

The Ecumenical Roots of the Lectionary for Mass

Paul Turner

Introduction

Ecumenism ranked among the criteria that shaped the revised Roman Catholic Lectionary for Mass in the late 1960s. Today the relationship between the Catholic Sunday scriptures and those read in other Christian assemblies is well known among liturgical specialists and even among ordinary churchgoers, who remark on similarities when they worship with friends in another denomination. The Lectionary for Mass resulted in ecumenical coherence; it was also conceived amid ecumenical awareness.

The arms of the liturgical movement and the ecumenical movement intertwined throughout the 1960s, which saw advances in theological and applied agreement. Specifically, those charged with revising the Catholic lectionary studied what other denominations had already done with theirs and wondered aloud how those same denominations would react to their decisions.

Coetus XI

The lectionary is the product of work completed by Coetus XI. After the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council passed the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy in December 1963, Pope Paul VI established a Consilium to implement its directives in January 1964. The Consilium created dozens of teams of specialists, each named with a number. In May 1964, just five months after the Constitution, Coetus XI received the task of preparing the lectionary. Its members were Godfrey Diekmann, Gaston Fontaine, Heinz Schürmann, Pierre Jounel, Pacifico Massi, Emmanuel Lanne, and Heinrich Kahlefeld. A year later, Cipriano Vagaggini replaced Godfrey Diekmann as the chair, and more specialists joined the team: Joseph Féder, André Rose, Adrien Nocent, Aimon-Marie Roguet, Klemens Tilmann, Henri Oster, Jean Gaillard, Hilaire Marot, and Lucien Deiss. Marot, from Chevetogne, specialized in ecumenism.

The lectionary in force could be found within the single volume Roman Missal. It followed a one-year cycle, featuring an epistle and a gospel on most days, spare in proclaiming passages from the Old Testament, consistent in offering a psalm verse for the gradual or tract, and persistent in its use of Latin, which few churchgoers could understand.

Coetus XI completed its work in 1968, four years after beginning. Some further changes happened before the lectionary was published in 1969.

One reason the group could work so quickly was that certain members had proposed revisions to the lectionary in scholarly articles over the previous years: Jounel for *La Maison Dieu* in 1961, the Sacred Congregation of Rites for an internal German three-year lectionary in 1958, Schürmann for *Paroisse et Liturgie*

in 1957, Kahlefeld in *Liturgisches Jahrbuch* in 1954 and even 1953, and Schürmann in the same periodical in 1952—twelve years before he was invited to serve on Coetus XI.¹

Another reason the group worked quickly was that the Roman Missal did not contain the world's only lectionary. Other Christian communities both East and West, Catholic and Orthodox, had their own: the Roman, Gallican, Ambrosian, Mozarabic and Italian liturgies in the West; the ancient Jerusalem, Nestorian, Jacobite, Syro-Catholic, Syro-Malancar, Syro-Chaldean, Syro-Malabar, Jacobite of India, Maronite, Armenian, Coptic, and Byzantine liturgies in the East.² Individual members of Coetus XI knew these lectionaries and put this broad ecumenical tapestry before the eyes of the other specialists.

But there was more. Members of the group also knew other work: Some Reformed Churches had developed lectionaries based on the Roman Missal's one-year cycle. By 1962 the Anglican Churches of India, Pakistan, Bermuda & Ceylon were adding Old Testament readings to Sundays and feasts as a complement to the *Prayer Book*. In Germany the Catholic-minded *Evangelische Michaelbruderschaft* added only 28 pericopes to the Roman lectionary. Lutherans in Germany had edited their lectionary in 1945, to which they added passages to facilitate preaching. It provided six series of readings, three each for epistles and gospels, and a preacher could add a third reading from one of the unused sets. In 1953 the German Lutheran Liturgical Conference admitted the possibility of reviewing the lectionary with ecumenical concerns, but it wanted to keep the traditional lectionary because it was a point of unity among Lutheran communities around the world. It approved adding new passages grouped by theme, or semicontinuous readings, while avoiding artificial harmonizations.

The Swedish Lutheran Church since 1862 added optional gospels, while appending an Old Testament and a non-gospel New Testament reading to the evening preaching service, building a three-year lectionary that preserved two thirds of the Roman lectionary in the first year.

