an effective lector.

**1. READ the Selection. This should be done several days or at best one week before you will actually do the reading in Church.**

- Read not just the reading you will have, but all the readings, including the Gospel.
- Identify the passage you will read - what kind or type of writing is it? is it a story, a letter, a song?
- Ask yourself what is the meaning of the passage. What is it saying
- .Put this into your own words. If you catch the meaning of the reading, then you can give or share that meaning with others. *Nemo dat quod non habet.* No one can give what he or she does not have.
- What is the tone or mood of the passage? Comforting, informative, scolding?
- Pick out the most important sentence, phrase, or image – and make sure you communicate that when you read.
- In the ideal world, you should never read publicly what you have not first read, and even prayed over, beforehand and in private.

**2. Look up words that you may not know the meaning of, or the correct pronunciation. - Possibly use a Bible commentary to understand the passage better.**

**3. Pray with the text -- reflect on what it means for you and your people. Lectio Divina, as we have described in an earlier section is one tried and tested way to pray over Scripture texts.**

**4. Practice reading it aloud. You should know when or where you will pause, what words, or phrases or sentence you will emphasize. Note that to stress a phrase, lowering your voice often works better than raising your voice.**

ON THE DAY YOU READ:

- Be rested and prayerful
- Be properly dressed – not overdressed or underdressed
- Be on time – or rather be early, at least ten minutes before the Mass begins, so that you can be alerted to any changes.
- Check the microphone to be sure it is working and properly adjusted.
- Take active part in the Mass. Join in the singing, and praying the responses with the congregation.

Archbishop Roger Mahony expressed it this way: “Parish lectors will be effective in proclaiming the Word of God in the liturgy in the measure they meditate upon it beforehand” (*The Bible in the Life of the Church*). In summary, if you have prayed with your reading, if what you are to read has meaning for you, that meaning will come through your reading, and God can use you to touch the hearts of others.

## **16. QUALITIES AND VIRTUES OF A GOOD LECTOR**

- One who practices, comes prepared, and is dependable
- Has a pleasant bearing, walks with dignity, bows or genuflects with grace
- Conveys enthusiasm and understanding of the reading. Is not a monotone.
- Correctly pronounces names and difficult words.
- Reads so clearly and deliberately that every word is clearly heard.
- The voice is sufficiently loud and the speed is correct.
- He/she takes sufficient pauses, and pauses at the right places.
- Continually learns, improves in reading. One asks for feedback from other parishioners, from the priests, on the qualities of your reading. Ask for constructive criticism, remembering that there is always room for improvement.
- Always be faithful and dependable. If you cannot fulfill your responsibility on a given day, find a replacement early, so the new person has time to prepare the reading well.
- Be willing to gently assist and advise other readers on how they are doing and how they might improve. Learn from watching and listening to others. See their good points and imitate them.
- The final challenge is to live what you proclaim.

All of these points can be used in self-evaluation, and in evaluation of other readers. We have succeeded in proclaiming and sharing the Word of God if the people who hear, listen to you, are encouraged to listen, read, love, and live the Word of God. We do this by convey enthusiasm and a prayerful understanding of God's word. We thank God for the great love and interest in the Bible.

The Catholic laity should have this conviction concerning the Scriptures: "It is our book, written for us. Someone may take away our property, even burn our churches, but you can't take away or tie down the Word of God. That belongs to us, the people. The Bible is addressed to us. It is our book."

The lector or reader has a key role to play here, to do his or her best so that the Word of God takes flesh in the minds and hearts of those who hear that word.

## **17. PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS, EXERCISES TO IMPROVE THE VOICE**

### THE GIFT OF SPEECH

It might be good to recall, to thank God for the gift of speech. We should not take this for granted, because not everyone has that gift. The human voice is used to bless and to curse, to praise and thank God, to make vow and promises, to teach, to communicate with friends and loved ones near and far. Think of the powerful voices of Martin Luther King, Jr. (I have a dream...) of President John F. Kennedy, the singing voice of Luciano Pavarotti, or a choir singing the Alleluia Chorus.

The deepest, most important way we use our voice is to proclaim and share the Word of God found in the Scriptures. To do this well, we need all the resources and strength we can find. We present here ways to improve our voice.

### IMPROVING YOUR VOICE AND DICTION - THE END IN VIEW

Our purpose with these reflections is that the reader ends up with an interesting, lively, and enjoyable voice that is heard and understood by everyone in the congregation.

One should read so well, so clearly, persuasively and powerfully, that people look up from their leaflets, missals and listen to you. Africa by tradition is an oral culture, and so this is a bit easier than in a more written, or print-oriented culture. In fact, in listening to an effective reader, the congregation will almost forget that the person is reading to them, and rather feel that he or she is sharing with them his or her own ideas, communicating to them personally.

