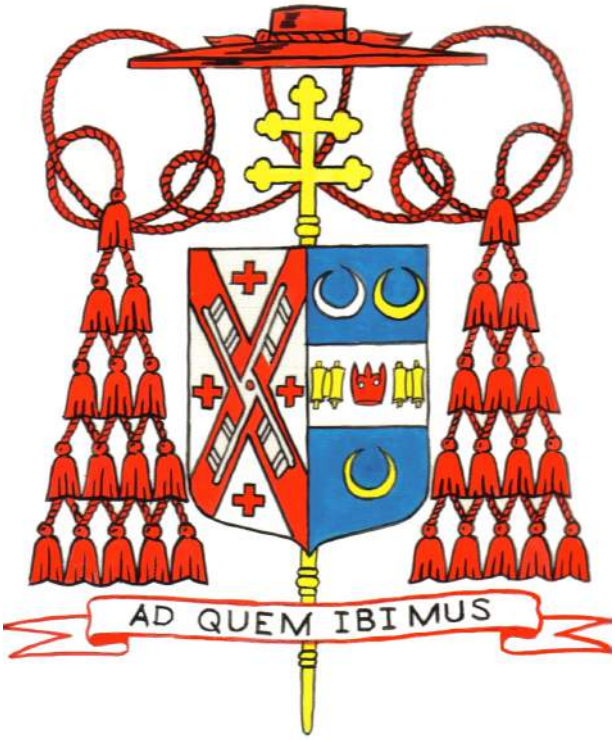


Guidelines for Lectors

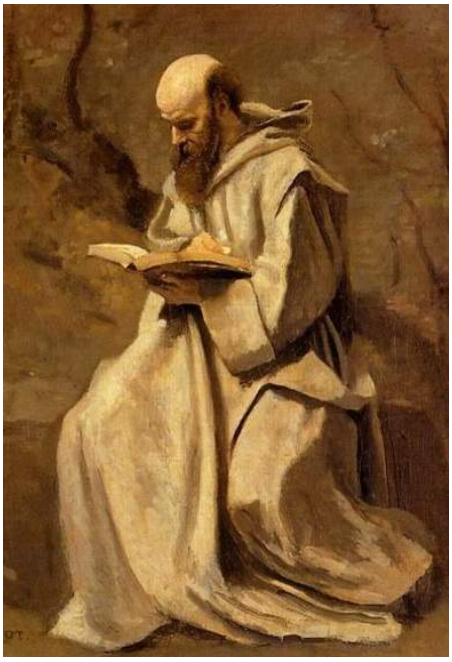
Archdiocese of New York

Prepared by the
Office of Liturgy of the
Archdiocese of New York

The Guidelines which follow are intended to offer a synthesis of ecclesial documentation concerning the role of the lector within the celebration of the sacred liturgy. As well, they highlight several aspects of this ministry as it is to be carried out within the Archdiocese of New York. These guidelines are directed primarily to pastors and others who oversee the ministry of lectors in the Archdiocese of New York.

History and Role of the Lector

Since the earliest days of the Church, Christians have gathered together to hear the Word of God proclaimed within the celebration of the liturgy. Over the centuries, various groups of persons have been entrusted with this task of reading the Word of God. For example, in the second century, the church began to develop a number of "minor orders." Those who received these orders were responsible for performing various ministerial functions in the liturgy, including that of reading the Word of God. In the first centuries of the Church's history, these lectors were often laymen. However, by the early middle ages, those who were enrolled in the minor order of lector were predominantly clerics studying for the priesthood.



In 1972, as a part of the post-conciliar liturgical renewal, Pope Paul VI replaced the minor orders with the ministries of lector and acolyte (*Ministeria quaedam*). Following the ancient tradition of the Church, these ministries were reserved to men. However, those who exercised these ministries were no longer to be ordained, but simply instituted into these roles. At the time, Pope Paul VI summarized the duties of the instituted lector in this way:

The reader is appointed for a function proper to him, that of reading the word of God in the liturgical assembly. Accordingly, he is to proclaim the readings from sacred scripture, except for the gospel in the Mass and other sacred celebrations; he is to recite the psalm between the readings when there is no psalmist; he is to present the intentions for the general intercessions in the absence of a deacon or cantor; he is to direct the singing and the participation by the faithful; he is to instruct the faithful for the worthy reception of the sacraments. He may also, insofar as may be necessary, take care of preparing other faithful who are appointed on a temporary basis to read the scriptures in liturgical celebrations. That he may more fittingly and perfectly fulfill these functions, he is to meditate assiduously on sacred scripture. [Finally,] aware of the office he has undertaken, the reader is to make every effort and employ suitable means to acquire that increasingly warm and living love and knowledge of scripture that will make him a more perfect disciple of the Lord (*Ministeria quaedam*, 5).

