

Hear the Word of the Lord

The Lectionary in Catholic Ritual

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Nihil Obstat

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The Structure of the Lectionary

THE FIRST POST—Second Vatican Council Lectionary for Mass for Roman Catholics was promulgated just five years after the closing of the Council. It was soon being used in many languages. The two most significant aspects of that lectionary, as noted earlier, were its use of three readings at every Sunday Eucharist and a rotation of Sunday readings in a three-year cycle. This chapter will first look briefly at the three-reading structure and the three-year cycle; then it will look in greater depth at how the three-year cycle of Sunday Gospels influences how we, the Church, come to know God's Word.

Three Readings

According to the introduction to the second edition of the *Lectionary for Mass* (1981),

each Mass has three readings: the first from the Old Testament, the second from an apostle (that is, either from a Letter or from the Book of Revelation, depending on the season), and the third from the Gospels. This arrangement brings out the unity of the Old and New Testaments and of the history of salvation, in which Christ is the central figure, commemorated in his paschal mystery. (66.1)

This arrangement provides a studied correlation between the First Reading and the Gospel reading. The Second Reading often correlates to the other two during the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. Otherwise, the Second Readings move sequentially through the various letters of the New Testament.¹

The Three-Year Cycle

Every Sunday is either part of a liturgical season—Advent, Christmas, Lent, Triduum, Easter—or part of Ordinary Time.

READINGS FOR THE LITURGICAL SEASONS

The readings are a primary means of moving the Church into the Sundays and seasons of the year. Their images and stories on any given feast or Sunday emerged over the centuries from the Church's experience of the presence of God in the assembly and in the world. The readings, however, do not come

unaccompanied. There is the music of each season, the colors, the smells, and the particular rites. The readings alone would never make an Advent, but neither would there be an Advent without them.

Looking at the table of readings for the lectionary, on pages 83–84, study any one of the seasons in any one year of the three-year cycle. Try to see the Scriptures of a season as a whole, not simply as the individual Sunday's set of three readings. Look more broadly and see how the whole Scripture of the season sounds.

The introduction to the *Lectionary for Mass* tells us that the principle of harmony was used in selecting Scriptures for each of the seasons. Whereas we read more or less continuously through the letters and Gospels of the New Testament during Ordinary Time, in the seasons we jump here and there, allowing the images to collide and resonate and dance together.

It is common to think of the readings as the shaper of the theology of a liturgical day or season. In a sense they are. Yet, the opposite is true as well, for it was the early Church's experience of the Risen Savior present in its assemblies that led to the narratives, to the memories, to the poems and prophecies from which the Scriptures themselves were formed and then chosen.

In the season of Advent, we can think of the influence of the prophetic poems of Isaiah, whose words to ancient Israel shape our understanding of the coming of God. In some ways, therefore, it is the reverse of what we think: It's not that the readings prepare us for the coming of Christ into the life of the world or the life of the Church. Rather, it is our communal experience of the coming of Christ in the world and in the Church that make these readings come alive and become incarnate in the tradition of the Church. But, as a result of this experience—be it of Advent or Christmas, of the forty days of Lent, the three days of Triduum, or of the fifty days of the Easter season—these readings have resonated with the assembly and become part of the sacramental experience of the People of God gathered in prayer Sunday after Sunday, year after year.

Our experience of God shapes the liturgy, and the liturgy in turn shapes the theology and experience of God in our lives. Sometimes this experience is confirmed by only one particular narrative of the life of Jesus. These are the days whose readings are the same from one year to the next. These days are few in the lectionary, though their number increases greatly if we add in the feast days of the saints. What follows is the order of these days within the liturgical year:

- The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas, including the Vigil Mass, the Mass during the Night, Mass at Dawn, the Mass during the Day)
- The Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God (January 1)
- The Epiphany of the Lord

- Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord (with the exception of the Passion narrative)
- Holy Thursday
- Good Friday
- The Easter Vigil (with the exception of the Gospel reading)
- Easter Sunday
- Pentecost Sunday (Vigil Mass)

Other days—Second Sunday of Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost—keep one reading the same each year, with the other two changing. The readings for all of these days are particularly appropriate for the content of the feast in the tradition. The same may be said of all the saints' days. The readings for All Souls' Day, however, may be chosen from among any of the many readings for Masses for the Dead in the lectionary.

