

Catholic

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The Lectionary HEART OF THE BIBLE

BY ROBERT M. HAMMA

When was the last time you heard or read a passage from the Bible? For most Catholics, the answer to this question would be the last time they went to Mass. Although most Catholics own a Bible, the majority of us do not read it on a regular basis, certainly not once a week. So whether we know it or not, the most frequent exposure to the word of God, for most of us, comes from the *Lectionary*.

The *Lectionary* is the large book from which the lectors and the presider read the specific biblical readings appointed for each Mass. It differs from the Bible in that it contains only those parts of the Bible that have been chosen for use at the Eucharist and at

other sacramental celebrations, such as baptisms or weddings. It contains at least one selection from each book of the Bible except for Obadiah, the shortest book of the Old Testament (only twenty-one verses long!).

Even though it does not contain all of the Bible, it contains the heart of it, if not most of it. It, along with the *Book of the Gospels* from which the Sunday Gospel is proclaimed, comprise the liturgical Bible, and we treat the books with the honor and respect due to God's word. Since the *Lectionary* is symbolic of our love for God's word, during the liturgy, the *Lectionary* itself should always be used by lay lectors rather than a missalette or a sheet of paper.



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The Place of the Word Before Vatican II

The words *lectionary* and *lector* go back to the Latin word for “reading”: *lectio*. Like so much of our liturgy today, the *Lectio-ary* as we know it was created as a result of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). Prior to the council, there was no separate book that contained all the readings. They were incorporated with the other texts for Mass in the missal. Those of you who recall the Mass before Vatican II will remember the altar boys moving the missal from the right side to the left side of the altar after the epistle and before the Gospel. Both the epistle and Gospel were, of course, read in Latin by the priest with his back to the people. The faithful read along in their missals. But the use of a missal by the laity was a twentieth-century innovation, a fruit of the same liturgical movement that eventually gave us the *Lectio-ary*.

On Sundays, it was customary that after the Scriptures were read in Latin, they were then read in English from the pulpit. The Gospel readings were set on a one-year cycle, the same passage being read on the same Sunday or feast day of each year. The result was that most Catholics received a much more limited exposure to the Bible than we do today. Mark’s Gospel, for example, was read on only four occasions during the course of the year. The sermon that followed did not always focus on the Gospel itself. Oftentimes, it was on an unrelated theme, such as a short teaching about some aspect of the Creed.

“The Table of God’s Word”

This picture of the first part of the Mass before the council is in sharp contrast to the Liturgy of the Word as we know it today. For this, we have to thank Vatican II and specifically the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) from 1963. When the council convened, the reform of the liturgy was one of its first concerns. The council recognized that “Sacred scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy” (SC 24) and called for changes that would make this principle a living reality. It recommended readings “from holy scripture” that would be “more varied and suitable” (SC 35).

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