We note also that everyone can improve his or her voice, improve in the ability to communicate better and more effectively. And like anything worthwhile, this will involve time and effort, practice and more practice. One also learns from others who are effective readers. For example, we can learn from listening to and observing those who read out the news on television. For the most part they speak clear English, but also Nigerian English that is understood by most.

Grace builds on nature. The word of God, and the proclamation of God's word builds on, uses, the words, the language, the voice, the lips of men and women. God relies on you, on your voice, for His Word to be heard and that indeed is a challenge and is a high responsibility!

## HOW TO TEST YOUR VOICE

To test your voice, go into the corner of a room, cup your ears and speak some words. Or use a tape recorder or video recorder. The sound you hear (as others hear you) may surprise you. This is how you come across – and this is what can always be improved.

## BREATHING

Good, strong breathing is necessary if you are going to read smoothly and powerfully. A good voice depends upon an adequate supply of air, and that supply of air used efficiently. Breathing should come from the diaphragm or stomach, that is, abdominal breathing. It should not come from the upper body, the upper chest. The shoulders should not rise and fall when you are breathing. Take some deep breathes before you begin to read. This helps you to relax and have a good supply of air. While this should not be done from the lectern, it is helpful to yawn and to try to yawn. One can also yawn with one's mouth closed. This relaxes and stretches the face muscles. Saying "AH---" for a number of seconds also relaxes your body.

While we are reading aloud from the lectern, we do not have or use the same normal pattern of breathing as when we are walking or sitting watching television. Our breathing relates to the activity of reading aloud and adjusts so that we do not run out of breath before the end of a sentence.

## BREATHING EFFICIENCY

To test your efficiency in speaking/reading aloud, try this. Put a lit candle four inches before your mouth, and say "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." If the candle goes out, you are using too much breath. Eventually you should be able to put a lit candle before your mouth and exhale for thirty seconds, without disturbing the flame. Or more simply put your hand four inches from your mouth and say "All's well that ends well." You should not feel any breath except when you say "w" and "that".

## EFFICIENCY EXERCISE

To improve your ability to get the most tone with the least breath, you can practice singing “AH...for a long time with a loud and firm voice.

As an experiment, try talking with your teeth clenched or with your lips tight rather than loose, and hear the difference. How much of the richness and depth of the voice is lost!

#### EXERCISES FOR RESONANCE

Hum “M” on various pitch levels up and down the scale. Feel the tingling on the lips and the resonance throughout the nasal passages.

Hum “N” in a similar way, and note that there is the absence of sensation of the lips. Humming aloud is a good way to improve resonance. This depth sound or resonance should be felt in your nose and head, in your chest and some say, even felt in your fingers! You should feel vibrations in the upper part of your body in the places mentioned. Or repeat the word “minuumum” saying it slowly a number of times.

To develop a rich “R” sound, trill the “r” at the tip of your tongue. Whistling can also be a good exercise to improve the use of your lips.

#### EXERCISE

Take a full breath, without straining, and count from one to twenty on that breath, without rushing. Maintain a quiet, conversational tone. Eventually, see if you can count to fifty on one breath! Instead of numbers, do the same with the letters of the alphabet – A to Z. You should find that your performance will improve with practice.

#### RELAXING EXERCISE

Drop your head forward, relax the throat and neck. Let the chin move towards your chest. Then rotate the head from the shoulders from left to right. The mouth should fall open, with the jaw relaxed, and the head turning from side to side.

#### RELAXING EXERCISE

Relax your jaw, allowing the mouth to fall open. Then shake the head briskly from side to side. Then move your jaw around in a circular movement and then reverse the movement. Repeat the word OUCH a number of times, opening the mouth wide.

#### PAUSES

Pauses - don=t have too many. Pause normally at period, question mark, colon, semi-colon, but not necessarily at a comma - Practice ahead of time where you will pause.

#### SUSTAINING VOLUME

Don't drop your voice at the end of a sentence.

## PROPER DICTION

Diction - pronounce clearly - Make sure you consciously pronounce the final consonant, for example, d's and t's Thus: "John wen**T** home and tol**D** his da**D**. Make sure you differentiate between d's and t's, between n's and m's and between g's and k's.

## STRESS OR EMPHASIS

Stress nouns over adjectives - Verbs over adverbs

## SPEED OR PACE

Speed/pace: it is almost impossible to read too slowly. Because of the size of the Church, because of the microphone, you must read slowly, deliberately. It may seem to be too slow, seem exaggerated, but it is probably a good pace. You should also read a bit slowly because of the nature and importance of the material – namely the Word of God. Your aim is that the congregation hears and follows every single word. Your goal is that every word and indeed, every comma and pause is grasped by those who listen.