Non-Instituted Lectors

In current practice, most instituted lectors are seminarians and candidates for the permanent diaconate. However, recognizing the importance of the proclamation of the Word of God in the liturgy and the genuine need for persons to perform this liturgical action, the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal (GIRM)* provides for others to serve in the role of lector as well:

In the absence of an instituted lector, other lay people may be deputed to proclaim the readings from sacred scripture, people who are truly suited to carrying out this function and carefully prepared, so that by their hearing the readings from the sacred texts the faithful may conceive in their hearts a sweet and living affection for sacred scripture (*GIRM*, 101).

Thus, when instituted lectors are not present, it is appropriate for other lay men and women to proclaim the readings at Mass. The guidelines that follow refer to those persons who serve as non-instituted lectors in parishes, schools, and other institutions within the Archdiocese of New York.

Becoming a Lector

Qualifications to serve as a Lector

As noted above, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* states that lectors should be “truly suited to carrying out this function,” and that they should be "carefully prepared” (*GIRM*, 101). In the Archdiocese of New York, in order for an individual to be regarded as “truly suited” for this role, it is required that the lector be:

-At least 14 years old;

-A Catholic who has received First Holy Communion and Confirmation, as well as one who leads a life of faith in keeping with the function to be assumed;

-Free from any canonical penalty legitimately imposed or declared;

-Reverential, respectful of his/her faith, and of good moral character;

-Possessed of the the necessary ability and talents to proclaim the Word of God in a clear, dignified, and effective manner; and

-If married, be in a valid marriage according to the law of the Catholic Church.

Preparation

The Archdiocese of New York requires that a person participate in a program of formation before being mandated as a lector. These programs are offered in each deanery throughout the year. Topics covered include:

-Sacred Scripture as the Word of God

-Introduction to the *Lectionary*: Contents and Structure

-Techniques for Effective Proclamation of the Word of God

-Pastoral and Liturgical Considerations Related to the Role of Lector

Continuing formation

Lectors should strive to develop their abilities as proclaimers of God's Word beyond this initial training. Preparation, prayer, study, and practice are key to one's development as an effective minister of God's Word, and these practices should be

fostered by the parish where a lector serves. Initially, a parish will provide opportunities for a new lector to practice reading from the ambo and to become familiar with the acoustics and amplification of a particular setting. Workbooks that provide scriptural commentary and aids to pronunciation may be given to lectors during their term of service. Further opportunities for study and reflection may include afternoons or evenings of recollection, with a lecture or prayerful reflection on some aspect of sacred scripture or the ministry of lectors. An introduction to different techniques for praying with scripture (*e.g.*, *lectio divina*, Ignatian method, scriptural rosary) can also serve as a helpful means of integrating one's personal devotion to God's Word with one's service as a lector.

The Mandate

The mandate is a written statement by a dean certifying that a person has completed the required preparatory course and may function as a lector in a designated parish or other institution. The mandate is transferable (*i.e.*, one who is mandated for service is able to serve as a lector in other parishes or institutions within the Archdiocese of New York). The mandate for lectors is given by the dean of the area where the parish or institution is located. Mandate forms may be obtained by the dean from the office of liturgy, and should be sent by the dean directly to the parish or institution where the lector will serve. The institution then presents the mandate to the lector.

Application for Mandate

When applying for a mandate, a written request naming those to be mandated, signed by the pastor or chaplain, should be made to the dean. This request should indicate the term of service (usually three years).

Terms for Lectors

The mandate to serve as a lector is, in most cases, given for a term of three years. The mandate may be renewed for additional terms. This practice has certain advantages:

-It encourages turnover among such ministers, ensuring that no individual feels that he/she has a monopoly on this ministry and giving other qualified parishioners an opportunity to serve;

-It prevents the situation wherein an individual may be called to indefinitely sacrifice his/her own personal time for this service; and

-It ensures, as a matter of course, the option to review all lectors in a parish, making it less difficult to conclude the service of those who may be less well suited for this role.

It is possible that lectors might serve one or more terms, take time away from this service, and then later return to it.

Commissioning

In the Archdiocese of New York, new and returning lectors are commissioned by the dean through a celebration of the *Rite of Blessing of Lectors* (*Book of Blessings*, Ch. 61). This commissioning will normally take place once a year in each deanery. This ceremony serves to mark the beginning of the service of each commissioned individual. Service as lector may begin, however, as soon as the mandate is received, even if this takes place before the commissioning ceremony. The ceremony of commissioning must never resemble sacred ordination in any way (*Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 155).

