

Distractions

The lector rises and takes a position in front of the assembly. Unexpectedly, three people enter the church, slip by the usher at the door and begin looking for a seat. Heads turn. The lector, seeing all this, responds appropriately. He or she calmly waits while still maintaining eye contact with the seated members of the assembly.

The lector no sooner begins to read than a baby cries out loudly from the second pew, fussing at high volume and setting off a chorus of whimpers among several of the other infants in the assembly. What does the lector do? Without so much as a telltale facial expression or a glint of a smile (unless the passage is something akin to “Let the children come to me . . .”), the lector speaks into the microphone with extra purposefulness, ratchets up the volume of his or her voice and takes care to draw in the assembly by using more eye contact than usual.

Minimizing distractions is a skill every lector can learn, and given the realities of parish life will have ample occasion to practice.

The most common distractions are noises and movements during the proclamation of the word. Perhaps what is most important about the way a lector responds to distractions is his or her own interior attitude, which the assembly will instantly be able to pick up.

Distractions are normal, after all, although they may demand greater concentration, increased focus, a sense of humor or perhaps a pause to clear up, override, or let go by. Responding to them takes discernment, mature judgement. It also requires a lector who doesn't take distractions personally, as interruptions of his or her special moment in the limelight or as some tarnish on the word of God.

Distractions are like flies while you're on a hiking trip. You don't pay them much regard. Sure, you pack insect repellent as a preventative, but finally, you accept the flies and focuses on the trip itself.

Some distractions have to do with the lector himself or herself. There are interior distractions, a person's own internal mood and response to events at home or at the office that are imposing themselves upon internal peace and a person's frame of mind. For these, the lector must resort to prayer and take a few deep breaths before the time comes to face the assembly.

But there are other kinds of distractions that have to do with the lector. I was at Mass once when a burst of wind accidentally flipped the page of the lectionary as the first lector sat down. When the second lector stood up to read, he couldn't find the correct reading! I was at Mass on a Holy Thursday when the lector read the wrong reading and everyone in the assembly, except the lector, seemed to realize it. A lector also can begin speaking and be overcome by coughing or find a frog in the throat that doesn't seem to go away.

Such distractions require a certain patience with oneself, an acknowledgement that ritual is a human thing and as such may at times be beset by human foibles. But preparation can prevent a lector from reading the wrong passage. Warming up can help prevent getting a frog in the throat. And familiarity with the reading will alert the lector to the “crisis” of staring at the wrong page, though one would have to know the page number or paragraph number or maintain enough poise to think of turning just a page backward or forward to find the prescribed passage. Sometimes, however, no ounce of prevention will suffice.

What happens if the distraction is serious — if a parishioner becomes ill or a dangerous intruder breaks into the assembly during the reading? Naturally, the lector must stop. The ushers, the pastor, the staff members present and parishioners may all have to take some role in alleviating the crisis. But afterward, the ritual must go on. It is then that the lector's presence, state of visible calm and focus will be essential to the assembly's worship.