

St. Paul National Seminary

A Guide to Lectors and Acolytes

Lit 002

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March 2005

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THE LECTOR

PREFACE

These notes have been drawn from class material from the “Tools of the Liturgy: Liturgical Ministries: Lector”. Both the readers and those who help them in the practice should be familiar with them if they have gone through the first semester of Theology One. The notes are therefore meant to be a reminder. As the reader can see, they also describe pastoral situations outside the seminary. This is because every liturgical activity in the seminary, besides being an act of worship in the present, is also meant to be a lesson for the future priest.

The pamphlet is particularly intended for students who have been selected and mandated to help fellow students in the preparation for liturgical reading. For that reason a summary of practical consideration is placed at the back to remind them of the main points to consider when carrying out their task.

WHAT IS A LECTOR?

A lector¹ is a man or woman² who officially proclaims the word of God at Mass and other liturgical functions. Under normal circumstances the lector takes any other scriptural reading apart from the gospel which reserved to the ordained

¹ SC 29; GIRM 34, 66, 89, 91, 148-152; GILM 14, 49-55; CB 30-32; Ray Lonergan, *A well Trained Tongue: Workbook for Lectors*, Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1982; James A. Wallace, *The Ministry of Lectors* Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1981; Cosmas Lee, *Proclamation of the Word: A Guide for Readers and Commentators*, Pax Liturgical Commission, 1978.

² Generally female voices carry further than those of men. Moreover, since women may not serve as priests, it is only fair that they are not deprived of roles which they rightfully share with men.

minister when present. The lector may also take the general intercessions as well as carry the book of the gospels in procession in the absence of a deacon.

A good lector has to seek to gain the techniques of good reading and not assume that these come to him or her naturally. These skills include volume of voice, speed of reading, confidence, tone of voice, articulation and pronunciation, phrasing and eye contact. They also include adequate preparation, knowledge of the use of public address systems as well as gait and posture. Each of these skills is expounded below.

VOLUME

The reader should be loud enough to be heard by the entire congregation. His projection should be made in particular towards those that are furthest from the lectern and those that may have difficulty in hearing. It is very easy to assume that one is loud enough if one does not check one's loudness with listeners at the back pews. Moreover one has to remember that if one's voice carries up to the last pew during the practice before an individual listener, the reader has still to be louder when the church is full of worshipers with all the little noises that they make.

Even the soft-spoken must make an effort to be heard. If in spite of effort made one's voice does not carry enough, that is an indication that a person is not fit to read to this particular congregation, and ought to be replaced. For the proclaimed word of God is meant to be heard.

At the same time one's volume should not be too loud to be irritating to the listeners. This is particularly the case in very small communities. A person should regulate the voice

according to the size of the church or the congregation if it does not fill the church.

SPEED

Reading can be fast or slow. The nearly always weakness is being too fast. Few for many there is an imperceptible fear of silence before the crowd when they are the focus of attention. We rather hear our own voice than tolerate a second of silence. Those who are in charge of reading practice should continually check the speed of readers. Fast reading, even when understood, is always unsatisfactory. Words, phrases and sentences are not given the chance to sink any depth into people's hearts.

However, it is also possible to exaggerate the slowness of reading. Particularly when one has a long reading to go through the speed should be moderate, not so boringly slow.

ARTICULATION AND PRONUNCIATION

The reader must seek to pronounce every word clearly, putting the stresses in the proper place. A well-articulated word is the result of a genuine effort to produce a clear sound of the vowels and consonants. We must move our tongue and our lips to shape the sounds as clearly as possible. People should not be left guessing at what is the precise word we read. It is better to exaggerate a little with articulation than to under-articulate in public reading.

While articulation deals with clearness of vowels and consonants in a word, pronunciation deals with the correctness of the sound the word as standardised and accepted in the dictionary. On the one hand one does not expect people for whom English is a second language to pronounce in the same way as those for whom it is the mother tongue. Some people, while trying to imitate an

American or British accent, only succeed in putting off the listeners who consider them showy, for they speak at the ambo in an accent we know to be different from the one in which they speak everyday. On the other hand, it is a commendable thing to learn to speak a language as well as one possibly can. The more we say words as they ought to be said, the greater the likelihood to be understood by more people, particularly those who do not share our mother tongues. When one is not sure of how a word ought to be pronounced, one can always humbly ask one who is more knowledgeable or check for the word from the dictionary.

