



Saint Michael the Archangel Catholic Church

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The Effective Lector

by Edward Horodko

When we gather to celebrate the Mass, God is present in the assembly, the presider, the scriptures, and the eucharistic bread and wine. The first part of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word, focuses on the scriptures. The lector is the minister who brings them to life for all to hear.

To be able to do this, the lector must first understand the scripture passages and then successfully communicate them to the assembly.

Here are some practical thoughts for the lector on how to bring this about.

Scripture is fundamentally oral and aural. It is spoken and heard. The lector proclaims it, the assembly listens. This is the mechanism which brings the Word of God to life.

The lector must be skilled in this form of public speaking and must have mastered the specific reading to play his or her part in this essential process. The assembly must listen and not follow along in their books (unless hearing-impaired). If the Missalettes are used by the Assembly, people should put them down and listen attentively during the readings so that this essential dynamic of speaking and hearing can occur.

An effective lector will bring so much to the reading with voice and gesture that people will automatically shift their attention away from their booklets if they've not put them down.

To be effective, the lector must be prepared. Technical expertise is essential, as is preparatory study of the particular reading.

Perhaps the best way to study scripture is with groups of lectors working together, since they can read aloud and listen as they study, and share the revelations that result. This may not be practical in your parish, however, so you may have to study on your own. But even in that case, it helps to read to someone informally, perhaps to a family member, as part of your study. Practice aloud. Get used to the sound of the readings, and gain insights as you practice.

Start your preparation early in the week before your turn. Begin by understanding the gospel, even though the presider or deacon will probably be reading it. In our current Lectionary, the gospel usually relates to the first reading in particular, so it will provide a context for the first reading. (Occasionally, it also relates

to the second reading.)

Prepare to read both readings, even if one will be assigned to another lector. That way, you're prepared to substitute if needed. If the lector reads the Responsorial Psalm and Gospel Acclamation, prepare those in a similar manner. Remember that these are songs (except for the Gospel verse) and should be sung, not spoken, if possible.

As you study a reading, reflect on its fundamental nature. Is it a letter? A discourse to a crowd? A story? Is it dialog? A poem? A song? A metaphor? A warning? What is the passage's context in its Biblical book? Who wrote or said it? What are the emotions to be conveyed?

To read a reading well, you must have deep understanding. A publication such as the Workbook for Lectors and Gospel Readers (Liturgy Training Publications, Chicago) is an excellent resource, but be careful that whatever resources you use for your study, you make the text your own; be sure you really master it. And whatever you do, do not use someone else's ideas of where to pause, how to inflect, or which words to emphasize. These actions must come spontaneously and honestly from only one place: from what the reading means to you.

As the weekend approaches, review the readings. But don't wear them out by reading them too often. Stop when you feel they really make sense to you, and when you have enough understanding of their historical and contextual significance to bring them to life with authority.

Arrive about a half hour before Mass starts. Consult the other lector if there is one. Look over the intercessions and any announcements for you to read, reading them quietly aloud, getting comfortable with any people's names, so you avoid surprises at the ambo. Then read your assigned reading(s) quietly aloud a couple of times, recalling your earlier study, placing the meaning in your "short term memory," reminding yourself of what the material means to you.

Besides the words you say, there are many non-verbal communications important to the lector's ministry. Be attentive to these, since you do them even if you don't notice that you're doing them. Consider your attitudes, your gestures, the tone of your voice, how you go about contacting your listeners with your eyes.

The Procession. When you carry the book in procession, show the assembly you know it contains the Word of God. Walk deliberately while carrying it. Hold it high as you process. At many parishes, the lector "enthrones" the book in a special place (such as on a special stand, or on the altar), making an additional physical statement about its importance.

When you arrive at or approach the place of enthronement, or when you simply arrive at the ambo with it, look like you belong where you are. Convey with your body language that you are aware of the importance of this book. Don't rush uncomfortably to put it down. Realize that people are watching you, and that you are silently telling them about this book with the language of your body.

The Body. When it's time to address the assembly, hold your body straight but not rigid. Don't slouch. Look like you want to communicate. Have authority. Be genuine, be unpretentious.

The Feet. Keep your feet firmly planted while you speak.

The Face. Use it to convey meaning, but avoid all artificiality. Be yourself.

The Eyes. Have eye contact with people when you talk to them. But not at the expense of losing your place in the text. Have an awareness of all the people, but talk to them one-to-one.

A good time to establish contact is during the opening "A reading from..." Stand still before you begin reading. Put the whole opening phrase in your short-term memory right before you speak it. Create a significant silence before you begin speaking. This will compel the assembly's attention. Look across the entire room as you say the opening phrase. Then pause again and begin the reading.

Have your attention on your "audience" as you speak. If you do this, the eye contact will take care of itself. Have respect for the Assembly, remembering that you are conveying God's Word to God's people in God's presence.

The Hands. If your height and eye-tracking abilities allow, hold the book while you speak to provide a visual reminder of the source of the words. This is good but not essential.

