

The Word of God as Lived in the Church

Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions
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Introduction: The Second Vatican Council

“Living and effective” is exactly how the participants at the Second Vatican Council experienced the Word of God. It was living in the world and effective in the world. The Council unleashed the power of the Word. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, made two key statements about the Word of God in worship. The first concerned its usage in general, and the second pertained to the Mass. Number 35 §1 says, “In sacred celebrations there is to be more reading from holy scripture, and it is to be more varied and suitable.” Number 51 says, “The treasures of the bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word. In this way a more representative portion of the holy scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years.”

Together these statements awakened an awareness of the Church's responsibility to make the liturgy a place where the Word of God would bear fruit. They also disclosed a certain unease with the Church's past usage of the Word. It seemed more harnessed than unleashed. You can hear in these statements a judgment on the deficiencies of the past: The word was not sufficiently varied, and at times not suited to the occasion; the bible's contents were underrepresented and the faithful were malnourished at the table of God's Word.

Here's how your program describes my task: “This presentation traces the historical evolution of the Liturgy of the Word, highlighting its theological significance and pastoral implications across two millennia of Christian worship. From the early Church's use of Scripture through the development of liturgical books of readings, to the Second Vatican Council's call to open wide the treasures of Sacred Scripture, this session will explore how the proclamation of the Word has been shaped by Tradition, reform, and ecclesial vision. What was the role of the Consilium in the creation of the revised Lectionary for Mass? How did the increase in pericopes affect the structure of the Lectionary and the cursus of readings? Why did the Council mandate the integration of Scripture into sacramental celebrations? How have more recent developments made an impact on our liturgical texts?”

I'll pursue this through the following outline: After this introduction, a history of the Liturgy of the Word from the bible through the Roman Missal of 1570; second an exposition of the role of the Consilium responsible for implementing the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy in the late 1960s; third a reflection on some theological and pastoral implications of the work; fourth, a review of matters pertaining to the proclamation of the Word in the liturgy; fifth, a

look at the Word of God in certain liturgies outside Mass—specifically the Order of Penance and the Liturgy of the Hours; and then some concluding remarks.

The slides that accompany my presentation are available today on my website: paulturner.org. You are welcome to copy them. They will come down on Friday, but I will replace them with a copy of this presentation.

A History of the Liturgy of the Word

The bible's most alluring reference to the Liturgy of the Word is its account of two disciples encountering Jesus less than twenty-four hours after the resurrection on the road to Emmaus in chapter 24 of the Gospel of St. Luke. They didn't recognize Jesus. On the road, he unpacked scripture, and at table he broke bread. The disciples discovered him present in their midst. These two moments foreshadow the liturgies of the Word and of the Eucharist.

The New Testament makes specific references to the practice of proclaiming the Word. Paul addressed one Letter to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus and the church at their house (2), implying some literate person would read it all aloud to the others. At the start of the Book of Revelation, John wrote, "Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen to this prophetic message" (1:3).

And, Paul wrote to the Colossians, "When this letter is read before you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and you yourselves read the one from Laodicea" (4:16). Sadly, no one has yet found the Letter of St. Paul to the Laodiceans. Surely, somewhere in purgatory is the person who lost it. And please, please, check your closets when you get home.

In the mid-second century, Justin the Martyr testified to a liturgy of the Word. He described reading from the prophets to Christians gathered for the Eucharist. Tertullian and Ambrose bore testimony to the proclamation of the scriptures in public. The *Apostolic Constitutions* of the fourth century recorded evidence of several readings before the gospel in the East. Egeria the pilgrim reported that readings were proclaimed in the liturgies of the Holy Land.

By the mid-eighth century, the earliest ancestor of what we know as a lectionary came from Würzburg, where one finds a list of the citations assigned for the celebration of the Mass. Around the same time, *Ordo Romanus I* gave evidence of a psalm sung antiphonally after the first reading. It was sometimes called a response, given its structure, or the gradual, given the singer's location up a step at a higher grade. The same source recorded the singing of the alleluia during most of the year, though replaced with a piece called the Tract during Lent.

Some churches erected two opposing ambos for the proclamation of the Word, on north and south sides. The gospel was reserved for the north because ministers were to proclaim Christ toward missionary lands of the south.