Termination of Mandate

The mandate for lectors in the Archdiocese of New York may be terminated at any time by a dean in consultation with a pastor, or by a pastor himself for good reason.

Renewing the Mandate of Lectors

When people who have formerly served as lectors return to this ministry, it is necessary for them to receive a new mandate from a dean. While preparation for this new mandate need not take the form of attending a deanery instructional seminar, it should include a brief review of the standard elements of the training program and a consideration of procedures specific to the parish or institution.

Lectors in Religious Congregations

Mandates for religious sisters and brothers who serve as lectors in their religious houses are given by the vicar for religious. The norms for lectors in the Archdiocese of New York apply to Masses celebrated in chapels or houses of religious.

Special Circumstances

Non-Catholic Lectors

There is sometimes a desire to have a non-Catholic serve as a lector on certain occasions, such as at a wedding with parties of mixed religion, a funeral, or an ecumenical gathering. The *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* indicates that baptized non-Catholics may proclaim the scriptural readings, with the permission of the local bishop. In the Archdiocese of New York, this permission is given through the vicar general's office (*Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, 133).

Children as Lectors

While lectors will ordinarily be adults, this does not exclude the possibility of children and younger adolescents from serving as lectors, particularly in masses for children, school masses, or family masses. In these instances, those who will serve as lectors should be chosen primarily according to their competence at proclaiming the Word of God, and not solely for the sake of providing an additional means of liturgical participation. Children and younger adolescents who serve as lectors in their parish or school do not need to attend a training program, and are not issued mandates for their service. However, they should be carefully taught the meaning of sacred scripture as the Word of God, and receive training for their service.

When no Mandated Lector is Available

When a mandated lector is not present at a Mass, the readings may be proclaimed by a deacon, if one is present. As well, a concelebrant, or even the priest-celebrant, may proclaim the readings (*GIRM*, 59). It should be noted, however, that the function of proclaiming the readings is ministerial, not presidential (*GIRM*, 59). Hence, the priest-celebrant should proclaim the readings only when this is truly necessary.

Special Occasions

Sometimes, Catholics who are not mandated to serve as a lector within the Archdiocese of New York may wish to proclaim the readings on special occasions, such as at weddings and funerals. These individuals may be invited to function in this role on such occasions provided that they are able to proclaim God's word with clarity and dignity.

General Considerations

Dress

No special vesture is necessary for the lector. However, lectors should be dressed in a manner which reflects the dignity of the Word of God. Athletic wear is not appropriate, as lectors are expected to wear their “Sunday best” when serving in this role.

Liturgical Books

The readings at Mass are to be taken from the *Book of the Gospels* and the *Lectionary* in a translation currently approved for use in the United States. It is unlawful to substitute other non-biblical texts for the readings and responsorial psalm which contain the Word of God (*GIRM*, 57).

Bound copies of the *Book of the* Gospels and the *Lectionary* bespeak the permanence and beauty of God's Word. For this reason, readings should be proclaimed directly from these liturgical books, and not from a missalette, printout, or electronic device (*Introduction to the Lectionary*, 37).

Style of Proclamation

The *Introduction to the Lectionary* states, "a speaking style on the part of the reader that is audible, clear, and intelligent is the first means of transmitting the Word of God properly to the assembly" (*General Introduction to the Lectionary*, 14). An "audible, clear, and intelligent" proclamation of God's Word requires an appropriate use of inflection, pause, projection, phrasing, articulation, posture, and pace.

In applying these techniques of proclamation, the lector should consider that his/her primary task is to present the Word of God in all of its richness and meaning. Hence, the lector should never proclaim God's Word in a dull or robotic manner, but should always work to accurately reflect the genre, tone, and style of the particular scriptural passage in one's own manner of proclamation. As well, a style of reading or the use of physical gestures that would turn the proclamation of scripture into a dramatic act directing the attention of the assembly from the Word of God to the reader should be strictly avoided.

Throughout their time of service, lectors should strive to develop the most effective manner of proclaiming God's Word, and pastors should regularly give feedback to lectors concerning their style of proclamation.

Lectors and other Ministries

The celebration of the Mass calls for the use of many different ministries. In general, it is preferable that a different person performs each liturgical function. If, however, a shortage of properly trained individuals makes this impossible, it is permissible to have one individual perform multiple roles (*GIRM*, 110).