ORDINARY TIME AND YEARS A, B, AND C

The most apparent feature of the three-year Sunday cycle for Ordinary Time is its concentration each year on one of the three synoptic Gospels. Synoptic, meaning to see together, refers to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke because they have roughly similar narratives of Jesus. This distinguishes them from the Gospel according to John, which tells the story of Jesus in a way quite different from the other three. The Sundays of Ordinary Time take up about one half of the liturgical year.

The lectionary calls the three years of the cycle simply Year A, Year B, and Year C; each corresponds to one of the synoptic Gospels. The Gospel of Matthew is read during Year A, Mark—for the most part—in Year B, Luke in Year C.

The Gospel of Mark is considerably shorter than either Matthew's or Luke's and does not have enough narratives and teachings of Jesus to fill up the Sundays of the year. The Church, therefore, fills in Year B with readings from chapter 6 of the Gospel of John, the bread of life discourse.

When we are in the seasons (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter) the year's particular Gospel does not disappear. Year A, for example, will often have Gospel readings from Matthew on the Sundays of Advent and Lent, including the Passion story from Matthew on Palm Sunday. But these readings are chosen because they are appropriate to the season, not because they come in any particular sequence within the Gospel of Matthew. The same is true of Year B with Mark's Gospel and Year C with Luke's Gospel.

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

If Years A, B, and C are filled with the Gospels of Matthew, Mark (with John 6), and Luke, what happens with the Gospel of John?

Readings from the Gospel according to John are employed by the Church at times when its conception of Jesus and its theology are consonant with the particular liturgical season or solemnity. For example, we find readings from the Gospel of John on Christmas Mass during the Day, on many of the Sundays of Lent; especially on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent in Year A; on Holy Thursday and Good Friday; and on many of the eight Sundays in Easter Time, which goes from Easter Sunday until Pentecost Sunday. On weekdays, John's Gospel is read especially in the last weeks of Lent and during the Easter season.

The Arrangements of the Gospels in Years A, B, and C

The Gospels proclaimed in the Eucharistic celebrations of most of the Sundays in Ordinary Time move through the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke in roughly the same order that we find them in the New Testament. This is especially so of the narratives between the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22) and his Passion (Matthew 26:14–27:66; Mark 14:1–15:47; Luke 22:14–23:56). This does not mean that everything is read. Often, if a particular story or a teaching of Jesus is used in Year A (from Matthew), it will not be repeated in the version Mark or Luke tells. The following table lists the progression of Gospel readings in Ordinary Time for each of the three years.

TABLE 3: SUNDAYS IN ORDINARY TIME

SUNDAY	Year A (Matthew)	Year B (Mark)	Year C (Luke)
BAPTISM OF THE LORD	3:13–17	1:7–11	3:15–16, 21–22
2	[John 1:29–34]	[John 1:35–41]	[John 2:1–11]
3	4:12–23	1:14–20	1:1–4; 4:14–21
4	5:1–12	1:21–28	4:21–30
5	5:13–16	1:29–39	5:1–11
6	5:17–37	1:40–45	6:17, 20–26
7	5:38–48	2:1–12	6:27–38
8	6:24–34	2:18–22	6:39–45