During the Middle Ages, dozens of poems or "sequences" entered the Liturgy of the Word on special days. Four of these remain the liturgy: The ones for Easter and Pentecost Sundays are obligatory, but the ones for the solemnity

of the Most Holy Body and Blood of the Lord and for Our Lady of Sorrows are optional.

The post-Reformation Roman Pontifical included a blessing of a psalmist, presumably a newly appointed one. Although a pontifical collects the services over which a bishop presided, a priest could offer this blessing. He said, “See that what you sing with your mouth, you believe in your heart; and that what you believe in your heart, you attest with works.” It was the inspiration for an admonition the bishop says today when ordaining a deacon and again at the ordination of a priest.

The facing ambos had largely fallen to disuse by the time of the 1570 Roman Missal; so, after the epistle, a server or the priest moved the missal from the south side of the altar to the north side for the proclamation of the gospel.

The 1570 Missal assigned these two readings to most of its Masses, both taken from the New Testament. Readings from the Old Testament were used on occasions such as the weekdays of Lent, ember days four times a year, and the vigils of major feasts. The readings recycled every year. Ordinarily, the weekday readings repeated those of the previous Sunday. This was the arrangement the Second Vatican Council thought could be enriched.

The Consilium’s Study Group XI

Upon passage of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy in December 1963, Pope Paul VI, about a month later, established a Consilium for its implementing. Members were specialists in liturgy. They appointed dozens of Study Groups of other specialists to elaborate various areas of the liturgical reform. These were known by numbers. Study Group XI was charged with the Lectionary for Mass.

Members were almost entirely from Europe, with the exception of one Canadian. All were male. They rejoiced at the watershed day when the full Consilium permitted them to include a passage from the Old Testament on all Sundays outside Easter Time, expanding the number of readings from two to three, and exposing Catholics to more of the bible than ever before.

Over four years, they discussed and reworked a series of drafts. They forged a three-year cycle of readings for Sundays. They also established weekday readings for every day of the liturgical year. During the strong times of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter, these readings follow a one-year cycle. In Ordinary Time, the weekday gospel acclamations and gospels are on a one-year cycle, but the first reading and psalm cycle every two years.

The Sundays of Advent feature a series of gospels beginning with Jesus’ prediction of his Second Coming, two passages pertaining to John the Baptist, and a final gospel anticipating the birth of Christ.

The first readings offer messianic prophecies that inspire the choice of the psalm. The second readings anticipate the Second Coming of Christ.

In Lent the first two Sundays offer gospels of the Temptation of Christ and the Baptism of the Lord. The next three Sundays rotate thematic gospels: in Year A, the preparation of the elect for baptism; in Year B, events leading to the

Passion of Christ; in Year C, the renewal of the baptized faithful who turn from sin to grace.

The first readings of the first five Sundays of Lent package up salvation history in miniature: creation and the flood on the first Sunday; accounts about Abraham on the second, and Moses on the third Sunday; the monarchy and the exile are heard on the fourth, prophets on the fifth. The second readings on these five weeks connect to one of the themes of the other two readings. The passages for Palm Sunday and Holy Week relate to the days at hand.

Throughout Easter Time the gospels follow a deliberate sequence: The news of the resurrection and the appearances of Jesus on Easter and the two Sundays following; the Good Shepherd on the fourth Sunday; the farewell discourse of Jesus on the Sundays that remain. The second readings of Year A present excerpts from the First Letter of Peter; in Year B they come from the First Letter of John. Year C presents visions from the Book of Revelation. The first readings all come from Acts of the Apostles: the first two Sundays present the early Christian community at peace; the next Sundays report the mission to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. Throughout, the psalms echo the first reading.

Especially in these strong times of the liturgical year, Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter, the “theme” of the readings is linear from Sunday to Sunday, not vertical—even though preachers, catechists and musicians continue to ferret out a single theme each Sunday, a concept the revisers did not strive to achieve.

In Ordinary Time, the Sunday gospels page through Matthew, Mark and Luke in Years A, B, and C. The first readings draw passages from the Old Testament that relate to the gospel. The second readings are semicontinuous presentations of the Letters of Paul, Hebrews, and James. Although few preachers take advantage of these, they invite a series of homilies on the second reading to help the faithful appreciate the letters of the New Testament.