Dividing Readings among Various Lectors

"Whenever there is more than one reading, it is better to assign the readings to different readers, if available" (*Introduction to the Lectionary*, 52). However, it is not permitted that two lectors should divide the reading of the same scriptural passage between themselves (*GIRM*, 109). An exception to this rule concerns the reading of the passion narrative on Palm Sunday and Good Friday. For these readings, lectors may read the roles of the narrator and the voice while the part of Christ is read by the priest-celebrant.

Singing the Readings

Utilizing the principle of progressive solemnity, the readings may be sung on more solemn occasions. Lectors who sing the readings must have the requisite musical ability to adequately carry out this service. As well, it is most important that the style of singing should enhance the words, and not in any way obscure them. When the readings are sung, the lector should use those tones which are given in the *Roman Missal*.

The Role of the Lector at Mass

Preparation

Lectors should thoroughly prepare themselves to proclaim the Word of God through study, prayer, and practice. Familiarity with the text, its role within the context of the whole of sacred scripture, and its relationship to the other readings for the day should be carefully considered. The lector should set aside a time for prayer with the text to be proclaimed. As well, the proclamation of the readings should be practiced aloud prior to the celebration of Mass, and special attention should be paid to the pronunciation of difficult words or phrases.

Prior to start of the Mass, the *Lectionary* should be placed on the ambo opened to the readings to be used.

Introductory Rites

Lectors may take part in the procession at the beginning of Mass and walk before the priest-celebrant. Upon reaching the altar, the lector makes a profound bow. If the Blessed Sacrament is in the sanctuary, the lector genuflects when approaching the altar (*GIRM*, 274). Then, the lector may take a place in the sanctuary with the other ministers or be seated in a convenient place with the assembly.

In the absence of a deacon, a lector may carry the *Book of the Gospels* (but not the *Lectionary*) during the entrance procession in a slightly elevated manner (*GIRM*, 194). If a lector carries a *Book of the Gospels*, he/she should place the *Book of the Gospels* directly on the altar without bowing or genuflecting when entering the sanctuary (*GIRM* 195, *cf*. 173).

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 these texts at the appropriate time (*GIRM*, 198).

Proclamation of the Readings

The readings at Mass should be proclaimed from the ambo (*GIRM*, 196). When the lector is already in the sanctuary, he or she proceeds directly to the ambo. If the lector is entering the sanctuary, he/she makes a profound bow to the altar (*Ceremonial of Bishops*, 72).

Readings should always be introduced with the text provided in the *Lectionary*, "A reading from...". As well, readings should be concluded with the phrase, "The Word of the Lord". Readings must be read integrally and without any additions, omissions, or changes to the text as given in the *Lectionary*.

In order to foster meditation on God's Word, the readings may be followed by a brief period of silence (*GIRM*, 45, 56; *Introduction to the Lectionary*, 28).

The Psalm

It is preferable that the responsorial psalm be sung (*GIRM*, 61). However, if there is no psalmist, the lector may proclaim the responsorial psalm after the first reading (*GIRM*, 99). In this case, the lector should follow the first reading with a short pause. The response to the psalm should then be recited, without any introductory words (*e.g.*, "The response is..."). The psalm itself should be recited in a manner that is conducive to meditation on the Word of God (*GIRM*, 61).

The Universal Prayer

When no deacon is present, a lector may announce the intentions of the universal prayer from the ambo (*GIRM*, 197). When announcing the intentions, the lector should consider that these texts are the prayers of the entire gathered community. Hence, a lector should not add his/her own personal intentions into the universal prayer.

Announcements

Announcements prior to the conclusion of the Mass should not be made by the lector, but by the deacon, unless the priest-celebrant prefers to do so (*GIRM*, 184). Announcements should not be made at the ambo, but from another suitable place.

Concluding Rites

At the conclusion of Mass, the lector may join the procession. In this case, a lector precedes the celebrant to an appropriate location at the foot of the altar, where the ministers bow or genuflect, together with the celebrant, and process out before him (*GIRM*, 169). The *Book of the Gospels* is not carried during the recessional.

Additional Considerations

The Lector at the Liturgy of the Hours

A lector may be called on to proclaim the scriptural reading within the celebration of the *Liturgy of the Hours*. In general, the liturgical principles for the celebration of Mass also apply to celebrations of the *Liturgy of the Hours*, with one notable exception: The readings of the *Liturgy of the Hours* are not introduced or concluded by any formula (*e.g.*, "A reading from..." or "The Word of the Lord").

Special Circumstances

Additional questions may arise regarding the best way to approach particular circumstances that can arise in the life of a parish. These may be referred to the office of liturgy.

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