Table 3 • SUNDAYS IN ORDINARY TIME

SUNDAY	Year A (Matthew)	Year B (Mark)	Year C (Luke)
9	7:21–27	2:23–3:6	7:1–10
10	9:9–13	3:20–35	7:7–17
11	9:36–10:8	4:26–34	7:36–8:3
12	10:26–33	4:35–41	9:18–24
13	10:37–42	5:21–43	9:51–62
14	11:25–30	6:1–6	10:1–12, 17–20
15	13:1–23	6:7–13	10:25–37
16	13:24–43	6:30–34	10:38–42
17	13:44–52	[John 6:1–15]	11:1–13
18	14:13–21	[John 6:24–35]	12:13–21
19	14:22–23	[John 6:41–51]	12:32–48
20	15:21–28	[John 6:51–58]	12:49–53
21	16:13–20	[John 6:30–69]	13:22–30
22	16:21–27	7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23	14:1, 7–14
23	18:15–20	7:31–37	14:25–33
24	18:21–35	8:27–35	15:1–32
25	20:1–16	9:30–37	16:1–13
26	21:28–32	9:38–43, 45, 47–48	16:19–31
27	21:33–43	10:2–16	17:5–10
28	22:1–14	10:17–30	17:11–19
29	22:15–21	10:35–45	18:1–8
30	22:34–40	10:46–52	18:9–14
31	23:1–12	12:28–34	19:1–10
32	25:1–13	12:38–44	20:27–38
33	25:14–30	13:24–32	21:5–19
34	25:31–46	[John 18:33–37]	23:35–43

This structure of the Gospel readings in the lectionary is indicative of the life of God in the world. According to Catholic teaching, God was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth and, through the Risen Christ, continues to be with us in the particular and concrete circumstances of our lives. The three-year cycle, with its sometimes plodding journey through the Gospels, is in itself indicative of the Christian life.

That the New Testament has a variety of portraits of Jesus is key. Jesus is revealed not as a static, monolithic character removed from the crises and exigencies of human life. Rather the three-year cycle of readings teaches us that the life of Jesus is ever-incarnate in the particular communities in which faith is born and into which people are initiated every year. This initiation into the life of God in the community is not identical from place to place, but—following the pattern of the New Testament and the three-year cycle of readings—is incarnate in the life of the community in a particular place, neighborhood, town, or city unique unto itself, with the wonderfully quirky and invigorating Christians who animate it.

The revelation of God was not static in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, nor is it so today. The lectionary calls us to discover the life of God in the world and, following the example of Jesus and of his imprint in the books of the Bible, to make our own lives like his.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE THREE-YEAR CYCLE ON OUR IMAGE OF JESUS

The authors of the Gospels wrote their narratives of Jesus' life from their experience of the Risen Savior in the life of their small communities. At that time, as today, the experience of God in the Risen Christ was shaped and influenced by the particular context in which a community existed and worshiped. While there are many parts of the Gospel story shared in common by the Evangelists, there are also parts in each Gospel that are unique. Even when the stories themselves are similar, we find details, characters, locations, and vocabulary that vary from Evangelist to Evangelist.

As a result of such differences in experience and storytelling, the portrait of Jesus in each of the Gospels is quite unique:

- In Matthew, Jesus is uniquely rooted in the narratives and major human figures of the Old Testament, and he is often portrayed as a teacher and a lawgiver like Moses.
- In Mark, Jesus is powerful and arresting as a healer and battler with demons, ever seeking for an isolated spot away from the pursuing and healing-seeking crowds.
- In Luke, Jesus is portrayed as a prophet, divinely called to bring a message of freedom and reversal to the poor and to those on the fringe of economic and religious life.

Because we are called by God as messengers and realizers of the Good News, like Jesus himself, we must heed the Church's genius in offering each of these Gospels over the course of the three-year cycle. We do well to listen carefully to the portrait of Jesus proclaimed in the assembly during Ordinary Time in each one of the three years of the cycle.

During Year A we contextualize the Jesus of the Gospel of Matthew in our own lives and in our world and our Church. As we hear this Gospel proclaimed and preached, we can renew the triennial call to explore Jesus' roots in the Hebrew tradition and indeed be teachers ourselves, fearless bearers of the ritual and evangelical traditions we call our own.

