

The Ministry of Lector

The ministry of the Lector was one of the Minor Orders in both early Eastern and Western Churches. The word itself comes from the Latin word *legere* meaning “to read”. It is the root of lectern, lectionary, lecture, etc. In the early Church the usual function of the Lector was to read the Old Testament lesson, sometimes the Epistle (though that was later reserved to the Sub-deacon), and only in Spain to read the Gospel.

The Lector is mentioned in the New Testament by St. Paul in his letter to the Colossians (4:16) which he probably wrote while in prison in Rome, and by St. John in his Revelation (1:3). Nonbiblical evidence is more abundant. St. Justin mentions a liturgical reader as does St. Cyprian. The *Apostolic Constitution* states that Lectors are to be ordained by the “laying on of hands” and the receiving of a list of canonical books. During the Middle Ages this order ranked directly under the order of subdeacon. Today, the Lector is no longer ordained in the Western Church, but may be commissioned by the local parish and “licensed” by the rector or vicar. In the Eastern Church it is still usual for the Lector to be ordained to that office.

Lector or a Licensed Lay Reader?

There’s a lot of confusion between the terms “lector” and “lay reader” or “licensed lay reader.” We must be clear as to which we are referring before continuing the discussion because often the terms are assumed to be interchangeable when they are not. The confusion arises because the two ministries do share the reading of scripture, but there most similarity ends.

A “Lay Reader” is licensed to officiate at

you are reading - pray about it, practice it, prepare for it, deliver it, and believe it.

Practice, practice, practice.

Once you’ve been assigned your lections or prayers, read them over and over again. A helpful suggestion might be to read them silently, once upon rising in the morning and once before retiring at night, on a daily basis the entire week before your scheduled service. At least twice before reading publicly, read the selection(s) out loud to another person or into a tape recorder. Disregard the sound of your voice, but pay close attention to the rhythm, speed, and enunciation.

Understand.

Holy Scripture is an historical document, preserving the “feel” of our Jewish and Christian ancestors as they encountered their Lord and ours. To read it with its original meaning, a Lector must understand what it is he or she is reading. This can be determined from the “setting” in which the particular pericope (reading) is found. Knowing *who* was writing *what* to *whom* and *why* can make a difficult passage clear. This can be discovered through any number of Bible dictionaries or from the preface to the book if your Bible is annotated.

St. Peter exhorts us to remember that Holy Scripture is not purely a matter of personal interpretation (II Peter 1:20-21). The Bible is the Church’s book and it is the Church’s duty to teach us the meaning of Scripture as held *ubique, semper,* and *omnibus* (universally, through time, and by consensus). There are many good commentaries available to assist in learning the meaning of specific texts and/or translations.

You don’t need to own a twelve volume commentary to find out what your lections are saying. Simply read the **entire** chapter in which your reading selection is found. Discover who is saying what to whom and why. Understanding the context and environment in which your reading falls may change the inflections and emphasis of your reading. Sometimes your lection will begin in what seems to be the middle of a sentence or thought, or with, “And he....” or “Then they..”, or “When God

had summoned him....” Not only is it permissible to modify the first sentence or two to clarify the context of the reading, it is preferred. Substitute the missing name(s) or substitute ambiguous pronouns with words that will add needed meaning or definition.

Slow down.

When we become nervous, all of us have a tendency to read at a much faster rate than is normal. This makes diction much more difficult and raises the chance of mispronouncing even simple words. If you make a conscious effort to slow your reading pace you will be much more likely to read normally. Many churches also have poor acoustics because of their hard floors, high ceilings, cavernous volumes, and numbers of restless coughing people. Spoken words bounce off the walls and columns (reverberate) until they are unintelligible. What might sound good to you might be mumbled and jumble to parishioners in the middle to the back of the church.

Members of the congregation also assimilate the spoken word at different rates. Older generations and those with hearing problems generally require a slower reading tempo for comprehension than younger people. Individuals also listen differently than others, and some read along in the bulletin insert while others don’t. So give everyone plenty of time to hear and digest what you are saying. A slow reading pace is also one that adds dignity to the word.

It is an excellent practice to take a breath at every comma, two breaths (long pause) at every period, and a very long pause between paragraphs. Use all of these breaks to compose yourself, read forward a sentence or two, search for difficult words or names, and generally prepare yourself for the continuation of your reading. You can also use pauses to look up to make the very important eye contact with the congregation.

Learn the proper names.

One of the greatest distractions on Sunday morning is the reader who stumbles over foreign words and names. Buy yourself a “self-

pronouncing" Bible which contains diacritical marks in the text, or purchase a guide for pronouncing Biblical words. Practice them carefully and often, until you feel as comfortable reading them as the English words surrounding them. If you have doubt about a pronunciation, ask your clergy or the head of Lectors. Don't let fear of embarrassment stand in the way of query. In fact, it will be more embarrassing and distracting if you mispronounce or hesitate in the middle of a word when at the lectern. Names of parishioners to be mentioned in prayers can also become stumbling blocks. Check with your clergy or parish secretary for correct pronunciations of people you do not know.

