

## **THE LECTOR SOUNDS THE VOICE OF GOD**

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The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says: "Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. . . .He is present in his Word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church." This means that when a lector proclaims the Word of God during the liturgy, Christ himself speaks to the congregation. The lector's voice becomes God's voice; the lector is the voice of Christ. The power in the Word the lector proclaims is the power of Jesus himself.

### **The Lector Creates the Voice of Christ**

The lector holds an awesome office: the lector's task as lector is to create in sound the voice of Christ. The voice of Christ is not in the printed text on the page from which the lector reads; the voice of Christ is in the sound in the air the lector creates. Like all voices, Jesus voice disappears when the sound ends. All meaning in the text can only be communicated by the lector while the sound is resonating in the air.

It is obvious, therefore, that all the lector's focus has to be on creating the meaning of the written text in the sound of his or her own voice. To create the sound of Christ -- is the fruit of many experiences of life. To read well is an utterance--expression--of the lector's whole being: as a person, as a believer, as an artist, and most of all the way the lector reads a passage is an expression of his or her personhood as a lover. If this is true of oral reading of the sacred text, it is even more true of the homilist

who preaches at the Eucharist *in persona Christi capitis ecclesiae*.

### **Most Lectors are Dull**

We have to start by acknowledging a painful reality. Most religious reading is bad. By that I mean that most of the time the reading at Mass is not really listened to by the congregation. As a matter of fact, many parishes have found it necessary to give out missals to the congregants so they “can follow along.” Most reading in the liturgy is monotonous, with little normal variation in the voice, as in the ordinary speech of human beings. As a result, it is dull. Furthermore, so often it is unfocused. Frequently, not even the lector knows the meaning of the passage, since the lector has not spent any time in serious study of the passage to be proclaimed.

The reason for this common state of affairs is that complexity of oral reading is not understood and, therefore, what is necessary to get people to listen is not appreciated. And this model of dull reading is passed on in church after church. In fact, the model is so ingrained as “reverent” reading or “proclamation” that in my years of teaching oral reading I have found that many lectors have to “wrestle with their conscience” about changing the model. It is understandable since most lectors learn to read aloud by imitating the monotonous lectors they have heard in church for years. Another habit that has been picked up by many lectors is that habit of simply looking over the reading a few moments before Mass. More than once a lector has come in just before Mass and asked me what the reading was for the day.

It is impossible even for a skilled lector to grasp the meaning of the text and communicate that meaning in sound in a quick look. A reading is ready to be

proclaimed out loud only when the lector has so familiarized himself with the text that he need only refer to it briefly from time to time. In other words, a reading is prepared when it has been practically memorized because it has been so frequently practiced out loud.

### **The Lector Needs Faith**

There are four elements that are always present in an oral reading that the congregation actually listens to. The first element is the faith of the lector. Ultimately the lector is a witness to the truth of the revelation he or she is proclaiming. In order to witness to the truth, the lector has to believe that the passage he or she is proclaiming reveals a living, viable truth of God's relationship to the lector first and to the community to which it is being proclaimed. For it is, after all, a revelation to and in a community of faith, the community where it is being read aloud. Neither the Bible nor the lectionary are private letters from God that are best read in the quietude of one's own room. The Bible is a document written to be shared with the entire believing community. As the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (Number 21) says:

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the Body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's Word and of Christ's Body. . . . For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets his children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the Word of God is so great that it

stands as the support and energy of the Church.

A good example of the need to see divine revelation in the light of faith is to consider this brief passage from the Letter to the Ephesians (Eph 1:3-5):

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

This passage is not just a revealed proposition of truth: "God chooses his people." It is a profound expression of Paul's own religious experience of being specially chosen by God to be a member of God's Church. Therefore, to read this passage so that the lector communicates its full truth, the lector has to decide: 1) What is my attitude towards this passage? 2) Does it resonate in my being so that I can witness to its truth? Furthermore, 3) Do I accept it as a revelation of God? If so, 4) what is the purpose of the revelation?

The answers to these questions require an active faith on the part of the lector, a faith that has been deepened by the consideration of the reading the lector will proclaim. Without the lector's witness of personal faith, they are simply words; they are not expressions of faith that will lead to faith in the hearers

### **The Lector Needs to Understand the Reading**

The second element that will cause the community to listen to the reading is the personal understanding of the lector. The lector needs to understand what God is

revealing to us through the human author of the scripture passage. To arrive at the meaning of the passage, the lector has to have some basic familiarity with the passage as it fits into the whole of revelation. Specifically, the lector has to know : 1)The focus of the passage, 2) the context of the passage and 3)the purpose of passage. All this basic exegesis is necessary so that the lector understands why the passage is important for the spiritual lives of his listeners. The lector will know why the reading is of value to his listener because it of value to himself or herself.