During Year B we absorb the proclamation of the Gospel of Mark, being not merely hearers but doers of the Word, incarnating in our own day the discomfiting works of Jesus. In Mark, Jesus hurriedly and courageously moves toward death, squarely facing the diseased and possessed persons who foreshadow his ever-looming Passion. Year B is a period for examining our consciences to discern how much we can go against the grain of our culture and even of our Church.

During Year C we find ourselves pondering the humanity we, like Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, share with all persons. We also find ourselves lost and prodigal, like Luke's coin, sheep, and son; we heed the words the Old Testament prophets, unflinching preachers of news good and bad, announcing a year of favor and a year of woe.

Some Problems in the Lectionary

The life of God in the world also informs our approach to the Bible. In our own time, for example, we have come to a deeper appreciation of the Old Testament as a canon in its own right, independent of the New Testament.

Some scholars involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue have suggested that the lectionary readings from the Old Testament function too much in the service of the New Testament. The Exodus of the Hebrew people from slavery, for example, is part of the biblical heritage not only because it foreshadows the liberation gained in the Cross of Christ, but also because it is a part of the history of Israel and of the theological tradition of the Jews. The Exodus story should then be appreciated in its own richness as Israel's experience of the living God.

The objection is likewise made that by choosing the readings from the Old Testament only to correspond in some way to the Gospel reading, much of the Old Testament is still never heard by Catholics. Various proposals have been made toward further revision of the lectionary, or at least toward experimentation with a fuller reading of the rich but neglected stories and other literary forms in the Old Testament.

Here, of course, the excised portion is larger and more contributory to the meaning of the passage for the assembly than in the reading from Matthew cited above. In general, it seems that the *Revised Common Lectionary* recognizes a greater capacity of the assembly to listen to Scripture readings, perhaps because worshipers in the Protestant traditions are, even five decades after the Second Vatican Council, more informed about the Bible than Roman Catholics, and therefore more able to receive the longer readings.

The similarities in these two lectionary orders are encouraging, but the similarity does not mean that Catholics and Protestants relate to Scripture in the same way.

Scripture and Memory

Fritz West, an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ, considered Catholic and Protestant uses of the lectionary in his book *Scripture and Memory: The Ecumenical Hermeneutic of the Three-Year Lectionaries*.³ He describes how Catholics and Protestants understand Scripture differently and listen to Scripture differently.

In both [Catholic and Protestant] liturgical paradigms, Scripture is present as book: the Bible for the Protestant liturgical paradigm; a book of Gospels, lectionary, or missal for the Catholic. At the same time, however, the two paradigms appropriate these printed forms of Scripture through different linguistic media. Holding speech to be primary, the Catholic liturgical paradigm regards lections [readings] to be the reconversion of writing back into the oral language from whence it came. The Protestant liturgical paradigm understands lections to be the public reading of a printed book and the sermon to be the reconversion of writing into speech.

In other words, the Catholic and Protestant liturgical paradigms hold lections to be speech and print, respectively. In so doing, they bring to bear upon lections different understandings of community and memory, memory and writing, writing and speech, and book and story. (page 46)

Even today, with many ecumenical goals accomplished, the Scriptures still function very differently in the spiritual and liturgical lives of Catholics and Protestants, no matter how similar the readings in the assembly may be. As Fritz West's work highlights, for Catholics the Scriptures are sacred as the communal memory. Catholics need to be together in assembly and there hear the readings proclaimed not so much to individuals but to this assembly. For Protestants the Scriptures are sacred as the written memory of the Bible. The Reformed traditions, faithful to their origins in making the printed text of the Bible available to all in the vernacular, often think of the sacred readings as

printed text first, then as proclamation. The Roman Catholic tradition is oral first; print is only a means to the end.

Yet, even with the slight differences in the contents of the readings in the *Lectionary for Mass* and the *Revised Common Lectionary*, and even with the larger issue of the memory of the Bible as primarily oral proclamation (Catholic) or printed word (Protestant), great strides have been taken in ecumenical endeavors of Christian churches in recent decades. We now need to become more conscious of our common reading and listening.