The Norwegian Lutherans since 1922 had three series of readings from the New Testament, the first of which retained over 90% of the Roman lectionary. Since 1885 the Danish Lutheran Church added a second series of texts to the traditional one and approved an optional third series in 1958. The Reformed Church of France edited a new lectionary in 1963 with three readings and a cycle of three years, completely independent of the Roman cycle of readings. The Old Catholic Church had preserved the Roman readings with very few exceptions, but they added three series of two other readings to build a four-year cycle. By the late 1960s, leaders from many of these groups hoped that the Roman Church

¹ Consilium ad Exsequendam Constitutionem de Sacra Liturgia, Schemata n. 110, Study Group 11: On the readings at Mass, October 2, 1965, p. 1.

² See Paul Turner, *Words Without Alloy*, citing Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy 1948-1975*, Trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), p. 412.

would not alter its readings. Members from Cœtus XI studied all those lectionaries.

Other scholars provided specific work: Lanne on the Byzantine lectionary, Pietro Borella on the Ambrosian lectionary, Juan Mateos on the Syriac lectionary, Jorge Pinell on the Mozarabic lectionaries, and Jounel on neo-Gallican readings.³

The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy had asked for a wider distribution of readings "over a fixed number of years." It was promoting a practice that other Christian denominations had already put into force.

Ecumenical Awareness

The Catholic scholars of Cœtus XI were comfortable consulting the work of other denominations. They wanted to know how others had approached the same challenge to marry scripture with the liturgical year. They trusted that other Christians held worthy insights. In their reports, they show that ecumenical investigation seemed the responsible thing to do. It was expected.

This becomes clearer in a few individual remarks in the development of their work. For example, in March 1966, the group noted this about establishing a number of years in the cycle of readings:

Certain persons, not without a truly ecumenical intention, may wish that in the first year of the cycle being chosen, there be kept the order of readings that is now held in the Roman liturgy with some small corrections. And the reason is not only about preserving the tradition, but especially because the medieval Roman order is still substantially preserved among certain separated communities.⁴

Two months later, the group repeated the same proposal, while adding these details:

In fact, if the matter is considered in general, the *Prayer Book*, which is as it were the foundation of the Anglican confession and of the Churches derived from it, and various Lutheran Lectionaries preserved 62% or even 93% of the Lectionary they received from the medieval missals. But if the matter were considered more accurately, several differences appear among the Protestants in the present state.⁵

The report goes on to mention several practices. An interconfessional group of Anglicans, the "London Group," had proposed a new order of readings in 1965, in hopes that the Lambeth Conference would encourage its reception by all the churches. Members of Cœtus XI wrote,

³ Schemata 101: August 20, 1965.

⁴ Schemata 148, p. 7.

⁵ Schemata 165, p. 7.

In the Year 1962, by the authority of the Metropolitan Anglican Church of India, Pakistan, the Bermuda Islands, and Ceylon, a list was made of Old Testament pericopes for the Sundays and feast days for almost the complete *Prayer Book*.⁶

The report continued,

From memos we newly received about the most recent state of things among our separated brethren, a) Dom Mahrenholz, from the separated German Lutheran Liturgical Conference, wants us to keep in one year the contemporary Lectionary; b) Dom Jasper, from the separated “London Group,” asks that we completely restore our Lectionary; 3) Dom Cafilish, from the separated liturgical commission of Swiss Old Catholics asks the same.⁷

Others matched their affinity for the lectionary in force. Schürmann saw the ecumenical value of keeping the readings as one year of the new cycle. He recommended correcting some of the readings to harmonize with the psalms and antiphons of the Missal, establishing an experimental new set of readings, inviting regional episcopal conferences to choose their format, and allowing variation in the weekday readings.

However, in the same report, Coetus XI decided they could not retain the lectionary in force for several reasons: They had a unique historical opportunity to create something new and meaningful, the lectionary in force would seem deficient compared to the readings they were already planning, and the former system would be unusable due to changes in the calendar, the addition of Old Testament readings, and improvements to the deficiencies in many of its passages. Then the report declares, “The state of the question among our separated Western brothers and sisters is in no way simple. Except for the Lutherans, especially in Germany, the others seek new ways and they also expect us to seek them.”⁸

In the same report, the group reviewed various points from the previous discussion. One of those got unanimous consent: Narratives that respond to the point of any given feast should be kept in place. The members were probably referring to days such as Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. The faithful were used to hearing certain passages on those days, and it would disturb them if they did not. Furthermore, the report warned, if the readings changed, the feast itself might be reduced “to an exceedingly conceptual theme.”⁹

Two weeks later, still in May 1966, a subsequent report states,

⁶ Schemata 165, p. 7.

