

## GUIDELINES FOR LAY MINISTERS OF THE WORD

*'The Lord God has given me a disciple's tongue. So that I might know how to reply  
to the wearied he provides me with speech.'*

*(Is 50:4-5)*

Since the beginning of the Church, communities have chosen people for the task of reading the Scriptures within the liturgy. Yet being a Reader is more than simply fulfilling a task. At its best Reading is a calling, a vocation and a spiritual discipline. It is a commitment to preparing oneself so that one's reading becomes a vehicle for God's word. Today we take the proclamation of the word of God for granted but, perhaps, do not recognise that the key instrument of the proclamation is the Minister of Reader. Now that the readings are in the language of the community it is incumbent upon ministers of the word to be as well prepared for the ministry as they are able. Reading at Mass is an act of proclamation. The Reader becomes the instrument that worthily proclaims the Good News of salvation. When the Scriptures are proclaimed it is Christ himself who speaks (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* 7). The Reader becomes the very vehicle, the instrument, of Christ's presence and through this ministry the assembly becomes more familiar with the treasure house of the Scriptures. Through poor preparation and proclamation the Reader may actually inhibit the presence of Christ in the liturgy.

A requirement, therefore, for being a Reader in the assembly is a love of Sacred Scripture and an eagerness to learn about the books of the Bible, the authors of the books and the cultures in which the word of God was originally written. Such an understanding will enable the Readers of the word of God to be confident as they approach the ambo to begin proclaiming this particular passage to the expectant hearers. It is so important that Readers of the word should be well prepared. Readers should have some biblical formation, to have developed a love of the Bible and an understanding of the way in which the selections chosen for inclusion in the Lectionary fit together. (The First Reading and the Gospel are usually thematically linked; the Second Reading is not and is usually continuous from Sunday to Sunday). Readers also need a liturgical understanding and formation: an understanding of the structure of the Liturgy of the Word and how it relates to the Eucharist.

A desire to proclaim the word of God in the Sunday assembly is not the only requirement to become a minister of the word. The natural gifts of pronunciation, articulation, timing, vocal melody and confidence in the face of a large assembly are also needed. Not all of these must be in place when a person first begins the ministry, but a person should take their ministry seriously enough to develop their ability to proclaim and to seek help in developing their natural abilities. Their talent and attentiveness to the presence of God in the Church, in the world, and in their own lives all contribute to their exercising of the ministry of the word.

**T**he first consideration is to understand the difference between reading in church during Mass or liturgical celebration and other types of reading. During the liturgy, the Reader is fulfilling a mission to his or her fellow community members. It is a sacred duty that involves a sharing of one's own faith. This does not mean that a reading should be stiff or formal, but rather the reader understands that they are continuing Jesus' mission of sharing the word with God's people. It is something special and requires adequate preparation.

Because it is Scripture that is being read the skills of public speaking (projection, good phrasing, proper emphasis, etc.) are still required and are not to be downplayed. Rather, it means that these skills which are picked up through training and experience are used in a context in which God's word can speak to God's people, a word that has power and that challenges, comforts, and builds up a community. It should not be a task that is being performed, rather a good reader allows the community to sense the presence of the living Jesus in that community through him or her without focussing too much attention on themselves. It is the message that should be remembered, not the messenger!

The Reader is entrusted, then, with the crucial task of making the word of God come alive by proclaiming it for the Christian assembly. A well-prepared reader can do much to enhance the celebration of the liturgy by a prayerful and powerful proclamation of the word of God. Such a proclamation can touch and move the whole assembly, serving as an instrument of God's grace.