On weekdays of Advent, the first week and a half features Isaiah with a gospel that echoes each theme—a rare stretch in the lectionary when the first reading determines the gospel, not the other way around. Starting on Thursday of the second week the gospels sequentially unfold events from the life of John the Baptist, with first readings to match. In the week before Christmas, the gospels recount events leading to the birth of Christ, and the first readings foreshadow their message.

Christmas Time weekdays feature gospels of the events after the birth of Christ and then the first chapter of John. The first readings offer semicontinuous passages from the First Letter of John; psalms pertain to the praise the faithful owe God at the birth of Christ—a rare stretch in the lectionary when the psalms pertain to the time of year, not to the first reading.

In Lent the first few weeks choose readings that express key themes of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. On some days, these are precisely the weekday readings from the 1962 Missal, proclaimed on those specific days for hundreds of years. Other Lent weekday readings from the 1962 Missal remain but on different

days, especially because the last half of Lent now gives a semicontinuous presentation of passages from John's gospel leading to the Passion of Christ.

In Easter Time the first readings on weekdays roll through much of Acts of the Apostles, but completely omitting, among other sections, Paul's visit to Malta—still a sore point for the Catholics on that island. The lectionary loves to arrange passages in biblical sequence, but the gospels during the Easter Octave break the pattern, in order to present the events of the resurrection of Christ from all four gospels in a presumed chronological order—as in the second century *Diatessaron*. The remaining weekday gospels feature appropriate chapters of John, such as Jesus' visit with Nicodemus, the bread of life discourse, the Good Shepherd, and the farewell discourse.

The post-Vatican II lectionary expanded the idea of select readings for Ritual Masses—events like confirmation, ordinations and weddings. There were celebrations of sacraments before, but the missal had no Ritual Masses. Confirmation, for example, usually took place apart from Mass and with no readings from scripture. Engaged couples today may choose from dozens of readings for their wedding, an action not possible before the revised lectionary collected so many of them. During that time the exchange of consent generally took place before Mass began, not during the Mass, and the priest offered the Votive Mass of the Holy Trinity because there was no Ritual Mass for weddings.

In all, the lectionary has had a far greater impact than Study Group XI could have imagined. The readings they selected influenced homilies, spurred commentaries, coaxed the selection of music, inspired church decorations, moved artists to create bulletin covers, impressed other Christian denominations to revise their lectionaries, and for some Catholics attending Saturday night marriage celebrations, it falsely made them think that the readings determined whether or not a wedding Mass “counted” for Sunday. None of that was in the plans for Study Group XI, but that is how the Spirit moved.

Reflections

The revised lectionary had theological significance and pastoral implications. Theologically, the lectionary announced loud and clear that the Catholic Church had been roused from slumber toward the centrality of the proclamation of the Word of God. The bible undergirds our doctrines, but public proclamation is its primary function. Today, Catholic biblical scholars are among the best in the world, but this was not true a century ago.

This reawakening most significantly spotlighted the Old Testament. Admittedly, the 1962 Missal and Roman Breviary gave prominence to the Book of Psalms. But many other books were ignored. Today, only one of the bible's 73 books appears nowhere in the lectionary, nor in any other ritual book. Which one is it? Do you know the answer to this trivia question? Obadiah. The Irish prophet. The entire Book of Obadiah is only one page long, but no ritual book found a place for it. The one saint who loved the bible so much he would understand Obadiah's frustration is the one we celebrate on the liturgical calendar today, Jerome, but he was not known for the virtue of compassion, so Obadiah, surely still fuming and

stomping around the gates of heaven at the decisions of Study Group XI, can expect no TLC from Jerome.

When the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy addressed the readings at Mass, it targeted the small representation of scripture. In the past the Missal held 1% of the Old Testament. Today's lectionary gives us 17%. You may think 17% is still not very much, and you'd be right. But you should also be grateful that it's only 17%. The readings skip over many genealogies, hostilities, and obscurities to craft a lean summary of its contents.

Could the lectionary be improved? Certainly. Many have called for it, and not just the Maltese and one muffled prophet. Women of the bible are underrepresented, including, famously, the deacon Phoebe, who was surgically removed from the first reading on Saturday of the Thirty-first Week in Ordinary Time in the first year of the weekday cycle. Even some popular episodes are missing, like the loss of Esau's birthright to Jacob over a bowl of lentil soup. Study Group XI strove to craft a selection of readings; the results are amazing, though imperfect.