## MICROPHONE

Use of microphone - not too close but also not too far away - "Sense" it is right, listen to how it sounds – and always beware of noisy feedback

## PRACTICE IN EVERYDAY CONVERSATION

Even in everyday conversation, in homes, in the market, at the table, consciously try to enunciate, be clear, deliberate, and polished. If your mode of speech in conversation is good, this will surely carry over when you read from the lectern.

## AN INTERESTING VOICE

Modulate your voice – variations of pitch, pace, pause, power, tone and intensity

## END OF SENTENCES

You end a declarative sentence with a downward inflection, but do not lose energy or do not drop your voice too much. And don't run out of breath at the end of sentences.

## PRONUNCIATION

Note the slight difference in pronunciation between wear and where, weather and whether.

When you pronounce WHERE - you softly pronounce H before W = hwear.

When you pronounce WEAR - you start with the W.

Other examples of such words are witch and which, watt and what, wail and whale.

## PITCH

Finding the right PITCH - Many persons would improve their public speaking and reading aloud if they lower their voice, its pitch, slightly. You might try this by deliberately lowering your voice a few tones – and “think low.” If the voice is too high, it indicates nervousness, tenseness, or strain, or a weak voice. While many could benefit from slightly lowering their pitch, a voice if too low sounds guttural, throaty, muffled, and tends to fade out.

## EXERCISE FOR PITCH AND QUALITY

Take a breath, relax, and then whisper NO. Take another breath and quietly say NO. Notice the low pitch and the relaxed quality of the tone. Do the same with YES, HOW, OH, WHO, ONE, TWO, etc.

## LOWER PITCH - CHEST RESONANCE

Increase the use of lower tones by practicing sounds that can be resonated in the chest, such as “Alone, alone, and all alone. Alone, alone, on a wide, wide sea.”

## NASAL SOUND

Too much nasal sound is not pleasant. To reduce or remove nasal sounds, practice the sound “www” - repeat “weary Willy worries women.”

## EXERCISES FOR VARIETY AND EMPHASIS – DEVELOPING FLEXIBILITY OF VOICE

- Count from one to ten, taking a breath before each count. Vary the pitch in the following ways:
  - a) as if you are asking a question “one?” two?, etc.
  - b) as if you are surprised ONE !
  - c) to express finality, finished. One.
- Pronounce the exclamation OH in such a way that it suggests each of the following meanings:
  - a) great surprise
  - b) indifference
  - c) disappointment

- d) disgust
- e) pleasant surprise
- Pronounce the sentence “She saw me.” With the following different meanings.
  - a) asking a question “She saw ME?”
  - b) horrified surprise “SHE saw me!
  - c) strong affirmation “She SAW me!!!”
- Say HELLO in a number of different ways - for example. Greeting an old friend, an exclamation of surprise, a teacher greeting a pupil, and calling to attract attention, etc.
- Say “Come here” varying the expression in accord with the following situations.
  - a) your child has been bad, and you want to scold him/her.
  - b) you are in water, and become frightened
  - c) you see an old friend in the distance – and want him/her to come to you.

#### EXERCISE FOR LIPS

- Repeat rapidly, Me, me, me - then WE, WE,
- Exaggerate lip movement and say “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.”  
We will wait for Will. Bubble, bubble, boiled the pot.
- Exercise your lips and keep them flexible and relaxed, by repeating “no man”... a number of times.
- Blow air out through your lips so that they flutter and make a fluttering sound. Babies do this. (Horses do it too) Children do this when they pretend to be a motor car or a truck. This relaxes and stimulates the lip area. It is also fun to do, and it energizes the sound in the front of the mouth.

#### EXERCISE FOR TONGUE

- Try lapping like a cat. Run the tongue in and out as rapidly as possible.
- Extend your tongue as far as possible, trying to touch the chin, and the tip of your nose.
- Explore your mouth with your tongue

### **18. QUESTIONS SOMETIMES ASKED**

**1. Does the lector who proclaims the Scripture read the prayers of the faithful?**  
Normally no. There should be another person assigned, prepared for that task. But if there is no one assigned or a shortage, then the lector could perform that function.

**2. Do I process in with the priest and servers?** This is normally the best procedure, especially on Sundays. But it is up to the discretion and decision of the parish priest. One

could also remain in the seat or pew with the congregation or have a special place in the sanctuary.

**3. Does one lector do both readings?** There should be two readers assigned, one for each reading on Sunday. But in case of necessity, one reader can do both.

**4. Who leads or sings the responsorial Psalm?** There should be a cantor or singer to intone and lead the people with the responsorial psalm. But if there is none, the reader can do it, provided he or she is an adequate singer.