⁷ Schemata 165, p. 9.

⁸ Schemata 165, p. 11.

⁹ Schemata 165, p. 14.

Many people have advised about it being especially desirable that, in this matter [that is, of the readings in the lectionary], unity among Christians may be achieved. However, they do not expect this to be so easy, especially in its full breadth, there being so much diversity among lectionaries. They think it would be easier to obtain *de facto*, that on great feasts and certain Sundays that have their own character by tradition, all Christians at least in the West read the same pericopes among themselves....

Father Martimort notes the ecumenical importance for keeping the reading of the same pericopes on the great feasts. St. Leo had once said that the reading of the same gospel on the same day everywhere on earth was an element of great importance for the liturgical feast.¹⁰

The decision to preserve the traditional readings on the most important feasts not only made historical and logical sense, it made ecumenical sense. The group valued that argument.

A few months later, October 1966, Cœtus XI weighed a more difficult matter recorded in their report:

Father Wagner raises a “leading” question, as he called it; namely, concerning the ecumenical problem: If we want to arrive at the unity of one Lectionary among all Christians, every task [we have completed] has to be reviewed from the beginning in collaboration with experts of these Churches. Other Christian Churches will never receive a Lectionary prepared by Catholics alone.

The Chair [Vagaggini] announces that this question had already been resolved at the beginning: See Schemata 165, n. 40, and Schemata 168, p. 4.

Fathers Martimort and Gy note that it is impossible for us to expect all Christian confessions to agree on this matter before we approve the Roman Lectionary.

Father Pascher observes in the ecumenical matter that the unity of translations of biblical readings in each nation is of truly greater importance than a unity of Lectionaries.¹¹

Also in October 1966, the group revisited the question of the number of readings, and whether or not the Old Testament readings being proposed could become optional. The report states, “Bishop Pellegrino notes that this question of the three readings is of great importance in ecumenism in this time when Catholics are again discovering Sacred Scripture.”¹²

¹⁰ Schemata 168, p. 3-4.

¹¹ Schemata 198, p. 2.

¹² Schemata 198, pp. 9-10.

In these excerpts from various reports, one can see the deference given to ecumenical matters. Catholics were rediscovering the Scriptures, which became a point of collaboration with other Christians. Even the addition of Old Testament readings to the regular proclamation of scriptures on Sundays held ecumenical value. Ecumenism was one of the driving arguments behind the revision of scripture readings in the liturgies of the Roman Catholic Church.

Lessons to Be Learned

In these interventions by those preparing the revised Catholic lectionary in the 1960s, the ecumenical awareness is striking to today's ears. They were probably not all that striking in the 1960s. The importance of the ecumenical movement was plain. Experts in the Catholic camp, in one expression of faithfulness to their belief, consulted the work that other Christians had completed. Deep into the work, the group continued thinking how other Christians might react. Today some Catholics may consider such consultation an act of concession, but it was impressively an act of intellectual responsibility and of Christian charity. When choosing one of two legitimate options, one of which might offend other Christians, the other of which might not, Catholics opted for not giving offense. They valued charity in ecumenism.

Also noteworthy was the willingness of one lone consultor, late in the process, to start all over again if the work could attain a larger goal: the adoption of a common lectionary among all Christian peoples. His proposal was idealistic, and it is hard to criticize those who made him face the real world. But the basic question is worth asking: What would Christian assemblies be willing to give up if it brought about greater ecumenical consensus on something as important as the scripture readings they hear each week on the day of the Lord's resurrection?

One way for our Churches to reengage the ecumenical movement is to adopt these attitudes of humility and charity. They may also pursue a sincere desire to know the truth, and not to fear seeking it inside places they do not often look, such as the revered practices of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Ironically, Coetus XI had to give up what would have been an ecumenically sustainable decision: keeping the former readings as one year of the cycle. But that became impossible for many other reasons. And, in the end, this difficult decision of separating from the ecumenical consensus that valued the one-year cycle led to a greater ecumenical consensus around a three-year cycle. Ecumenism is not supposed to work this way: convergence by misreading the signs. But sometimes the Spirit of God works through human failure and points toward unity in Christ.