PHRASING

The total meaning of a passage is conveyed to us through a building-up of lesser ideas and these through intelligent and logical grouping of words. A good reader is able to break, by periods of pausing, words into their logical groupings. Obvious pauses are indicated by printed paragraphs, full-stops, colon, semi-colons, question marks, exclamation marks, commas etc., but these are often not sufficient. The reader, over and above what is indicated by punctuation marks, must add breaks to the reading to make it more easily understood, especially when the sentence or phrasing is too long.

Often many readers make the mistake of reading all pauses as if they were full stops. Their voices fall at a comma, semi-colon, or sense phrase, as if that were the end of the sentence. That distorts the meaning of the whole sentence.

The remedy towards good phrasing is familiarity with the meaning of the text one is reading. This is achieved by prior reading of the text over and over again. It also helps to reflect on the meaning of what one is reading. One who simply reads without reflecting on the meaning of the text,

not only is not nourished by the text as he should be, like all the others. He also can make very simple mistakes of reading words differently from the way they are, without being aware of the mistakes at all.

EYE-CONTACT

Eye contact makes reading more personal and gives the impression that the reader knows what he is reading, and has prepared himself well. For some people eye contact may lead to the loss of the line where they were, for which it may be helpful to keep a finger at the line while one looks up, and to make sure that the finger does not slide to a different line! However, we should not exaggerate eye contact in the proclamation of scripture. Too much eye contact could promote a 'chit-chat' attitude thereby diminishing the solemnity of the occasion.

USE OF THE PUBLIC ADDRESS SYSTEM

Even a good reader could be hampered by the improper use of a microphone. Many of these systems differ from each other so that one may not use the same in the same way. Even where two systems are the same, the different acoustic arrangement of a particular church or place of worship may create all the difference, thus demanding a different handling of the system. The best way to check one's use of the system is to practice before hand with someone or some people listening to you from different places in the church and telling you your performance.

Other things to consider is the regulation of the voice to march the public address system. Sometimes people may trust too much to the microphone and lower their voice to the extent that even with it they are not clearly heard. On the other hand shouting in the microphone may be irritating to

the people who hear you. Talking too close into the microphone may give "Ps" an explosive sound, while keeping the microphone too far may reduce its effectiveness. Trying to keep eye contact, or in the case of preaching, constant movement may take you away from the microphone such that some phrases are not heard. Before using the microphone one should avoid the irritating habit of tapping on it or blowing in it to "test" even when this is not called for. Again moving the microphone about can create a lot of unwanted noise. Where possible first switch the microphone off before transferring or adjusting it.

At the seminary the size of the chapel does not normally require the use of a public address system. However, this makes it more imperative for readers to make themselves heard. If in the course of your reading it begins to drizzle, that you need to raise your voice above that of the rain. Occasionally it might be necessary to stop totally, if you see that the noise made by the rain is too strong to allow you to be heard.

POSTURE, GAIT AND DRESS OF THE LECTOR

What we are and how we feel can be expressed by the way we move, place our hands, hold our head or stand. There is such a thing as a lazy, impolite, purposeless, unconvincing posture. When we approach the lectern or stand behind it, we should move and stand in a way fitting to the speaker of God, with dignity, seriousness and solemnity. Avoid standing akimbo, first on one leg and then on the other. It is helpful towards reduction of nervousness if the reader holds both hands on the side of the ambo.

The lector should also take proper care of what he wears. One should be neat and presentable while reading. At the same time one ought to be modest in dress. This particularly

applies to ladies who read. Do not dress in a spectacular and eye-catching or provocative manner. The speaker of God is not there to draw attention to self but to the word of God.

In the seminary the manner of dress is not such a big problem since the lector, being one of the servers, will normally be dressed in the appropriate liturgical dress of cassock and surplice. All the same one needs to make sure that one comes out for liturgical functions neatly dressed. In the same way as the Master of Ceremonies sees to it that the main celebrant and concelebrants are neatly vested, so too the servers should check each other's surplices to see that they appear tidy, particularly at the back.

THE LECTOR'S PREPARATION

The Lector is the official reader of the scriptural lessons during the Liturgy apart from the gospel reading which is reserved to ordained ministers.³

It is clear from what has been said about techniques that it is impossible to read well without preparation *well in advance*. It helps at least for the beginning to ask people how they feel about the volume, speed, tone and pitch of our reading. Humility is needed to ask for the pronunciation of certain words.