**5. Do I sing the Alleluia?** The Alleluia is a chant of praise and thanksgiving, and it accompanies the procession of the priest to the lectern as he prepares to read the Gospel. So normally it should be sung with a simple melody. The reader, if he or she has an adequate voice, could lead this singing of the Alleluia.

**6. How is reading at a weekday different from reading at Sunday?** This would depend on the parish and parish priest. For example, on weekdays there may be no special dress worn by the reader, and the reader may not necessarily process in with the priest and servers. But the basic function of the reader proclaiming clearly, strongly, the Word of God remains the same.

**7. Can I also distribute Communion at the same Mass?** Normally another person should be designated as Special Minister of Communion. But in case of necessity, the reader could on occasion assist the priest in distributing Communion.

**8. What if I make a mistake?** It depends upon the nature and magnitude of the mistake. It is usually best to go on, rather than go back and draw even more attention to a mistake. Perhaps many persons did not even notice the mistake, as you did. If you make a mistake in pronunciation, go on, don't focus on the mistake or take time to apologize.

**9. What if a baby starts crying out loud?** In general, try to go on with the reading. Do not make a scene, or draw attention to the baby.

**10. How do I dress?** There is no one policy. The Lectionary favors ordinary dress, but gives allowance for other customs. Thus, in this culture, simple dress, like a choir robe, may be appropriate. The point of dress is that the congregation is not distracted in any way from giving attention to the words of Scripture, rather than to the dress of the reader. The reader is not a member of the clergy, and so should not appear to be dressed like the clergy. You are lay ministers.

**11. How do I start, how introduce the reading?** After settling in at the lectern, one begins with the phrase, "A reading from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians." There is no need to say that this is the first or the second reading.

**12. Do I give chapter and verse of the Scripture passage?** This is not necessary. In the Archdiocese of Abuja, the Archbishop prefers that the reader does not give chapter and

verse. As he explains, these are not part of the original Scripture. Protestants rather than Catholics introduced this custom of chapter and verse. In addition, giving chapter and verse might wrongly encourage the congregation to open their bibles and search to find the verses, rather than give full attention to actively listening to the reading.

**13. Should I present a theme of the reading before the actual reading?** Most lectionaries do give a brief summary of the main theme of the reading. This can be omitted or read. But in any case, if read, it should be very brief, highlighting one key point of the reading.

**14. How does one carry the Book of the Gospels?** It can be carried either waist high or higher, level with one's eyes, (eye height), in order to show special respect for the Word of God.

**15. What are the qualifications for becoming a lector?** Obviously, a good voice, with the ability to read loud, clear, distinctly the Word of God. With that should go faith and intelligence to understand that Word so one reads it clearly, intelligently, and with conviction. One should also be a Catholic in good standing, giving witness to the way of Christ in one's daily life, family life, and life in the marketplace. There is no age qualification – for example, children can read at a Mass for Children. So too, the handicapped can also read. Some of the best readers I have heard were blind children at Pacelli School for the Blind in Lagos.

**16. How are lectors chosen?** This is up to the parish priest or his Pastoral Council. One way would be to call for volunteers and then examine and test them as well as train them. Sometimes training sessions are organized at a pastoral institute such as the Gaudium et Spes Institute.

**17. Is there a term of office for this ministry?** This is up to the parish priest. One can be commissioned for a specific term that is renewable, or for an indefinite term.

**18. What about the order of lectors? Is the order of lector the same as a parish lector?** They are not the same. There are important differences. The order of lector is normally for seminarians who are preparing to be priests. As part of their training and preparation, they are officially installed as permanent lectors. This is done not by the parish priest but by the bishop or their major religious superior. Lectors in parishes are lay men and women commissioned (rather than installed) normally by the parish priest to serve that parish as reader/lector.

**19. Is it good for lectors in a parish to meet as a group? How frequently?** We can all learn from one another as a group of lectors. Weekly meetings to help each other prepare for the ministry of lector can be most helpful. This might occur early in the week, for example, Monday or Tuesday, so that we have more time to reflect upon the reading and prepare how best to read it.

**20. Should there be a formal organization of lectors, with officers, in my parish?** This would depend upon the size of the parish and the number of lectors. Surely, such a group can be a helpful support and strength for the lectors, and help in evaluating and improving their work as lectors. It can also help in preparation of the readings, in working out a good schedule, and can assist the priest in making the Scriptures more vital in the overall life of the parish.

**21. If I move to a new parish, must I be trained again, and commissioned again?** This would depend on the parish priest in the new parish. What you should do is go to him and offer your services, explaining how you have served as reader in the past, and what training you might have had. Then, depending upon his need and his decision, you might serve in the parish, or be examined and trained if he feels that is necessary.