Read the text as it is written.

Unlike the Psalms, which are written to be sung, most of the lections are prose, not verse. Observe and practice reading the punctuation as well as the words themselves. Observe and hesitate for commas and semicolons, raise the pitch of your voice for question marks, emphasize the words before and after a colon, lower the pitch of your voice before periods and breathe between sentences. **DO NOT** dramatize, attempt to act out, or pretend to be the person being quoted in scripture. Do not change your voice noticeably by raising or lowering your pitch to distinguish scriptural characters (as might be done in puppetry). Don't speak in a squeaky voice to represent a woman or girl, and don't become gruff to sound like God or Moses. You may modify your inflection to reflect anger, joy, sadness, or other emotion.

Avoid involving your body in the reading. Waving your arms, shaking your fist, looking toward heaven, pointing your finger, or summing the Almighty from above with outstretched arms is not the way to read scripture. Leave these antics to the television preachers. Simply proclaim and project the Word of the Lord. Do not try to become the co-author or a stage actor.

Actually rehearse in the church.

Until you become a veteran at reading the proper, you should always try to rehearse at

least once at the lectern. This will not only give you confidence when the pews are full, but will assist you in establishing your decibel level (loudness) and the exaggeration in enunciation necessary to be understood at the back of the nave. Plant your spouse or friend in the very last pew. If they can hear and understand your reading in an empty nave you are well on your way to being heard and understood when the pews are full. Remember, though, that peoples' bodies absorb sound. Also remember that an unamplified lectern requires better diction than an amplified one.

If your lectern is equipped with a microphone and a light, practice with them on and adjusted to your liking. Know where the switches are so you can check them in advance on the day of your reading.

Arrive early.

Always be more than prompt when you are assigned to read. Arrive in plenty of time to pray and find a seat on an aisle and near the sanctuary. If the clergy are looking to see if you have arrived, give them ample opportunity to see you.

You may want to mark the Bible with 3M Post-its in advance so you will know exactly where the reading begins and ends. On the Post-its, you can add the words that will be substituted for ambiguous pronouns in the first sentences, the words used to announce the reading: ("The second reading [Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.]", ("Here endeth the Epistle. ("The Word of the Lord.")) **Do not** write directly on the pages of the Bible. It's also a good idea to place a Post-it on the edge of the beginning page just in case someone moves the book marker before it's time for you to read.

Postures and gestures

Although as a Lector you are not usually a member of the vested sanctuary party, you and your duties are an integral part of liturgy, whether it be Mass, Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Compline, or other sacred service. As such, you should conduct yourself with the dignity, grace, and reverence the liturgy and your duties infer and deserve.

When walking to and from the lectern, don't dangle or swing your arms as you normally would when walking down the street. Fold or interlock

your hands together reverently at abdomen level (a posture of informal prayer). Your rector might prefer a slightly more formal posture with your interlocked hands at chest height. Ask.

When crossing the altar or entering the sanctuary, don't forget to reverence. If the Blessed Sacrament is reserved on or near the altar, genuflection is the proper gesture. If the Sacrament is not present or reserved at a side altar, a graceful moderate bow is the preferred gesture. If you are approaching the lectern from a location other than the nave, and you do not cross the altar, it is proper to make your reverence facing the altar just before stepping up to the lectern. In some parishes, Lectors kneel before the celebrant for a blessing before their reading.

During your reading, you may place your hands on the lectern or Bible. Because you will be looking up occasionally to maintain eye contact with the congregation, it is recommended that the fingertips of one hand follow the printed words as they are spoken. It could be very embarrassing to you and distracting to the congregation if you look up, then lose your place in the text, having to hesitate to find your position and regain your composure.

Bowing your head slightly at the name of Jesus during your reading or recitation of prayers is reverent and fitting, as is the sign of the cross at references to the dead, when invoking the name of the Trinity, and at the conclusion of biblical prayers or canticles.

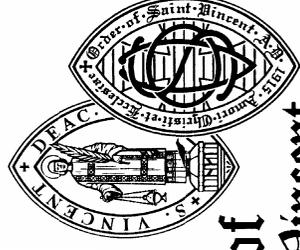
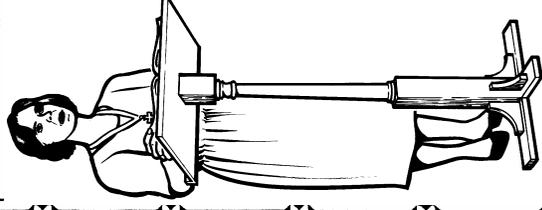
Always remember that you are chosen to proclaim the Word of God. Attach such importance to your appearance, movements, and poise.

How does it apply to me?

God the Holy Spirit uses the divine revelation of Himself in Scripture to speak to each of us in our present need and where we find ourselves at the present time. Giving Him some quiet, reflective time after reading the assigned pericope will allow God to touch the heart and the mind.



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