

The Liturgical Year

Paul Turner

I was still in the seminary in 1977 when The Liturgical Press published an English translation of Adrien Nocent's *Célébrer Jésus-Christ: L'année Liturgique* in four paperback volumes, each about the size of your hand.

I don't remember who recommended these books or where I bought them. I can still read the seller's handwriting inside the front cover, where a pencil etched the price. All I know is that I bought all four volumes, brought them to my room, flipped to whatever week of the liturgical year it was, and started reading.

I was hooked.

Adrien Nocent was a monk of the Belgian abbey Maredsous and a professor at the university of Sant' Anselmo, which housed the Pontifical Liturgical Institute in Rome. He had been involved with the implementation of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* after Vatican II and is responsible for some of the work on its revised lectionary.

I never met him. He was no longer at Sant' Anselmo when I studied there a decade after the publication of the books I loved so much. However, several years later, I must have mailed him a copy of my book *Confirmation: The Baby in Solomon's Court*. I still have the book that Nocent sent me in return, along with this thank-you note handwritten in English: "This book is arrived just today from U.S.A.! Thank you for your gift. This book, gift for you! For you: p. 56-116!" The book he sent was an English translation of his own *A Rereading of the Renewed Liturgy*, and the chapter in question was entitled "Christian Initiation." About half of that chapter treated the sacrament of confirmation.

The Liturgical Year, as the English translation of Nocent's multi-volume work is called, was an in-depth commentary on the revised Lectionary for Mass, which had debuted in English in 1970. This commentary was one of the first, certainly the most comprehensive to date, and the most authoritative because Nocent had personal experience bringing the lectionary to birth.

I consulted *The Liturgical Year* every week my first many years as a priest. Nocent's take on the readings helped my homily preparation. It also gave me a deeper appreciation of other liturgical books and of the entire liturgical year.

Nocent taught me to approach the weekend readings of Ordinary Time from the back end - the gospel. Then I could look at the first reading for some foreshadowing of the gospel to come. I also learned to search the psalm for some echo of the emerging theme. He treated the second readings separately. In his view they had little to do with the other two, and he did not want preachers to force themes. On any committee, there comes a time when some people don't get their way. I wonder if Nocent objected to the way the second reading was taking shape as he sat on that committee for the revised lectionary. For many years I ignored the second reading in my preaching, and I'm sure it had a lot to do with Nocent's opinions.

Although I did not appreciate it at the time, Nocent had deep insights into other aspects of the liturgical year. For example, he made numerous references to the choice of biblical passages in the Office of Readings, as well as the prayers and antiphons of the missal. Once one looks at a liturgical season through the eyes of all its official books, new insights and connections appear. Nocent was not shy about sharing his views. His sweeping philosophies about life and liturgy, society and history, make this an even more fascinating work. This was the kind of book that could only come from a man imbued with the liturgical tradition and alert to changes in society.

I considered it a great privilege when Liturgical Press asked me to help bring Nocent's books back to life. Looking for ways to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, the publisher thought a re-presentation of this material would bring people back to the freshness of the liturgical renewal, while discovering insights that can still be applied to the liturgy today. Because of the age of the books, readers today might benefit from annotations explaining more of the author's context. Some editing of the material also had to take place because of a developed sensitivity to gender-inclusive language, a desired unification of biblical sources, and a closer link to the revised translation of the Roman Missal. In some places the original translator's work had to be adjusted for clarity, and some numerical references (such as biblical verses) corrected for precision.

I felt very much like a student of this great master because of the hours I had spent with his books during my service as a young priest. The publication is now in three volumes, slightly larger in size than the first four. The French original, incidentally, was in seven volumes. All the material is there, just repackaged now by seasons in a way that should make the research more useful than ever.

The impact of the lectionary on Catholic liturgical piety is immeasurable. It has totally changed the way that a preacher prepares the homily and that musicians plan the singing. The lectionary has influenced catechetical trends and church decoration, the prayer of the faithful and bulletin inserts. Citations to the Sunday readings appear in print and online publications. Apps place them on your daily calendar. Centuries ago, people identified the Sundays of the year by the first word of their entrance antiphon. That's why we have Gaudete Sunday during Advent and Laetare during Lent. Today, when people plan a Sunday, they commonly want to know what the gospel will be.

The Roman Catholic Lectionary for Mass has influenced the creation of the Revised Common Lectionary in use by many other Christian assemblies. All these are signs that the post-Vatican II work on the revision of the readings was one of the most powerfully successful changes to the celebration of the mass.

Especially because Nocent took part in the work, his insights will be of great use even to a generation that has never heard of him.

Perhaps his most key insight into the lectionary is that doing biblical exegesis on a text is not enough. A further question should be, "How is this

passage used *in the liturgy*?" Nocent calls this approach a Liturgical Reading of Scripture (vol. 1, p. 82). He gives as an example Luke's account of Zacchaeus, who climbs a tree to see Jesus. When the story is proclaimed on the Thirty-First Sunday of Year C, the first reading from Wisdom concerns God's patient pursuit of the sinner. So, the particular "liturgical reading" of the story on this day concerns Zacchaeus's conversion. However, the same passage may be used for the consecration of a Church, where the key verse is Jesus' intent to stay in Zacchaeus's house. On that occasion, these verses have more to do with the building than with the converting sinner. Other aspects of the passage can be gleaned through biblical exegesis, but a liturgical reading will show why it is used on a particular day.

Whether you choose to consult these books or some other resource, the following groups would benefit from some research before the Sunday liturgy.

Preachers. You will find here not just a biblical commentary, but a liturgical reading of the passages. Many people have drawn connections between the readings, but Nocent can tell you the initial intent from the days when the lectionary was formed.

Musicians. Whether you are planning or executing the music for the liturgy, it helps to know what the season is about, how the readings fit in, and how the music can support the lectionary. Especially the psalmist should be familiar with all the Sunday readings. The psalm is deliberately chosen because of its thematic link to something - usually, but not always, the first reading. Many times the lectionary makes a precise selection of particular verses from the psalm in order to drive this home. Take a look at the numbers of the psalm's *verses*. If there's a gap, concentrate on the specific verses that follow it. A prayerful reading of a commentary will help the psalmist know what to emphasize when singing.

The faithful. When you come to mass, you sometimes rightfully complain that you can't hear the reading, cannot understand what it means, find the homily irrelevant, and don't approve of the music. However, we all have work to do before coming to church - even you. The preacher should be prepared, and the musicians should have thought through and practiced their selections. But you, too, dear faithful, should be preparing for the mass, especially for the liturgy of the word. Do you know what the readings are going to be this coming Sunday? If not, now is a good time to look them up, and perhaps to study a commentary on them. Then at mass, you can put down the printed copy of the reading, look up, listen with open ears, and hear what God has to say to you as the word is being proclaimed. If you've done your homework, this will open up new dimensions to the proclamation of the word.

For those familiar with the prayers and antiphons of the missal, and with the Liturgy of the Hours, the celebration of the eucharist will have even more meaning. Themes reappear and connect in ways that enrich the liturgical life.

At the time I first picked up Nocent's books, there wasn't much written about the lectionary. The author did not even include a bibliography. Today the resources are many, and people have ample opportunity to choose one or more

for consultation week by week. When stepping into the liturgical year this way, Catholics will experience more deeply the center of their piety. Participation at the Sunday mass will truly become your source and summit when you embrace the liturgical year, and let it embrace you.

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