### **The Lector Needs to Appreciate the Power of the Word of God**

The third element in fruitful oral reading is an appreciation of the power of the Word of God because the lector is a minister or agent of the Word's power.

Scripture begins with the image of God creating:

Gen 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

The heart of the Bible story of God's creating is the Word. Unlike other creation myths from the surrounding peoples, like the Mesopotamians, the creation of the universe is not the result of a cosmic battle, a struggle between gods. The universe is not the bloody remnants of the slaughter of the monster, Tiamat. Neither is creation a serious construction project requiring the laying out of plans and employing many workers. Creation is simply a Word uttered by the all-powerful God: "Let there be

light, and there was light."

This simple creation of the universe by God' Word is developed in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. The creating Word of God is the identifying mark of the God who speaks to Abraham in Chapter 12:

Gen 12:1-4: Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves."

The Lord (Yahweh) who spoke to Abram is the same Lord who spoke the Word that created the universe. And it this speaking to Abram (later God changed his name to Abraham)that begins the entire process of our own salvation. For Abraham is our father in faith, and we believers are the great nation, the children God promised to Abraham when he first spoke to him.

Gal 3:6 Thus Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith.

The Gospel of John develops this same theme of the power of God's Word. Jesus is the Word uttered from the beginning

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him nothing was made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Then, John ties it all together in John 6:22-71.

In passage after passage throughout the Scriptures, *Word* is not primarily thought. *Word* is a power given to a person from a person and the *Word* of the person is identified with its effect. Two examples from ordinary life show the power of even the human word. What holds a marriage together is the promise a man and wife make to one another when, at the altar, they say to each other: "I do." It is a simple utterance, but couples have to come back to the reality of their word time and time again, in good times and in bad.

Another example is the word, "I love you." How hard it is to say that word and mean it. We have cheapened, "I love you all". But to actually look at another person and say it and mean it takes a real commitment of will. Fathers so often can't say "I love you" to their teen-aged children, or teenagers have trouble saying "I love you" to their parents. I have conducted marriage vow renewal services, and I am always intrigued by the fact that so many couples married twenty, thirty or forty years don't look at each

other when they renew their vows. Words are not cheap – they are powerful and sometimes the power is frightening.

To read effectively, the lector has to appreciate the power of the words he or she is reading aloud. As Jesus said: “The words I have spoken to you are spirit, and they are life (Jn 6:63).” When the lector reads God's Word aloud in faith, the lector is creating new life of faith in the listeners. The lector changes hearts by proclaiming God’s Word of power and life. Consider the meaning of the opening passage of Ephesians:

Eph 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

When the lector proclaims that passage so that is really heard, really enters into the depths of the listeners’ souls, his listeners are transformed by grace, and the lector is the one who brings about that transformation.

### **The Influence of Literate Culture Impedes Oral Proclamation**

Unfortunately this theological truth has difficulty getting translated into a pastoral practice of reading aloud. The basic difficulty is cultural. The American culture has been formed by the printed word. All Americans are expected to be able to read printed texts: signs, directions, manuals. Maybe the words will be translated into

Spanish or another language, but the result will always be print. That means the lector, by cultural conditioning, is more concerned with reading the written text than creating the meaning of the text in sound. In an oral culture, sounds are the medium of communication. The problem, therefore, for the lector is that the Bible is not a book of dead letters. The Bible is basically out of an oral tradition that leads to living faith. The oral Word is written down to be handed on through the centuries but when it is orally proclaimed the Holy Spirit writes the Word in living hearts of those who hear it .

Paul writes to the Corinthians: 2 Cor 3:3

You are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

The glory of the revelation the lector proclaims is a light of God's glory.

For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2 Cor 4:6)

In the practical order, all this revelation means that when the lector is reading aloud God's holy Word to God's people, he or she is actually shining the light of God's glory into the hearts and minds of the listeners.

### **The Lector Needs to have Learned the Art of Oral Communication**

The final element for effective lectoring is the skill or art to communicate via the spoken Word. The spoken Word is the means by which the lector communicates his or

her faith, understanding and appreciation of the power of the Word. These elements need to be brought together dynamically in the actual oral reading of the text. Only then can the lector make God's Word a living Word of Salvation to those who hear him or her.