Many people who are otherwise very good readers can become confused with the pronunciation of unfamiliar biblical terms and names. Terms like "phylacteries" and names like "Ahasuerus" do not form part of ordinary vocabulary.

³ *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 63.

A certain head of government who was by virtue of office also chancellor of the national university once had to confer degrees on the granduants. Each head of faculty read the names of the granduants at the end of which the chancellor stood up to confer the degree. He stood up at the end of one such list and solemnly declared as he had done before "by virtue of my authority as chancellor, I confer upon you the Bachelor of Science degree in... (pause), obtes... obstre... osbte... whatever!" Those who were conferred with a degree in "whatever" should have actually graduated with a bachelor of science in obstetrics, if His Excellency had taken the trouble to go through his papers.

Preparation also involves a meditative reflection on the reading so that it has meaning for the reader. That way he or she can proclaim it in a manner that is meaningful, colourful and convincing without being affected. This may require reading the text several times or even studying it. It may require prayerful meditation on it.

For some people who are not familiar with reading it may be necessary to find out the proper formulas for beginning and ending of a reading. In certain lectionaries, particularly with regard to readings given in portable missals, the full formulas may not be given. One can easily find indicated simply "Jud. 3: 1-5," or "Jas. 4: 2-7". In the former case one who is not prepared, even when familiar with abbreviation of biblical books may be at a loss to decide whether the reading is from the book of Judges, or of Judith; or from the letter of St. Jude. In the latter case one who is not familiar with biblical abbreviation may not easily know that "Jas" in this case is the short form for "James". Nor may he know that James wrote an epistle, or a gospel, or whether he is one of the prophets! That of course sounds ridiculous to one for whom biblical

readings are familiar, but it may not be obvious to many people, if they are not prepared.

Again it may not be necessary to announce chapter and verse, in Catholic reading. Usually the congregation is not prepared to note these down as they are read out, so it is unnecessary to read them. At the same time many people who are not prepared get confused as to what constitutes the chapter and verse, particularly where the reading is a parchment of several units of verses.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THOSE WHO GUIDE LECTORS

- Be humble, polite and respectful towards those whom you guide in reading. For most of us it is not easy to take correction. No one wants to know that they read badly. Do not humble readers any more than you need to. Do not make unnecessary and exaggerated corrections. If a reader needs no correction, do not make any. Complement where complements are due.
- At the same time be firm. Do not feel intimidated. Remember that you are carrying out an important liturgical ministry. Carry it out to the best of your ability. Point out the necessary corrections.
- Focus on what is read and not on the reader. It is better for the reader to hear: “that word is pronounced: ‘sin’ and not ‘seen’ or ‘scene’” than that “you have a poor pronunciation” or that “I can’t understand your accent”
- Go through the readings yourself before hand. That you can identify mistakes more easily makes when they are made.
- Carry out the practice in the very place where the reading will be made, unless for some reason this is not possible.

- Be punctual. Do not make readers wait for you. Be in the church at the appointed time.
- Sit at the furthest possible place in the church while listening to the reader. This is to make sure that even those who of the congregation who sit furthest will be able to hear. Bear in mind that while the practice is usually made in an empty church, the actual reading takes place when the church is occupied. When the church is full of people some of the sound waves are absorbed by the actual presence of the people. Some are muffled by the noise people make: coughs, shifting in their seats, opening books, etc.
- If possible make your corrections and comments only at the end of the reading. Let the lector read to the end without being interrupted. But if you feel that you will not be able to recall the corrections, then make them as the reader goes on. Stop them to make the corrections.
- Correct:
 - Loudness
 - Speed of reading
 - Articulation
 - Pronunciation
 - Meaning: e.g. does the reader make pauses when not necessary, or ignore pauses where they should be, thus distorting the meaning? Does he/she ignore punctuation: question marks, commas, full stops, etc.?
 - Posture

THE ACOLYTE

WHAT IS AN ACOLYTE?

The Acolyte⁴ is the official server at the altar. By institution, he is authorised to serve at the altar, assisting the deacon and ministering to the priest, especially by preparing the altar and vessels. He may distribute Holy Communion, taking precedence over other extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist. He may also take precedence over servers in acting as cross bearer, thurifer, etc. At a solemn Mass, his role is similar to that of a sub-deacon in the old liturgy. The chief server could be an instituted acolyte. The acolyte wears an alb, but, if he acts as M.C., choir dress may seem preferable.

