



## The Role of the Reader at Mass

The one who serves as a reader in Sacred Liturgy is the person designated to proclaim Sacred Scripture (with the exception of the Gospel). This person would also proclaim the psalm response (in the absence of a cantor), and the Universal Prayer or, as it is commonly known, the Prayer of the Faithful (in the absence of a deacon). Though this person is often called a “lector,” a quick study of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)* indicates that this is a misnomer. The lector is actually an instituted office of the Church, much like an Acolyte. So what is a reader?

“In the absence of an instituted lector, other lay people may be deputed (i.e., delegated) 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*). For the purpose of the Revised Liturgical Norms in the Diocese of Bridgeport, the term “reader” will be used as it most closely reflects the *General Instruction*. As a formal ministry, the ministry of lector is meant to be conferred on men who are preparing to become deacons and priests and it received as part of their preparation for ordination.

### Early Church

Long before the Church used the term “ministries,” there were formal classifications of minor orders, one of which was the lector. Generally, this was conferred only on those preparing for ordination for the priesthood. The

apostolic letter *Ministeria quaedam*, published in August 1972, decreed that what was once known as minor orders were now called ministries. It also opened the door for these ministries to be delegated to lay Christian and gave specific mention to two ministries – readers and altar servers – which up to this point had been assigned to the subdeacon, another of the previous minor orders.

“The reader is appointed for a function proper to him (or her) that of reading the word of God in the liturgical assembly. Accordingly, he (or she) is to proclaim the readings from Sacred Scripture, except for the gospel in the Mass and other sacred celebrations; he (or she) is to recite the psalm between the readings when there is no psalmist; he (or she) is to present the intentions for the general intercessions in the absence of a deacon or cantor; he (or she) is to direct the singing and the participation by the faithful; he (or she) is to instruct the faithful for the worthy reception of the sacraments. He (or she) 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 (or she) is to meditate assiduously on sacred Scripture” (*Ministeria quaedam*).

The reader is to “make every effort and (to) employ suitable means to acquire that increasingly warm and living love and knowledge of Scripture that will make him (or her) a more perfect disciple of the Lord” (*Ministeria quaedam*). In short, one who does not study Scripture ought not be called upon to proclaim Scripture.

### Jesus As Reader

In the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus returns to Nazareth and visits the Synagogue. There he is handed the scroll, unrolls it, and reads from the sixty-first chapter of the prophet Isaiah. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind,





to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord” (Lk 4:18-19).

In verse 20, we read that after Jesus handed the scroll back to the attendant and sat down, “the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him” (Lk 4:20). What were they looking at? Why were they staring intently? Scholars differ on the meaning of the passage. Some argue that those in attendance were waiting for Jesus to offer an explanation, as they knew the passage referred to the coming of the Messiah and surely some present would have heard Jesus’ claim. Still others say that it was precisely because they knew Jesus to be a good and holy man and, we can assume, he had proclaimed the Scriptures well that all eyes were fixed upon him. To concentrate on these points would be to miss another: that after Jesus proclaimed the reading from Isaiah, he took his place among the rest of the assembly. He “sat down” (Lk 4:20). Silence followed. The focus was on the Word. Surely therein lies a lesson for us today.

### Preparation

The *GIRM* reminds us that “the celebration of the Eucharist is the action of Christ and of the Church, namely, of the holy people united and ordered under the Bishop” (GIRM, 91). It is incumbent upon all of us, each in a different way, to participate in the celebration. Together we form “a holy people, a people of God’s own possession” (GIRM, 95).

Those who proclaim the Word at Mass are to spend time in prayerful preparation. A reader’s proclamation of God’s Word may prove to be among the chief nourishments that worshippers will receive. A reader is to be an effective minister of the Word. The people of God expect the Liturgy of the Word to strengthen and prepare their faith for a more meaningful celebration of the second part of Mass, the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

Knowing the background of the readings to be proclaimed is also important. A reader should take time to know St. Paul, St. Luke, and the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah so well that he or she understands their message both intellectually and personally. It is important to remember that Scripture is also literature written in a particular historical context. Different materials require different treatment. Read the theological part of a letter or epistle of St. Paul as if you were conducting an argument. Read Sirach or Wisdom so as to bring out the individual wise sayings of

which those writings are composed. Read the denunciations of the prophets with ardor, the admonitions of Paul with regret, the love poetry of the Songs of Songs with passion, Revelation of John in the tradition of apocalyptic literature, and the narrative of the Exodus as a story. Participating in Bible studies, reading online commentaries, and spending time reflecting on the Scriptures are all important ways a reader can prepare for this vital role in liturgy.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, published at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council reminds us that a reader is called to “discharge their office with the sincere piety and decorum demanded by so exalted a ministry and rightly expected of them by God’s people. Consequently, they must all be deeply imbued with the spirit of the liturgy, each in his own measure, and they must be trained to perform their functions in a correct and orderly manner” (SC, 29). This requires effort on everyone’s part.

The task of readers is not to read Sacred Scripture to people at Mass on Sunday. Rather, proclaiming God’s Word at Sunday Mass is to help create for the members of the assembly an *experience of God’s presence*, of Jesus’ presence, in His Word. The goal is not to get the Word only into our heads but also into our hearts.

If readers and listeners collaborate to create a life-giving proclamation, we will experience the presence of Jesus in and through His Word, as did the people of Christ’s time, who were amazed by the authority and clarity of how Jesus spoke. Let us work together to form a link with the first disciples of Jesus and the assemblies of the apostolic church.

*May the Word of God come alive  
in our hearts and open our  
minds to a greater  
understanding of our Lord and  
Savior, Jesus Christ.*

*To learn more about the upcoming revisions to the liturgical norms in the Diocese of Bridgeport, visit [www.formationreimagined.org](http://www.formationreimagined.org). Meetings will be held throughout November for those who wish to learn more.*