

nine steps

to becoming a better lector

Lectors need to be “truly qualified and carefully prepared,” says the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, “so that the faithful may develop a warm and living love for Scripture from listening to the sacred texts” (66).

That is, perhaps, a larger responsibility than you thought when you signed up to be a lector. It means more than getting up on Sunday to do a reading. It means proclaiming God’s word in such a way that those gathered come to a deeper, richer faith. If you follow these nine steps, you will be on track for making that happen in your parish.

Read Scripture

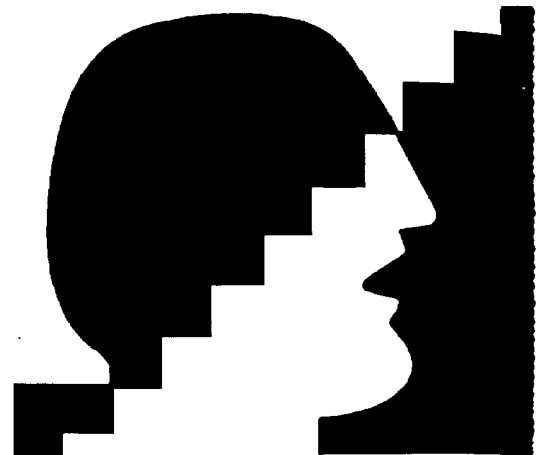
You cannot effectively proclaim God’s word without being intimately familiar with Scripture. The Sunday lectionary is organized on a three-year cycle based on the first three Gospels. You will want to read Scripture according to the way it is organized in the lectionary. So, for example, it is helpful to read the entire Gospel every Advent (Matthew in Year A, Mark in Year B, Luke in Year C). Much of John’s Gospel is read in Year B, especially during the summer. That is a good time to read all of the fourth Gospel.

When preparing a reading for Sunday, read the Gospel first. Then read the first and second readings, which are intended to prepare the assembly to hear the Gospel. The second reading is usually one of the letters from St. Paul, which is read somewhat continuously over a series of Sundays. Part of your preparation can be to read the entire letter before you get down to the work of practicing your reading. Read the letter even if you will be proclaiming the first reading; doing so is another way to expose yourself to the riches of Scripture.

When you prepare your reading, read it in context. This is especially important if you have the first reading because some of the selections don’t make much sense out of their original context. There are two ways to read in context. The first is to read the passages that come before and after your reading in the Bible. The second is to read the lectionary passages that occur the week before and the week after your reading. By doing both, you will get a sense of what the original author intended and what the church intends by selecting this particular passage for this particular Sunday.

Practice

To expect a lector to practice seems obvious. However, you’d be surprised at how many lectors leave out this basic step. To practice means to read the reading out loud while standing up. Silent reading at your desk may help you get ready to practice, but it doesn’t substitute for it. Practice out loud at least six times. Practice on at least two different days other than the Sunday you read. Other helpful things you can do are: practice in front of a mirror, practice with a tape recorder, practice with a video camera and practice in front of your children or grandchildren. Children are great critics.



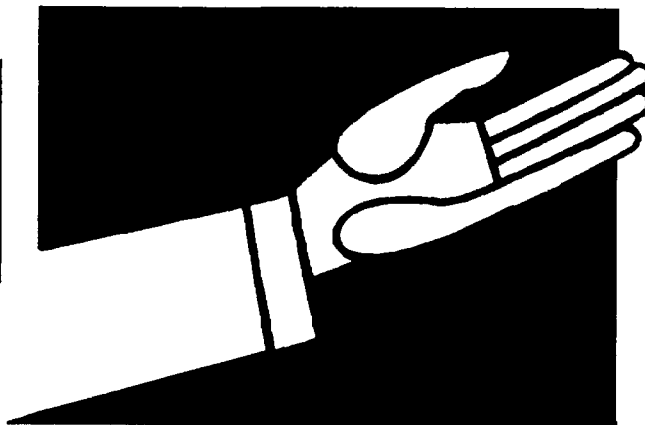
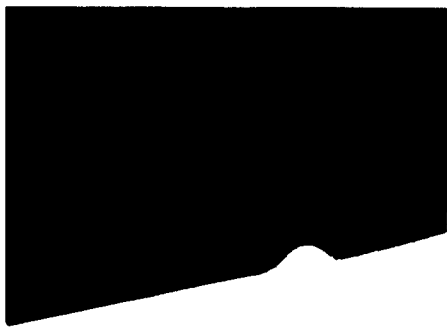
Pray

Praying is another basic but often overlooked step. Read the Gospel as a Sunday night prayer the week before you read. Read your reading as morning prayer at least twice in the week before you read. Pray for the Spirit to open the ears of those who will hear your reading. Pray for the strength to put aside your own ego and for the Spirit to speak through you.

Find the emotion

If you want the Scripture you proclaim to speak to people’s hearts, you have to find the emotion in the reading. Read the passage several times and try to discover the primary emotion. Sometimes reading the psalm assigned to the day can help. Once you have the primary emotion identified, recall times when you have felt that emotion. Try to recall that emotion in yourself as you practice the reading, and let the emotion come through as you proclaim.

Pray for the strength
to put aside your own ego
and for the Spirit
to speak through you.



Find the most important phrase

Every reading will have at least one important phrase. Most readings have several, so you will need to decide which one is *most* important. If you are having trouble, use a pencil and underline *all* the powerful, interesting or disturbing ideas in the reading. Then read the Gospel again, and discern its main idea. Read your reading again, focusing on the underlined parts. Pray about it, and then decide what the most important phrase is in the reading. Emphasize that phrase in such a way that its importance is clear to everyone in the assembly.



Use eye contact

Always look at the assembly for a long time before you begin to read. Use your finger or an index card to keep your place. Always use eye contact on the opening and closing sentences. Make eye contact on words and phrases that reveal the key emotion. Make eye contact on the most important phrase. The more times you practice the reading out loud, the easier it will be to make eye contact with the assembly.



Project

To project does not necessarily mean to speak louder, although that is often the result. Humans are built with two air cavities. If you inhale in such a way that your stomach pushes out, you are filling your lower air cavity. If you try to make your chest bigger, you are filling your upper cavity. To project your words effectively, fill your lower air cavity first, then your upper air cavity. As you read, use the air from the lower cavity first. Keep in mind that you want to use your diaphragm instead of your throat. Try not to rely on the microphone to carry your voice. Control your breathing, and make sure you feel your stomach muscles moving as you read.



Vary your pace

Almost every reading has fast parts and slow parts. Most readings also have loud parts and quiet parts. Some readings call for clipped, staccato rhythm; others call for smooth, melodic rhythm. When you practice, try different, even ridiculous paces. Find the pacing that works best for your reading.



Vary your style

Some readings read like stories, and some are read as fire-and-brimstone prophesies. There are “newsy” readings and poetic readings. Be conscious of the kind of reading you are assigned and match your proclamation style to the style of the reading. Also be aware of the season of the church year you are in. That will also influence your style. And different assemblies require different styles. The 5:00 p.m. Saturday evening assembly may need to hear the reading presented in a different way than the 11:00 a.m. Sunday crowd.

These steps will help you become a better lector, but in the end, it is the Holy Spirit that proclaims God’s word through you. Your job is to prepare as well as possible, and then let the word move through you to the members of the assembly. When that happens, “the faithful receive the power to respond ... actively with full faith, hope and charity through prayer and self-giving, and not only during the Mass but in their entire Christian life” (*Lectionary for Mass, Introduction* 48).

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