

When a passage is read in parts, the number of readers should be kept to the minimum necessary. Different readings will suggest a different number. However in all cases a maximum of four readers is likely to be sufficient. Such a number will mean each reader will have easy access to a microphone, and that there will not need to be movement of readers likely to distract the congregation from the word proclaimed. When a reading is divided in this way the priest always should read the words of Christ.

The question always to be asked is: is the purpose of dividing a reading among readers to assist those present in fruitful hearing of the word? If the only reason is to involve more readers, then the decision to proceed in this way should be reconsidered.

The faithful's participation in the liturgy increases to the degree that as they listen to the word of God spoken in the liturgy they strive harder to commit themselves to the Word of God made flesh in Christ. They endeavour to conform their way of life to what they celebrate in the liturgy, and then in turn to bring to the celebration of the liturgy all that they do in life.<sup>25</sup>

## Notes

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|----|---|----|---|
| 1  | <i>General Instruction to the Roman Missal</i> (hereafter GIRM) 55, <i>Lectionary for Mass: Introduction</i> (hereafter LM) 12  | 12 | LM 35-37, CTM 124-125   |
| 2  | <i>Sacrosanctum Concilium</i> (hereafter SC) 7  | 13 | LM 52, CTM 42   |
| 3  | LM 28   | 14 | LM 20-22, 23  |
| 4  | LM 76   | 15 | CTM 161-162, 164-165  |
| 5  | GIRM 107  | 16 | <i>Lectionary for Mass</i> , Volume 1, p949-963, CTM 162  |
| 6  | GIRM 91, 111  | 17 | LM 15   |
| 7  | <i>Celebrating the Mass</i> (hereafter CTM) 157, GIRM 57, LM 12   | 18 | LM 42, CTM 160  |
| 8  | GIRM 57   | 19 | Vienna International Religious Centre [ <a href="http://www.virc.at">www.virc.at</a> ] provides downloadable texts of Sunday readings in many European languages. |
| 9  | The Lectionary uses the Jerusalem Bible and the Grail Psalter (1963). The following versions are also permitted to be used in the liturgy: Revised Standard Version (RSV), New Jerusalem Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and Grail Psalter (1993). | 20 | <a href="http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Scripture">www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Scripture</a>  |
| 10 | LM 28   | 21 | LM 79   |
| 11 | LM 32-34  | 22 | LM 75, 80   |
|    |   | 23 | LM 76, 77, 81   |
|    |   | 24 | <i>Directory for Masses with Children</i> 47.   |
|    |   | 25 | LM 6  |

One of a series of resources prepared by the Liturgy Office of the Bishops' Conference to accompany the publication of *The Gift of Scripture* a teaching document of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, and of Scotland. The document can be downloaded from [www.catholic-ew.org.uk](http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk) and is published by the Catholic Truth Society [[www.cts-online.org.uk](http://www.cts-online.org.uk)]. Further resources are available from [www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Scripture](http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Scripture). Leaflet ©2005 Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. S006

**Liturgy  
Office**  
ENGLAND  
& WALES

# Proclaiming the Word

## Guidelines for Ministering the Word at Sunday Mass

*Speak, Lord,  
your servant is listening:  
you have the message  
of eternal life.*

1 Sam 3:9; Jn 6:68

*A Resource for*  
**THE GIFT OF SCRIPTURE**



The Liturgy of the Word has as its main part readings from Sacred Scripture. In these readings God is speaking to his people, opening up to them the mystery of redemption and salvation, offering them spiritual nourishment to enable them to be Christ's living witnesses before the world.<sup>1</sup> The Church confidently teaches that in the word proclaimed, Christ himself is truly present.<sup>2</sup>

It is never enough simply for the word to be proclaimed. The word is proclaimed in order that the Lord might speak to his people, and that pondering on his word his people might be drawn into dialogue with him.<sup>3</sup> It is important that the word proclaimed to the Lord's people must be capable of being received by them with understanding. The collaborative work of clergy and lay faithful in their various pastoral, liturgical and catechetical ministries will assist to such a reception.

At the same time, and particularly in parish liturgy where people of all ages and backgrounds will be together, still further effort is often likely to be necessary to ensure that all of those present will be helped to listen to the word, and to hear it with understanding. The following suggestions of how such further help might be given are all taken either from the Lectionary itself, or from suggestions in the Introduction to the Lectionary.