### **19. RITE FOR COMMISSIONING LECTORS IN A PARISH**

This can also be adapted for the annual renewal of commitment of lectors

The rite normally takes place at Sunday Mass. It begins after the Gospel and Homily. The homily should explain the place of the Word of God in the liturgy and the importance of proclaiming it well. The lectors are invited to come forward and stand before the people. They are presented to the people in these or similar words:

**Priest:** (*Addressing the congregation*)

Dear friends in Christ, our brothers and sisters, (Names) are to be given the great privilege of proclaiming God's word in the Assembly. Through them, God will speak to his people of the salvation and redemption won for them by the Lord Jesus, so that, nourished by this word, the people will grow in the love and the knowledge of God.

**Priest:** (*Addressing the candidates*)

You have been called to proclaim the word of God in the assembled community of God's people. In so doing you share in the Church's mission to preach the Good News to all people. May God's word be living and active in your lives, that you may worship the living God in spirit and in truth.

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

**Priest:** Are you willing to become a Reader and to faithfully proclaim God's word to the people assembled in this Church? (I am)

Are you willing to prepare each proclaiming of God's word by study and prayer? (I am)

Each lector in turn approaches the priest and puts his hand on the Bible which the priest is holding. The priest then instructs them:

This is the Word of the Lord. Make the Scriptures your constant study, so that you may be well prepared to proclaim them when asked to do so by the priest. Amen.

He then prays:

Let us pray to God our loving Father and ask him to bless our brothers and sisters chosen to proclaim His Word:

God our Father, you have given our brothers and sisters faith in You and in Your living Word. Look with mercy on these men and women who are prepared to proclaim your word and to lead your people closer to your teaching. Bless + them, purify their hearts this day so that they may always live what they proclaim. Through their words and example, deepen the faith and love of your church, and bring us to share in your unending joy in heaven. We praise and thank you, Father, in the name of Jesus your Son, and in the love of the Holy Spirit, God of glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Mary, Mother of the Word Incarnate, pray for us.

St. Bede the Venerable, patron of lectors, pray for us.

St. Jerome, patron of those who study the Scriptures, pray for us.

## **20. RITE FOR LECTORS TO RENEW THEIR COMMITMENT**

### LIGHT SERVICE

This could take place at Mass, at the end of the liturgy of the Word. Seven candles or a seven branch candelabra are used. The readers gather around the candles. The readers light the candles one by one, and after each one is lit, the following prayer is read:

**Presider:** God our Father, we come to know you in your word of life. Hear us as we pray to you, for you alone have the words of everlasting life.

**Reader # 1:** The first flame is the word of creation. We pray for the power of the word that brought all into being. May your word in us create new heavens and a new earth.

All: Lord, you alone have the words of everlasting life.

**Reader # 2:** The second flame is the word of sorrow. May our mouths be filled with the taste of ashes that we may share the words of all who mourn and grieve.

All: Lord, you alone have the words of everlasting life.

**Reader # 3:** The third flame is the word of wisdom. May we learn to speak from our hearts as well as our heads, to teach the wisdom of a pilgrim people.

All: Lord, you alone have the words of everlasting life.

**Reader # 4:** The fourth flame is the word of justice. May our tongues taste the passion for freedom, may we never cease pleading for the oppressed.

All: Lord, you alone have the words of everlasting life.

**Reader # 5:** The fifth flame is the word of history. May we come to see the human face of God in our common heritage. May we learn from God's faithfulness to trust our destiny.

All: Lord, you alone have the words of everlasting life.

**Reader # 6:** The sixth flame is the word of peace. Swords into plowshares, the lion and the lamb -- teach us to dream in the language of peace.\

All: Lord, you alone have the words of everlasting life.

**Reader # 7:** The seventh flame is the word of God's Spirit. May we learn to cherish the Spirit's soundless music.

All: Lord, you alone have the words of everlasting life.

**Presider:** Lord God, in your constant love of men and women has been handed down to us in human words. In this way you are God and Father. We pray that we may eagerly listen to the words of your gospel and in this way be with you heart and soul in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## **21. PRAYER FOR LECTORS, PATRON SAINTS FOR LECTORS**

Dear Jesus, thank you for calling me to be a lector  
at your eucharistic celebrations.

Let me take this role seriously  
and diligently prepare myself for it  
by studying the sacred texts before Mass  
and by striving to be a better Christian.

By my physical action of reading,  
I am the instrument through whom you become present  
to the assembly in your Word  
and through whom you impart your teachings.  
Let nothing in my manner disturb your people  
or close their hearts to the action of your Spirit.

Cleanse my heart and my mind  
and open my lips that I may worthily proclaim your Word.