Regarding pastoral implications, another deprivation noted by the Council was the lack of appropriateness of some readings. The lectionary not only increased the number of readings but also improved their application. Adrian Nocent, who served on Study Group XI and wrote one of the first commentaries on the lectionary, noted that one reading may serve two different contexts. The context interprets the reading. He gave Luke 19 as an example, where Zacchaeus the tax collector climbed a tree. On the Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time of Year C, days before hearing the weekday passage from Romans that edited out Phoebe, the story of Zacchaeus arrives in semicontinuous order. But the same passage may be proclaimed at the anniversary of the dedication of a church because Jesus tells Zacchaeus he intends to stay at his house—foreshadowing the presence of Christ entering a house of prayer.

Pastoral implications also imply a deeper appreciation for the relative weight of certain days on the liturgical calendar. These rules are obscure, but they govern such concerns as when a wedding Mass is to take the readings of the day, such as Saturday of the Octave of Easter; or when readings associated with a saint's day take the upper hand, such as the parish patronal solemnity falling on a Sunday in Ordinary Time. On weekday memorials in Ordinary Time, the readings associated with a saint may replace those of the weekday, but we are cautioned not to do that very often. Yet on a day like the Passion of John the Baptist, the gospel is proper, but the first reading may come from the weekday. The readings accent the nuances of the liturgical year.

Proclamation

The proclamation of the Word of God during the liturgy expresses these theological and pastoral points. For example, the minister who reads is not to be the presider. Even the gospel rightly belongs to a deacon or a concelebrant. Lay men and women may serve as readers, and for those making a special commitment to the Word of God in their lives, some may be instituted into the

ministry of lector. The missal also refers to a psalmist, distinct from the songleader or cantor, even though the roles are usually combined in the same person. The psalmist, though, by definition, proclaims the Word. The sung refrain may be biblical, nonbiblical or based on a verse of the psalm, but the verses all come from the bible. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal allows alternate settings that paraphrase the psalm, but by design the people receive the Word of God.

The proclamation of the gospel launches a series of ritual activities. An acclamation announces the moment, and its words change from alleluias to others during Lent. The people rise. A deacon asks for and receives a blessing from a priest. A procession forms. The Book of the Gospels may be carried between ministers holding lighted candles. The minister greets the people, who respond, and all trace the sign of the cross on their forehead, lips and heart. Afterwards, the minister kisses the book. If incense is used, the one proclaiming the gospel takes the thurible, bows to the book, swings the thurible three times, and bows again before returning the vessel to the thurifer. The Ceremonial of Bishops says that the swings go in three different directions: center, left, and then right—perhaps suggesting the spread of the gospel to all the world. This is the only moment when the ritual books call for multidirectional swings of the thurible, and it pertains to the Word of God.

The ambo is the place from which the readings are proclaimed. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal is stingy about its usage. As it limits what goes on the top of the altar, so it limits the uses of the ambo; namely, the proclamation of the scriptures, the Exsultet at the Easter Vigil, and, if desirable, preaching and the universal prayer. Otherwise, the ambo is not to be used. Purposes such as announcements and songleading may take place at a microphone, but not that microphone. Sadly, this restriction is broadly ignored around the world; communities that do reserve the ambo for its strict purposes will find a deeper reverence for the Word of God and the moments of its proclamation. The Word does not share space with mundane concerns.

For the proclamation of the first two readings, the people sit. Although this seems like an unimportant instruction, changing posture together manifests a unity of intent. Additionally, people do not merely sit but listen to the readings as one. During the proclamation, never does the missal encourage people to follow along on a participation aid or cellular device. The Word of God is spoken to be heard, not fact-checked.

Outside the Mass

The Catholic liturgy features the bible outside its usage for Mass. Two noteworthy examples are the Order of Penance and the Liturgy of the Hours. Few people include a bible reading in the celebration of reconciling an individual penitent, but the liturgy makes room for the priest or penitent to introduce one. The Order of Penance provides a selection of readings out of renewed interest in the proclamation of scripture in the Catholic liturgy, but the reading remains optional. Some of those revising that liturgy for the Consilium feared that

introducing a reading would impractically extend the length of a confession, especially problematic during times of year when lines are long. Still the very existence of the option affirms the value of the Word of God in all the liturgical corners of Catholic life.