Anyone who has done any kind of oral communication knows just how important the oral skills are. The art of communication is vital for teaching a class of grade schoolers; successful lecturers are very skillful in delivering a lecture to a graduate seminar in a way that holds the seminarists attention. Sales persons spend hours honing their "pitch" to a perspective client. I know a trial lawyer who has built a mock jury box in his basement so he can practice his summations for the jury. In all these oral situations, the speaker is well aware of just how important it is to speak well. Lectoring is not acting, but it is telling a story - a story of salvation, using the saving Words of God and making them exist for the believing community today through sound.

Now this seems mean that a great deal of preparation has to go into the preparing of even the briefest passage to the community of the faithful. And it does. Without adequate preparation, the Word of God will not be given voice, and faith will not be nourished.

It is at this point that the lector has to apply the principles of oral communication to the proclaiming of the Word of God in the liturgy.

**Purposeful Conversation is the Model of All Fruitful Oral Communication**

If you listen to purposeful conversation and you will find we communicate meaning through emphasis and subordination. For example, if you are trying to persuade someone to come to your point of view, you look them in the eye, and then bring out the meaning you want to communicate by emphasizing what you think are the important words, and subordinating the others.

I am sure most of us have been corrected by our parents at one time or another with the forceful phrase: "If I told you once, I've told you a thousand times: Don't do that." It was said with enough force so that we got the meaning; we did not have to even wait to understand the words, the tone of address was enough to get and hold our complete attention. That is the essence of oral communication; create sounds that transmit meaning. It is a common human experience. We do not really have to be taught how to communicate what we mean when we are talking with friends or family. We do it all the time without reflecting on what we are doing. But when we do analyze conversation speech, we find we communicate meaning by changing the four elements that make up the spoken word: pace, pitch, volume, quality. We speak slowly; we speak quickly; we raise our pitch or we lower it; sometimes we are loud; sometimes we almost whisper we speak so softly. Sometimes our voice has an angry edge to it; other times we speak in a loving, sympathetic manner. All these variations we use so ordinarily convey a variety of meanings, emotions and attitudes. The skillful orator, like the skillful actor can convey a great range of feelings, even as we do in ordinary conversation – the stuff of daily life. No one would say we were acting then. In fact, "putting on airs" implies

that somehow we are manipulating our voice – not to convey meaning – but to communicate false meaning.

The best and most common example of such artificial manipulation is “the preacher’s tone.” We recognize it instantly. It is speaking on a monotone, ending all phrases on a downward inflection. It is usually adopted as a means of communicating holy authority or sacred reverence. Actually, the listener will probably simply label such stentorian speech as being a phoney.

The key to the voice that invites and holds the attention of the listener is *dynamic change*. That is, by changing the four modes of emphasis not only between words, but even within words. For example, we can say "What" on a rising intonation, or a falling one; but we can also express great surprise by changing the pitch of the voice within the word itself; beginning low, going high, and falling back down at the end. All within a single, short syllable. We do this all the time, but the lector has to be able to do it so as to bring out the meaning of the passage being read orally. Another very effective tool for the lector is the pause. Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen was a master of the pause; he was able to create astounding effects in creating spiritual meaning simply by pausing at the right moment for the right length of time.

### **Foreign Accents Impede Oral Communication**

Just as we can communicate meaning through the effective creation of sounds, we can seriously impede communication through the poor use of sounds. The most common misuse of sound in lecturing is the foreign accent – an accent which is difficult

for the English listening audience to understand. The result is, the congregation simply does not listen to the lector. This is a growing problem in parishes where there is a mistaken idea that ethnic speakers should be regularly used as lectors to represent ethnic minorities within the parish. One lector from Africa was all dressed up in a magnificent African dress. She clearly stood for something, but she could not be understood by the majority of her listeners because of her heavy African accent. The effect of ethnic representation was lost along with the loss of the Word of God. Certainly parishes do not use people with obvious speech defects as lectors – such as stutterers. But for some reason, heavy accents are not considered defects, even though listeners cannot understand the lector.

### **The Goal of Lectoring**

The goal of lectoring is very simple, but also very difficult to achieve. The goal is to read the Word of God aloud so that the listeners can hear the Word clearly, understand its meaning, and be moved in the depths of their hearts by the revelation of God.