**PATRON SAINTS.** I do not know of any one saint appointed by the Church officially to be the patron or patroness of lectors. The following are suggested as possible patrons.

—  
St. Bede the Venerable, Feast May 25

Life of St. Bede: He was born in England around the year 672 and died around 735. He lived in the monastery and was an ordained priest. He made use of the monastery library, writing many books on history, giving chronologies of important events. He also wrote commentaries on Scripture, gathering and collecting the thoughts of great writers such as Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose and Gregory. His most famous work is his *Ecclesiastical History*. This shows how the church has grown, developed and contributed to world history.

PRAYER TO ST. BEDE. Lord you have enlightened your Church with the learning of St. Bede. In your love, may your people learn from his wisdom and benefit from his prayers. Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

St. Bede, careful historian and Doctor of the Church, love of God and of truth,  
you are a natural model for all readers of God's inspired Word.

Move lectors to prepare for public reading  
by prayerfully pondering the sacred texts and invoking the Holy Spirit.  
Help them to read in such a way  
that those who hear may attain learning and edification.

- Saint Priscilla and Saint Aquila. These women of the early Church were in charge of house churches where Christians gathered to hear the Scriptures and break bread. (see Acts 18:26; 1 Cor. 16, Rom 16)
- Saint Phoebe – served the early Church as a Deaconess (Rom 16,1)

- Saints Mary and Martha. They welcomed Jesus and Mary listened to him, the Word made Flesh.
- St. Jerome - patron of those studying the Scriptures    Feast Day: September 30
- St. John Chrysostom – patron of preachers – those preaching the Word of God.

Three women saints might also be considered as patronesses:

- St. Margaret of Scotland - Nov. 16. Working for Church reform, she was instrumental in starting church synods. She tried to renew priests, founded churches, frequently read the gospels for spiritual reading, and had a deep love for the poor. It is said that every word of hers was well chosen
- St. Angela Merici - January 27. She was the foundress of the Ursulines, the first teaching order of women. She established schools taught by women, for poor girls, teaching them the Word of God and other subjects.
- St. Bridget of Sweden, widow - July 23. It is said that she only began to speak when she was three years old. But then she spoke very maturely, She gave advice to Popes and is famous for her Revelations.

## **22. QUESTIONNAIRE FOR LECTORS AND CANDIDATES FOR LECTORS**

These can be prayed over privately, or better, shared with a group. They can provide the basis for a good discussion or sharing during a day or evening of recollection.

1. What has been your most positive experience as a lector?
2. What has been the most problematic - what are the biggest problems you face as a lector?
3. Do you have materials, books that help you in preparing your reading?
4. What suggestions do you have for improving the quality of reading in Catholic parishes?
5. Do you wear a special vestment?
6. Do you also read out the Prayers of the Faithful? How does this go?
7. What are the marks or characteristics of a good reader?
8. Any advice you have for the Parish Priest to improve the proclamation of the Word?
9. What do you find most troublesome about or in Scripture?
10. What resources would help you to be a better lector?
11. What has being a reader/lector meant for you personally, and possibly for your family?
12. How have you been accepted by the parish, by the congregation?

## **23. HELPS FOR A DAY OF RECOLLECTION FOR READERS**

- One reader should select and read one Scripture passage, and two other readers should be asked to prepare short reflections on that passage. This might be followed by shared reflection on the passage by members of the group.
- Readers might reflect on the hymns that are sung in your parish. Reflect on which of them are based more explicitly on images or stories or words of the Bible.
- Invite a scripture scholar to give a talk on some book or some aspect of the Bible
- Meditate on Psalm 119. This is the longest Psalm, but it is very much directed to the Word of God. It should encourage and help us to love God's word, which is a light and a lamp to our feet.
- Meditate on the parable of the sower and the seed. The seed is the Word of God. Note the different reactions to the Word. Some are moved to start a new life by the Word. Others resist and are not ready to change. In others, the Word bears much fruit, the hundredfold.
- Take some quiet time to express thanksgiving to God for the calling to be a lector. Take time to express sorrow for carelessness in preparing, in reading, and in living and witnessing to God's Word.
- Pray for the Spirit to come, to help us to hear and speak God's Word. – so we be strong, wide, and faithful ministers of God's Word.

#### SUGGESTED MEDITATIONS

Here are a series of Scriptural passages which talk about the Word of God, its effect in our lives. They can be read slowly, and prayerfully reflected on. Or use the method of Lectio Divina.

Nehemiah 8. Ezra promulgates the new law. The people gather; men, women, children old enough to understand. He read from daybreak till noon, and all the people listened attentively. As he opened the scroll, all the people rose. All the people said AMEN, AMEN. - A day of celebration, eat and drink, distribute portions, great joy, "for they had understood the words that had been expounded to them."