Whether you hold it or rest it on the ambo as you read, you may find it useful to run your finger along the text as you read so you can freely maintain eye contact with the assembly without the risk of losing your place.

Hand gestures are occasionally appropriate. But use them only if they clearly enhance the reading. Avoid all gestures that do not actually help honestly communicate the reading. Never look artificial or "theatrical." The operative word here is honesty.

The Voice. The lector obviously must be heard to be effective. To be heard by all in the assembly, you must understand the acoustics and public address system in your church. In most buildings, if you can hear your own amplified voice from the speakers as you speak, you're close enough to the microphone and the system is working adequately. Understand your PA system well so you can use it correctly.

The P.A. System. If your PA system has not been professionally calibrated lately, several lectors should critique the system's performance during a Mass. If the sound is not loud and clear throughout the church, you've got a problem that should be immediately addressed, perhaps by a professional sound engineer. A lector must be heard to be a lector.

For the typical PA system to work well, you must project your voice toward the tip of microphone. And the microphone should be positioned so that you can comfortably see your listeners. Don't ignore the microphone, don't avoid the microphone, and don't be obsessed with the microphone. Use the microphone.

When it's time to read, walk to the ambo and take a deep breath as you arrive there. Realize that the sound of your voice originates in your diaphragm (your solar plexus). Breathe from there as you would sing from there. Do not strain your neck or vocal cords.

Let the power of your voice...

- come from your diaphragm...

- through your vocal cords...

- to the assembled people.

Project the sounds and do not force them.

Even "soft" speakers can learn to speak loudly, clearly, and naturally by practicing this.

Understand and utilize the acoustical properties of the church building. In some churches, if you speak too quickly, meaning will be lost in the echoes. If you speak a little more slowly than you think you should, you're probably speaking at the best rate. Ask other lectors to listen carefully to you from all parts of the church and tell you if you're speaking slowly (and loudly and clearly) enough.

Concise articulation is essential. (But do not sound strange, artificial, or melodramatic.) Avoid running words together; they can't be understood that way. Pay some attention to ALL the phonemes (sounds) in the words, and make sure you say them. Don't let the ends of words or sentences fade softly away; let them all be heard. Don't jumble your words together; let them be distinct. Again, ask other lectors to critique you.

Mean what you say. If you are not speaking honestly --if the meaning is not coming from you-- do not speak.

Create appropriate drama with body language, loudness, dynamic range, and inflection. But don't overdo it. Use only the drama that comes from meaning.

Use dramatic pauses where they work. Silence makes people to listen to you.

When you tell a story, really tell the story. When you quote someone, take on the persona (the "mask") of that person.

Do not speak in monotone. Use inflection to convey meaning, to bring life to it.

Always set the opening and closing forms ("A reading from..." and "The Word of the Lord.") apart from the body of text with both a pause and a change of attitude. Remember that they are not part of the reading; don't make it sound like they are. Avoid unnecessary detail in the introduction. For example, just say "A reading from the letter of Paul to the Romans..." Don't say something like "Our first reading is a reading from the letter of Paul to the Romans." In other words, don't add things that are obvious. Avoid introducing or summarizing the reading before you start proclaiming it. This gilds the lily, and perhaps inhibits the listener's openness to the Word of God itself. Do not presume to explain what God means.

When you make a mistake, remember why you're there... to convey the Word of God. You're not there to show people that you're perfect, or what a great reader you are. If you ruin a sentence or thought, simply back up and say it correctly. Whatever you do, don't apologize for your mistake; that adds to the distraction,

taking people even farther from the meaning you're trying to convey. Don't be embarrassed because you're human.

If no meaning was lost in your error, ignore the minor error.

If you're inexperienced at public speaking, practice projecting meaning into the church building when it's empty. Imagine it's full of people. Listen to your voice fill the church. Get comfortable with the sound. (Have the PA System on.) Understand the physics of being heard in that space. Remember that people will absorb much of the sound of your voice, so you need to be even louder when the church is filled than when it's empty.

SUMMARY

- ❖ Ask yourself these questions about why you're speaking... and get a Yes.
- ❖ Are you trying to involve people in what you're saying?
- ❖ Have you done your homework?
- ❖ Are you using the resources (workshops, books, etc.) your parish provides to enhance your lector skills?
- ❖ Do you mean what you're saying?

To be an effective lector, you need to...

- ❖ understand what a lector is...
- ❖ use the technical skills of good public speaking
- ❖ be sensitive to the acoustics and electronic sound reinforcement in your church..
- ❖ convey and create emotions appropriate to the specific readings. Let the readings drive the feelings. Mean what you say.
- ❖ integrate this spiritual practice with the others in your life.
- ❖ if you also greet the assembly at the beginning of Mass at your parish, be warm and hospitable. And if you lead the intercessions, be sure to really lead them.
- ❖ perform your role in the Liturgy of the Word fully prepared, with a mastery of your readings, honestly communicating God's word to God's people.

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