### Formation of the Assembly

In the normal run of things, the progressive formation of the assembly in their faith should be adequate to each member of the assembly hearing the word and engaging with it at the level of human maturity appropriate to them. However this places particular responsibility on:

- All those with responsibility for the initiation of children and of adults, and for their on-going formation, to show proper care in ensuring that through their work they help promote the ability of individuals and the community as a whole to understand the scriptures.<sup>4</sup>
- The homilist, who should take care to ensure that the homily offers assistance to the congregation in their understanding of any parts of the scriptures likely to be obscure to them, particularly if those obscurities present a block to an understanding the passage as a whole.
- Above all, on the other ministers of the word, specifically entrusted with the work of proclaiming the sacred texts. These men and women have the responsibility of preparing for their

attending Mass make use of the Lectionary as a source of prayer and reflection during the days before they come to Sunday Mass, and the days after. Any failure to use the full complement of readings is likely to prove at least a distraction to them. Similar issues will also arise where the Lectionary forms the foundation of parish catechesis.

If readings are omitted from Sunday Mass, it may prove possible to print the omitted reading (or at least the reference to it) in the newsletter so that those who choose may use this reading at some later time for their private prayer.

### Length of texts.

In the case of certain rather long texts, longer and shorter versions are provided.<sup>22</sup> However it is not always the case the shorter reading is the more suitable. Sometimes hearing the longer narrative will better help a congregation to understand what they are hearing.

### The option of alternative readings.

The compilers of the Lectionary themselves have recognised that some readings have an inherent difficulty and provide for an alternative. In such cases such alternatives as are given may be freely used.<sup>23</sup>

### Presenting a reading in 'parts'

At Masses with Children, "when the text of the readings lends itself to this, it may be helpful to have the children read it with parts distributed among them..."<sup>24</sup> This way of presenting a reading in parts might especially be considered where the reading is unusually long. Different voices would usually be used for the narration, and for the various persons 'speaking'.

This is the manner in which it is commended that the readings of the Passion on Palm Sunday and Good Friday are presented. Other occasions when such an approach might be taken would include the 3rd, 4th and 5th Sundays of Lent, when the gospel passages are much longer than usual. However the use of additional readers for a particular reading is not restricted to the Gospel reading only. The structure, and meaning, of other texts too can be clarified by the use of two or more readers.

In all cases it should be clear that what is being offered to the assembly is a reading, and not a dramatisation of the reading. These two forms are quite distinct and the presentation of the word at Mass should only be as a reading. Dramatisations of the biblical narrative have an honoured place in the life of the Church, but as with other such expressions of popular piety, should not displace or be confused with the liturgy of the Church.

## Newsletter

Many parishes find it helpful to print the reference to the Sunday readings in the newsletter. Putting the reference for this Sunday's and next Sunday's readings helps people who want to continue to find nourishment in one of these week's readings, and those who want to prepare themselves for the next Sunday's mass by looking at the readings in advance.

## Publications

Publications such as *Bible Alive* can be a very useful resource for helping people to deepen their familiarity with the Bible as a whole, and to develop a more biblically based prayer life. ([www.bible-alive.co.uk](http://www.bible-alive.co.uk))

## Catechesis

More and more parishes are finding that it is helpful to base their sacramental catechesis on the Sunday Lectionary. A model that many have found useful is described in the Liturgy Office resource *Sharing the Word on Lectionary-based Catechesis*.<sup>20</sup> A more detailed approach can be found in *Echoing God's Word: Formation for Catechists and Homilists in a Catechumenal Church* (James Dunning, Liturgical Training Publications, Chicago, 1993.)

This model provides an opportunity for catechists, the priest presider/homilist, readers and other parishioners to come together to share the word together and find help from each other for their deeper hearing of the word.

## Choosing the right words

### The number of readings

At Masses assigned three readings the three are normally to be used. However for serious pastoral reasons, one reading may be omitted. The Gospel reading must always be used. In choosing between the first two readings, the choice must carefully be made so as to safeguard the Church's intent in the Liturgy of the Word to instruct the faithful more completely in the mystery of salvation. Thus, unless the contrary is indicated in the text of the Lectionary, the reading to be chosen as the first reading should either be the one that is closer to the theme of the gospel, or the reading which best lends itself to a coherent catechesis being offered over an extended period, or that preserves the semi-continuous reading of some biblical book.<sup>21</sup>

Omitting a reading is to make a most significant omission. Such action should be taken only for the most serious of reasons. Increasingly those

task with care – striving to understand the text in its Biblical context, in its present liturgical setting, and with a sense for its particular significance for the congregation they are to minister to. They also need to take care to ensure that when proclaiming the word they speak clearly, and make good use of the amplification system.