## THE MINISTRY OF READER

1. The Ministry of Reader comes from God. It is the Lord who wants to communicate to his people; it is God who has inspired these messages of hope and comfort, of challenge and surprising truth. Readers are the vehicle and instrument of God's word.
2. The Ministry of Reader does require training and preparation. There is personal involvement with the texts seeking to enable an assembly to want to listen and to hear God's word speaking to them. God's word is holy and the documents of so many Christian Churches speak of its proclamation as a moment of grace, of God's presence in the community. The General Instruction to the Lectionary calls for the Scriptures to be read in Church from books that respect the worthiness of their content.
3. God's word is 'alive and active, sharper than a two-edged sword' (Heb4:12): it achieves the end for which God sends it. It is meant to change people, to erase weariness, to fill their lives with hope and with God's healing comfort. Readers are the instruments through which this occurs.

*'When your words came, I devoured them: your word was my delight  
and the joy of my heart.'* (Jer 15:16)

The Reader, then, serves the Eucharistic assembly - the people God has gathered to hear his word - by telling the story of God's saving work in the lives of his people. These narratives and stories, told for generations, reinforce our identity as members of the People of God.

In our hearts we know that these narratives and stories, while based in history and tradition, are in a mysterious way about our own existence, our own time, our own relationships, and about us. The role of the Reader is to tell the truth about the story so that God's people are touched. We will be reminded of what God has already done for us and will continue to do for us.

## PREPARING FOR READING

Preparation for this ministry is essential. Too often Readers have been chosen at the last minute or do not check the rota until they arrive at church! None of these people will be properly prepared to read the word of God. This can lead to the Reader stumbling through the readings, reading the wrong reading, hit-and-miss pronunciation, leaving the assembly confused and even bored. It can also lead to a lack of confidence in Readers, due to not being able to feel competent in reading. Remember that good preparation will bear fruit in good readings and more confident Readers.

Preparation includes reading the passage *aloud*, if only to yourself. There is a need not just to let your mind become familiar with the ideas and words, but also to let them ‘get around your tongue’ as you practise the rhythm of the phrasing of the words. Otherwise you will find yourself sometimes ‘out of step’ in your verbal rhythm in the middle of a sentence, especially in longer sentences.

Also, part of studying the lectionary passage is discovering what genre it is and letting that be expressed in our reading. In storytelling (and much of Scripture uses this genre), repetition of phrases is an important part of allowing the story to be remembered. There is often a rhythm built up in the way the words are used. The Reader needs to find that rhythm and pass it on so that this reading this day in Church can also be remembered.

Pastoral exhortations (found in most of the Epistles of the New Testament) are read differently from one of Jesus' parables. The Epistles are letters and should be read as letters intended to build a community of faith and show them a pastor's loving and compassionate care.

## PREPARATION

Begin early in the week; Monday is not too early.

### PRAYER

Before and after the Scriptures, pray. Ask God, through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, to help you to understand what it is you are to read so as to be an effective proclaimer of his word. What you believe about the Scriptures will say more than the technique you use.

## PRACTICE

Again, don't be afraid of reading the Scriptures aloud to yourself. If a particular passage is difficult to read, then give it enough practice until you are confident. Don't let your arrival at Mass be the first time you see the reading. Practise out loud! Use a some kind of recording facility (on your phone) or even a video from time to time if you can so that you can hear how your words actually sound. Practising is not to make for a 'flawless performance,' but to make you comfortable with the message of the text so that you can convey it without much effort.

## RESEARCH

If the Scripture has words you do not know how to pronounce or you do not know what they mean, look them up in a Bible Dictionary or do not be afraid to ask someone. Read with understanding.

A good Reader, having read the passage several times beforehand and having prayed over it, will find himself or herself drawn to one or two lines in the reading that may be the 'highpoints'. There is often more than one way to read a passage and still be faithful to it. Another Reader may highlight different elements of the reading. A good Reader would be close enough to the reading that none of the main themes would be lost and the whole would be read in such a way that a meaningful message from God can come through. Many of the sentences used by St Paul or in other New Testament letters have to be studied and read very carefully and with a lot of emphasis in order for their meaning to be fully grasped by the congregation.

