

Know Your Lectionary!

As a proclaimer of God's word, you need to know the book called the lectionary (from the Latin word *lectio*, which means reading or lesson). It is a collection of Bible texts arranged for proclamation according to the church's liturgical calendar. Seasoned lectors and gospel readers should be able to use the lectionary with ease. More than that, the committed proclaimer respects this holy book as the medium through which God's word comforts, inspires and challenges God's people to respond to God's love more fully.

When the Second Vatican Council first insisted that the riches of sacred scripture be opened more lavishly for the faithful, we had been living for centuries with one set of Bible readings that were the same every year for each day of the year. The revised lectionary nearly tripled our exposure to the Bible during the liturgy with a collection of readings (translated into the people's languages) covering a three-year cycle for the Sunday liturgy and a two-year cycle for weekdays.

In order to abide by Vatican II's directive, two major changes were made. The Sunday liturgy of the word was expanded from two readings (epistle and gospel) to three. The first reading is almost always from the First Testament and chosen with the gospel of the day in mind. The second reading is taken from Second Testament books other than the gospels. No particular relationship to the other readings guides its choice. In fact, it is very often a *lectio continua*; a part of a book is proclaimed a section at a time over a number of weeks.

When the liturgical cycle of readings was expanded from one year to three (Years A, B, C), gospel readings from the three synoptics, Matthew, Mark and Luke, were assigned to each of them, respectively. These three evangelists write a kind of "synopsis" of Jesus' life and ministry—not a summary or outline (in the sense of an abridgment) but a more or less sequential narrative. The Gospel of John, very different in character and purpose from the synoptics, fills in occasionally but is primarily reserved for the Easter season.

Part of the lectionary that we have been using for the 30-odd years since the reforms of Vatican II has recently been revised. The part containing the readings for Sundays and feast days, a revised "volume 1," became available for use on the First Sunday of Advent, November 29, 1998. Its use will not become mandatory until the part of the lectionary containing the readings for weekdays, saints' days and sacramental rites (such as confirmation) is ready.

But even this recent revision is not final. We will continue to see improvements in the selection of scriptural texts

(and the way they are edited for public proclamation) for several more years to come. The U.S. bishops, for example, have decided to reexamine this new version in five years. We will also see improved translations of the scriptures in the future, translations that take into account advances made in the study of biblical texts and in the Bible's original languages.

The most obvious feature of the lectionary is its organization according to the liturgical calendar. The heart of our year is the Easter Triduum. Then, other Sundays are arranged into seasons and into "Ordinary Time." The seasons of the church's year are Advent, Christmas, Lent and Eastertime. All other Sundays of the year are numbered in "Ordinary Time."

The word "ordinary" here does not mean "plain" or "common" or the opposite of "extraordinary." The root word is "ordinal" and indicates that Ordinary Time is composed of those Sundays we number consecutively from 1 to 34. (The first Sunday is most often the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, so we usually begin with the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time. And the thirty-fourth Sunday is the solemn feast of Christ the King.)

Notice that each group of readings for each Sunday or feast day liturgy is numbered in the lectionary for easy reference. Thus, the First Sunday of Advent, Year A, is #1, the First Sunday of Advent, Year B, is #2, and so on. Readers who are unaware of how the lectionary is laid out run the risk of proclaiming the wrong reading (Year A instead of Year C, for example). The homilist who has based the homily on the proper readings for the day will understandably be quite frustrated when this happens! If you are fortunate, however, your parish will have acquired the newly revised Sunday/feast day lectionary in a three-book set (Year A, Year B, Year C), thus avoiding this danger.

Clearly, the lector who knows the "why" and "how" of the lectionary is better equipped to perform the ministry of reader more effectively. No reading is completely isolated from the others assigned to a given celebration. It is carefully chosen for its relevance to a particular season, its relationship to other readings at the same celebration or its appropriateness for a particular day. Lectors and gospel readers who are truly committed to their important ministry will take some time to learn more about how the lectionary is put together, especially now that a revised lectionary is at hand. Knowledge of the lectionary is nothing less than knowledge of the means by which God speaks to the Sunday assembly through your voice.