In the seminary seminarians who are instituted as acolytes usually take the role of ordinary servers. In parishes they may work along with other young servers whom they train and direct. The assignment of their duties at the altar depends very much on the pastor under whom they serve.

In the recent past it has become customary to have girl servers as well, and indeed in some areas they form the majority. However, like all new practices, in areas where their service is not the norm, its introduction ought to be made with due precaution.⁵

⁴ See DOL, 341 pp. 911ff, GIRM 65, 68, 142-147, 209-231; CB 27-29. *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, no. 44.

⁵ *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, no. 47.

VESTMENTS

SERVICES AT THE ALTAR

AS MINISTER OF COMMUNION

IN THE ABSENCE OF A DEACON

In the absence of a deacon the acolyte may assume some of the functions of the deacon as minister of the altar. He "...arranges the corporal, the purificator, the chalice, the pall, and the Missal upon the altar."⁶ But he does not pour the water into the wine, for this is the function of the priest who carries out the gesture with the appropriate words.⁷ Nor does he stay around to open the book as the deacon does. He kneels together with the rest of the congregation at the moments of kneeling.

PRECEDENCE OVER THE CATECHIST

ACOLYTES AT PASTORAL WORK

TRAINING OF OTHER SERVERS

APPENDIX:

DUTIES OF ACOLYTES AND LECTORS AT MASS ACCORDING TO THE GENERAL INSTRUCTION TO THE ROMAN MISSAL

C. THE DUTIES OF THE ACOLYTE

⁶ *General Instruction*, no. 139.

⁷ *General Instruction* no. 142.

187. The duties that the acolyte may carry out are of various kinds and several may coincide. Hence, it is desirable that these duties be suitably distributed among several acolytes. If, however, only one acolyte is present, he should perform the more important duties while the rest are to be distributed among several ministers.

The Introductory Rites

188. In the procession to the altar, the acolyte may carry the cross, walking between two ministers with lighted candles. Upon reaching the altar, the acolyte places the cross upright near the altar so that it may serve as the altar cross; otherwise, he puts it in a worthy place. Then he takes his place in the sanctuary.

189. Through the entire celebration, the acolyte is to approach the priest or the deacon, whenever necessary, in order to present the book to them and to assist them in any other way required. Thus it is appropriate, insofar as possible, that the acolyte occupy a place from which he can conveniently carry out his ministry either at the chair or at the altar.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist

190. If no deacon is present, after the Prayer of the Faithful is concluded and while the priest remains at the chair, the acolyte places the corporal, the purificator, the chalice, the pall, and the Missal on the altar. Then, if necessary, the acolyte assists the priest in receiving the gifts of the people and, if appropriate, brings the bread and wine to the altar and hands them to the priest. If incense is used, the acolyte presents the thurible to the priest and assists him while he incenses the gifts, the cross, and the altar. Then the acolyte incenses the priest and the people.

191. A duly instituted acolyte, as an extraordinary minister, may, if necessary, assist the priest in giving Communion to the people.¹⁰⁰ If Communion is given under both kinds, when no deacon is

present, the acolyte administers the chalice to the communicants or holds the chalice if Communion is given by intinction.

192. Likewise, when the distribution of Communion is completed, a duly instituted acolyte helps the priest or deacon to purify and arrange the sacred vessels. When no deacon is present, a duly instituted acolyte carries the sacred vessels to the credence table and there purifies, wipes, and arranges them in the usual way.

193. After the celebration of Mass, the acolyte and other ministers return in procession to the sacristy, together with the deacon and the priest in the same way and order in which they entered.

D. THE DUTIES OF THE LECTOR

Introductory Rites

194. In coming to the altar, when no deacon is present, the lector, wearing approved attire, may carry the Book of the Gospels, which is to be slightly elevated. In that case, the lector walks in front of the priest but otherwise along with the other ministers.

195. Upon reaching the altar, the lector makes a profound bow with the others. If he is carrying the Book of the Gospels, he approaches the altar and places the Book of the Gospels upon it. Then the lector takes his own place in the sanctuary with the other ministers.

The Liturgy of the Word

196. The lector reads from the ambo the readings that precede the Gospel. If there is no psalmist, the lector may also proclaim the responsorial Psalm after the first reading.

197. When no deacon is present, the lector, after the introduction by the priest, may announce from the ambo the intentions of the Prayer of the Faithful.

198. If there is no singing at the Entrance or at Communion and the antiphons in the Missal are not recited by the faithful, the lector may read them at the appropriate time (cf. above, nos. 48, 87).