## The role of the priest

A priest or bishop celebrant will normally preside at the Liturgy of the Word. This will always be the case at the celebration of Mass. Those ordained to the priesthood are also the ordinary ministers of the word, at Liturgies of the Word celebrated outside of Mass – though for a variety of reasons this responsibility will be delegated to other ministers – ordained (deacons) or lay ministers (readers or others invited to lead the prayer of the Church).<sup>5</sup>

The parish priest, in particular, has responsibility for ensuring that good practice is introduced with regard to the preparation and celebration of the liturgy in the parish. It will usually be most appropriate for this responsibility will be shared with others, for example the parish liturgy group.<sup>6</sup>

## Celebrating the Word

### Respecting the dignity of the Word.

In the Scriptures the community of faith even now hears God speaking to it. For this reason the biblical readings and their accompanying Scripture chants may not be omitted, shortened or replaced by non-biblical texts.<sup>7</sup>

Non-biblical readings or songs may not be substituted for the Scripture readings (including the responsorial psalm) provided in the Lectionary.<sup>8</sup> Similarly it is necessary that the scriptures be read from an approved translation.<sup>9</sup>

On occasions, most commonly in the celebration of marriage or funerals, a request is sometimes made to use a non-scriptural reading. This may sometimes be appropriate. Such readings might be included within the homily, as a reflection after Communion, within in an order of service or it may be more suitable for use at an accompanying social gathering. Care should be taken that any such texts are consonant with our faith in Christ, are suitable for public proclamation, and unlikely to cause offence or be mistaken as Sacred Scripture

In the Liturgy of the Word the scripture readings must always be proclaimed

without haste, allowing time for the assembly to hear the word, take it to heart and begin to respond to it in prayer. The dialogue between God and his people taking place through the Holy Spirit demands short intervals of silence.<sup>10</sup>

The word should also be proclaimed from the place dedicated to its proclamation and its preaching, the ambo. A disservice is almost always done to the ritual nature of proclamation, to the distinctive nature of the word proclaimed, and to the congregation's ability to receive the word when it is proclaimed from elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

The dignity of the word should also be indicated by the quality of the books from which the word is proclaimed. A service leaflet or missalette should never be used for the proclamation of sacred scripture. Where it is necessary to use separate sheets of paper they should be presented in a worthy binder.<sup>12</sup>

### Ensuring sufficient readers are available.

Whenever there is more than one reading, it is better to assign the readings to different readers. This will assist the assembly to appreciate the genre and context of different passages of scripture.<sup>13</sup>

### Ensuring that texts intended to be sung are sung.

There are a lot of words in the Liturgy of the Word. If they are all read then there can a sense of monotony can easily be conveyed. Yet the psalm and gospel acclamation are intended to be sung.<sup>14</sup> Singing the psalm helps the assembly respond in prayer to the first reading and prepares them to hear the Gospel. The gospel acclamation enables the assembly to greet the Lord who is about to speak to them in the Gospel.<sup>15</sup>

The use of cantor and musicians will not only assist in the ministering of these elements, but restore a sense of space and reflectiveness to the whole of the Liturgy of the Word.

To assist parishes which have few musical resources the Lectionary provides a number of Common Responsorial Psalms which may replace the one assigned to the day as a way of facilitating people's participation.<sup>16</sup>

## Participating in the Word

### Providing Introductions to the readings.

Introductions can help the gathered assembly toward a better hearing of the word of God.<sup>17</sup> Such introductions should normally be restricted to briefly situating the text – for example observing that the prophecy of

Ezekiel was addressed to the chosen people in Exile in Babylon or making a connection between this week's gospel reading and that heard last week. They may be best given before each reading, rather than as introduction to all the readings en bloc. Whether presented en bloc or separately the temptation to drift from introduction to a mini-homily, summarising, interpreting their message rather than, simply, preparing people to hear the word for themselves should be avoided. The Lectionary itself offers brief headings to each reading which offer such summaries. They are given for the assistance of those preparing the readings, but should never be used as spoken introductions.

It is also possible to provide a brief introduction in a parish bulletin either for the particular Sunday or the following one.

The responsibility for preparing introduction is the presiders. It can also be done by the deacon or a lay minister. Such comments should always be succinct and well prepared.<sup>18</sup>

### Orders of Service

As a rule the texts of the reading should not be included in an Order of Service though it can be helpful to include the scripture reference and the brief heading.

### Hospitality

Communities which welcome a large number of overseas visitors for whom English is not their first language may wish to consider providing the text of the readings.<sup>19</sup>

### Accessibility

Attention also should be given to the specific needs of the hard of hearing and the deaf. All parishes should have a loop system fitted for the benefit of those using hearing aids. There are many people who are hard of hearing who rely to a considerable extent on lip reading in order to assist their 'hearing'. This means that the reader's face should be properly lit. It is not uncommon for down lighting to be installed to assist the reader in reading the Lectionary, but without thinking of installing additional lighting to dispel the shadows the down-lighting produces on the reader's face.

Consideration should also be given to providing large print texts for those with impaired vision.

Accessibility is not just about texts but about physical space as well. Readers with physical disabilities should be able to approach the Ambo in an easy and dignified manner.