At the other extreme, the Liturgy of the Hours basks in scripture. Certain elements come directly from the bible: psalms, canticles, responsories and readings, for example. Well, the Lord's Prayer, too. The antiphons to the psalms and canticles may be verses from the bible or words based on biblical verses. These may be drawn from the psalm or canticle they frame, from another book of the bible, or even from the readings at Mass on the same day. For example, on Friday of the second week of the psalter, this week, Psalm 60 at Daytime Prayer has everyone pray an uncredited antiphon from the Book of Job, which is proclaimed at daily Mass this week. During Lent and Easter Time, several antiphons for the *Benedictus* and *Magnificat* in the Liturgy of the Hours come from the gospel of the day in the Mass.

Other references to the bible are more obscure but unquestionably there. For example, many of the hymns that open the hours and the intercessions that conclude morning and evening prayer have biblical sources. This coming Saturday evening, the petitions at First Vespers make several biblical allusions: The introduction recalls the concern of Christ for the hungry crowd in Matthew 15:32. The petition for the fruitfulness of blessings recalls sayings about the Word in Isaiah 55:11 and Luke 8:15. With possible allusions to Isaiah 49:6 and Acts 2:3, the second petition asks Christ the light and salvation of all nations to enkindle the fire of the Spirit in his witnesses. The last petition for this coming Saturday evening asks that the names of the dead be written in the book of life, alluding to Revelation 3:5.

The revised English translation of the Liturgy of the Hours will feature on Sundays antiphons for the *Benedictus* and *Magnificat* that spread across the three-year cycle. Currently, the antiphon at First Vespers is taken from the gospel of Sunday Mass in Year A, the *Benedictus* antiphon draws from Year B, and the *Magnificat* at Second Vespers comes from Year C. Soon each of these will provide three antiphons so that the appropriate one may be used each year.

The Liturgy of the Hours especially reveres the scriptures in the Office of Readings. As the revisers worked on it, they envisioned a two-year cycle of biblical readings and a one-year cycle of second readings. The Office of Readings allows biblical passages longer than those proclaimed at Mass. The work began before Study Group XI had finished the lectionary; afterwards, the revisers refined the readings in the office to contrast with those at Mass. However, shortly before the first Latin edition of the Liturgy of the Hours went to press, the printers notified the Holy See that there were too many pages to fit into four handheld books. Abruptly, a decision was made to curtail the biblical passages in the Office of Readings to a one-year cycle. By this time, the relevant study group had disbanded, so the task fell to a few reluctant scholars. They did remarkably well, though no one wanted to cut readings from the bible.

The General Introduction of the Liturgy of the Hours mentions the two-year cycle of readings, and the Holy See released a table in the 1970s for those who wished to follow it—just a table, like history’s first listing of readings at Mass from Würzburg. That table for the Office of Readings was revised in the year 2020. Just a couple of years ago, the Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments announced it had completed work on a fifth volume of the Liturgy of the Hours, which updated elements in the liturgical calendar, provided the Latin original of the psalm prayers, and revealed a complete two-year cycle for the Office of Readings—not just the biblical readings, but the non-biblical ones as well.

By that time, the USCCB had progressed so far in its publication of the revised translation, that it wisely decided against delaying the project again until ICEL had completed its translation of the new texts. Besides, this would be Volume V, and it would have little impact on the contents of Volumes I through IV. Eventually, we’ll see an English translation of this new volume with a two-year cycle for the Office of Readings, which, I’m happy to announce, will include St. Paul’s visit to Malta, the entire Book of Obadiah, and the emergence of Phoebe.

Conclusion: The Word as Lived in the Church

The Word of God has a privileged place in Catholic life. The liturgy balances the proclamation of pure passages from the scriptures together with elements that derive from them. Collects, eucharistic prayers, solemn blessings, and sacramental formulas are only some of the elements that dip the words we speak in the liturgy into vibrant paint of the Word of God, living and effective. If ignorance of the bible is ignorance of Christ, then the Catholic liturgy is one of Jesus’ most intimate friends. We will each find the word living and effective in our own lives when we hear it, read it, proclaim it, study it, and pray over it. As we come to know the Word, we come to know Christ.