## PRONUNCIATION

There are basic pronunciation guides available that phonetically spell out the Biblical names of people and places. For instance, Barrabus may be listed as *buh-RAB-us* or Capernaum as *kuh-PER-num*. You might like to look at this website for help: [www.betterdaysarecoming.com/bible/pronunciation.html](http://www.betterdaysarecoming.com/bible/pronunciation.html)

## ENUNCIATION

Enunciation is different from pronunciation. The latter involves using the tongue, lips and teeth to make the correct sounds of a word phonetically. Enunciation means that the speaker clearly articulates all the sounds that make up the word. For instance, a common mistake in enunciation is to drop the 'd' or 't' sound from the end of a word.

## SOME PRACTICAL POINTS

- ⊕ Arrive early for Mass: use the time to familiarise yourself with the Lectionary text and layout. Find a quiet spot and sit or kneel to pray: ask the Holy Spirit to be with you, that his flame be bright in your heart as you joyfully proclaim God's word.
- ⊕ Since the focus should be on the word of God, Readers' clothing should be appropriate for the ministry they exercise.
- ⊕ Mistakes: we are never perfect. If a mistake is made, stop and reread the verse. It is not necessary to say 'sorry' or 'excuse me'. Continue with the reading with confidence, knowing that God expects faithful worship not perfect worship. If you accept that it is ok to make mistakes this will lessen any nervousness.
- ⊕ Be faithful to the rota: if you are unwell or cannot be present secure a substitute giving them as much notice as possible to enable them to prepare the readings.
- ⊕ Sit near the front of the church when you are reading: do not rush to the ambo. Wait for the *Amen* of the Opening Prayer before moving.
- ⊕ Move with dignity: do not bring pieces of paper from which to read. Always read from the Lectionary.
- ⊕ Bow towards the altar at the altar step before you make your way to the ambo.
- ⊕ Make sure you have the attention of the assembly before starting to read. Try to look at the whole assembly on reaching the ambo. The beginning of the reading should not be rushed.
- ⊕ Begin with 'A reading from...' *not* 'The first reading is...' or 'Our reading is taken from...'. Introduce the reading just as it is stated in the Lectionary. The little line in *italics* is really for the Reader to give them a sense of what the reading is about: it doesn't need to be read aloud.
- ⊕ After the reading, pause a moment, look at the assembly and then say 'The word of the Lord'. Pause before beginning the Psalm. Periods of silence are an integral part of the liturgy. Don't be frightened of them.
- ⊕ Try to make frequent eye contact. At the end of the reading our eye contact, along with our voice, is part of the sign that the reading is coming to an end. It is very important that a phrase such as 'The word of the Lord' is not said into a book, but is proclaimed toward the people, inviting their prayerful response.

- ⊕ It is not necessary to introduce the Psalm with words like ‘our response is...’. Everyone knows that the Psalm begins with an antiphon or response. Begin the Psalm simply by reciting the antiphon and letting the assembly repeat it. Remember that when reading the Psalm you are reading poetry: it should flow. When the verse is finished, look at the assembly, thus indicating their response. Ideally Psalms, because they are song, are sung.
- ⊕ After the Psalm, a different reader should introduce the Second Reading as written. After the reading pause again, then leave the ambo as the Gospel Acclamation (*Alleluia* or *Praise to you, O Christ*) is sung. Bow towards the altar and return to your place.
- ⊕ At the end of the Creed the Intercessor makes his or her way to the ambo to pray the Prayer of the Faithful. Pray them, don’t simply read them. Pause after each bidding. The priest will begin and conclude these prayers. There is no liturgical reason for the priest to pray ‘*Lord, in your mercy*’ between each bidding. This is the prayer of the faithful and it is sufficient for the presider to begin and conclude them. The Prayer of the Faithful, or General Intercessions, should also be read meaningfully and not as if a chore. They should be read at a pace such that the congregation can make the prayers their own.

*‘When the Scriptures are read in the Church,  
God himself is speaking to his people,  
and Christ, present in his own word, is proclaiming the gospel.  
In the biblical readings, God’s word addresses all people of every era  
and is understandable to them’*