Isaiah 6: 3-7 Holy, holy, holy is the Lord... I said "Woe is me; I am a man of unclean lips... He touched my mouth and said - "your wickedness is removed, your sin purged."

Isaiah 55:10 For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to him who sows and bread to him who eats, So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth. It shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it.

John 8:31 "If you live according to my teaching, you are truly my disciples; then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." And "you seek to kill me, because my word finds no place in you (no home)" (Jn. 8:37)

John 12: 47-8 “If anyone hears my word and does not keep them, I am not the one to condemn him... whoever rejects me and does not accept my words already has his judge, namely the word I have spoken – it is that which will condemn him on the last day.”

Matthew 7:24-7 Anyone who hears my words and puts them into practice is like the wise man who built his house on rock... Jesus finished this discourse and left the crowds spellbound at his teaching.”

Ezekiel 3: 1-3 Son of man - eat this scroll, then go, speak to the house of Israel.... I ate... Son of man, now go to the house of Israel, and speak my words to them.”

Revelation 10 “Here, take the scroll and eat it...” - it will be sour in your stomach, but in your mouth, it will taste sweet as honey - (announces suffering and victory)

## 24 ADDITIONAL MEDITATIONS ON THE WORD

### THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH

#### John 1: 1-18

For any day or a day of recollection. Prayerful reading, meditation, reflection (Lectio divina) on the beginning of the Gospel of John. You as lectors are entrusted with the Word, called to proclaim, share that Word with God’s people. We pray for a deeper love and understanding of the Word of God, and of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Note the key words that are underlined, which point to important themes from the Gospel of John.

1. In the beginning was the **Word**, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
2. He was in the beginning with God
3. All things came to be through Him, and without him nothing came to be what came to be..
4. In him was **life**, and this life was the **light** of the human race
5. The light shines in **darkness**, and the darkness has not overcome it.
6. A man named John was sent from God.
7. He came for testimony, to testify, **witness** to the light, so that all might believe through him.
8. He was not the light, but came to witness to the light.
9. The true light which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world
- 10 He was in the **world**, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him
11. He came to his own, but his own people did not accept him
12. But to those who did accept him, he gave power to become **children of God**, to those who believe in his name.
- 13 who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man’s decision but of God
- 14 And the **Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us**, and we saw his **glory**,

- glory as of the Father=s only Son, full of **grace** and **truth**.
15. John testified to him and cried out saying: This was he of whom I said, “The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.”
  16. From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace.
  17. Because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
  18. No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side, has **revealed** him

COMMENT: Key words, rich words in the gospel, especially the Gospel of John are highlights - each can be reflected on, give us much to think about. How are we to be light, witnesses, to reflect and praise God’s glory? How much God loved the world that he came to dwell in it.

All receive the WORD the word that brings life now and for eternity. Out of love, God desires to share his Word, wants that Word to break into our world, into our lives. You, as lectors have a special responsibility for proclaiming and living God’s Word.

### **THE TWO DISCIPLES ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS (Luke 24: 13-35)**

It is the first Easter Sunday. But these two disciples are walking away from Jerusalem. They have lost hope. Jesus, unknown to them, comes up, walks with them. Notice how he listens to their story. Then he opens up the Scripture and shares the good news with them. He shows them that in the book of Isaiah, the Messiah had to suffer and so enter glory. The treasure of the scripture, the Word of God, shared with them by Jesus, the Word made flesh gives them faith and hope, new life. Then, after Jesus has shared the Word with them, they go into the inn, and break bread. They recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Immediately, they go back to Jerusalem to share the good news with the other disciples.

LESSON. We too must let Jesus open the Scriptures for us. Then as readers we share it with others. This story also shows the link and unity between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Like the two disciples, we too should share the story, the good news of our faith with others, both with members of the Church and with others who are not members.

We also listen to others, as Jesus did, and hear their story of how they come to believe in Jesus Christ and his holy Catholic Church.

### **MARY AND THE WORD OF GOD**

Mary, Mother of the Lord, is the best example of one who listens to God’s Word and keeps it. At the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38), she said yes to the message of the angel

Gabriel. She trusted in the power of God. “I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say.” Because of her faith, because of the power of the Holy Spirit, she would give birth to the Word of God, the Word made flesh.

When Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56), she is praised among all women. Elizabeth says of Mary: “Blest is she who trusted that the Lord’s words to her would be fulfilled” (Lk. 1:45). Mary is the exemplar of one who trusts in the power of God’s Word.

Then Mary prays the Magnificat, showing her thanksgiving to God, her trust in God’s love and power, her belief that God is faithful to his promises. He keeps his Word.

Finally, we can reflect on how Mary remains close to Jesus, her Son, the Word made flesh, even to the cross. Recall the 4<sup>th</sup> Station of the Cross where Jesus meets his Mother. Recall the scene of the Crucifixion, with Mary at the foot of the cross. Jesus entrusts the beloved disciple to Mary, and then tells the beloved disciple (and us) “There is your mother” (John 19:27). We reflect on Mary’s faith and love, and pray that we too have the courage to stay with, to trust and to live according to God’s Word.

## **25. REFLECTION ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WORDS AND THE WORD OF GOD IN OUR LIVES**

### WORDS IN DAILY LIFE

We might reflect on how words are important in our lives. How key moments of our lives are marked by words. Thus we use words when we exchange marriage vows, when we take an oath of office. Reflect on how promises are sacred and should not be broken. “I give you my word.” Recall that we praise someone very highly when we say that he or she is “a person of his or her word, one who keeps his/her word. Words can be used to bless and to curse. Words can heal or can injure. Words can express love or hatred.

If the word is important in our ordinary, everyday lives, reflect on how much more important and powerful is the Word of God.

**WORD OF GOD:** “In times past, God spoke in fragmentary and varied ways to our fathers through the prophets...” (Heb. 1.1) Indeed, God has spoken to humanity in many diverse ways, from the very creation of man and woman.

A) **CREATIVE WORD.** The first revelation of God actually occurs in creation. God manifests his power and his love. And he creates man and woman in his own image. “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made; and by the breath of his mouth their entire host... He spoke and it was made; he commanded, and it stood forth” (Ps.33: 6 and 9). According to St. Bonaventure, for the Christian there are two holy books, the book of Scripture and the book of nature. God speaks and reveals to humanity through both books.

B) COVENANT WORDS. On Mount Sinai God spoke and revealed to Moses the Ten Commandments, or the Ten Words (Exodus 20: 1-17). God makes a covenant with his people. If we keep the commandments, we are on the way to life, eternal life.

C) PROPHETIC WORDS. God speaks to the prophets, to Isaiah and Jeremiah, to Amos and Jonah. They first hear God's Word, and then they proclaim that Word to God's people. The words of the prophets have a great range. They are powerful, challenging, judging, but also comforting, encouraging, and giving hope to the Israelites.

D) WORDS OF WISDOM. In the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, we use the Psalms to express our words of prayer to God. We turn to the Wisdom of Solomon, to the book of Proverbs to hear God's words of wisdom and advice that should guide us even today.

E) THE WORD MADE FLESH. "In times past, God spoke in fragmentary and varied ways to our fathers through the prophets; in this, the final age, he has spoken to us through his Son" (Heb. 1.1-2). Mary said yes to God when the Angel Gabriel announced good news to her. Her word of yes led to the birth of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. "The Word was made flesh. He lived among us" (Jn. 1:14).

F) JESUS, PROCLAIMER OF THE WORD. "Jesus appeared in Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. 'This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the Gospel'" (Mk. 1: 14-15). In parables and stories, in the Sermon on the Mount and on the plains, Jesus taught the people with power. "The words I spoke to you are spirit and life" (Jn 6:63). Jesus, the Son of God, only spoke what the Father had instructed him to say. "I have not spoken on my own; no, the Father who sent me has commanded me what to say and how to speak... whatever I say is spoken just as he instructed me" (Jn. 12:49-50).

G) CHRISTIANS LISTEN TO THE WORD AND ACT UPON IT. Christian faith means saying yes to God's Word made manifest in Jesus Christ. For the word to be heard, there must be preachers and teachers like Peter and Paul. "Faith comes from hearing, and what is heard is the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17).

Then, after hearing the word, one must understand it and put it into practice. "Anyone who hears my words and puts them into practice is like the wise man who built his house on rock" (Mt. 7:24). This faithful response will lead to life everlasting. As St. Peter proclaimed: "Lord to whom we shall go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn. 6:68).

We must let God's word take over. "Humbly accept the word that has taken root in you, with its power to save you. Act on this word. If all you do is listen to it, you are deceiving yourselves" (Jas. 1: 21-22).

H) SERVANTS OF GOD'S WORD. By receiving and acting upon God's Word, we become servants, or ministers of God's word, like the disciples in the Acts of the Apostles. In order that the Word might not be neglected, the twelve assembled the community of

disciples and appointed deacons. “This will permit us to concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

Again in the Acts of the Apostles, we hear the prayer of the early community, a prayer we could make our own today. “Grant to your servants, even as they speak your words, complete assurance by stretching forth your hand in cures and signs and wonders to be worked in the name of Jesus, your holy Servant” (Acts 4:29-30).

If every Christian is to be by Baptism a servant or minister of God’s Word, how much more so, those who are chosen to be readers of God’s holy Word at Mass.