

Part Two: The Service Of Readings

The Liturgy of the Word

By DAVID E. NOWAK

The beginnings of the service of readings go back to the synagogue practice with which the Apostles and Christians of the primitive Church had been acquainted as they grew up.

The Synagogue service, indeed the very nature of the religion of the Old Testament as a religion of revelation, heavily relied upon the reading of the sacred books. On appointed days, and above all on the Sabbath, the community

assembled and passages were read from the "Law" and the "Prophets."

A homily was customarily inserted after the more important reading from the "Law," and each assembly included a congregational prayer spoken by one of its members. The service concluded with the blessing of the priest, or other corresponding prayer.

These elements of the synagogue service (readings, homily, and prayer of the faithful) are unmistakably found in the service of Christian congregations at an early date. St. Justin describes the beginning of the Christian eucharist in 150 A.D.: "The records of the Apostles and the writings of the Prophets are read the person presiding gives a discourse to alert the people and exhort them to imitate these great teachings. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers" (Apol. I 67).

Throughout the history of the Christian liturgy the number of readings has varied from rite to rite, but three readings are fairly universal. Originally Rome seems to have had three readings at Mass: first from the Old Testament, then from the New, and then from the Gospels. This arrangement has been restored in the new Roman Lectionary in a three-year cycle for Sundays and holydays.

On ordinary days the synoptic Gospels are spread over a year preceded by a reading from either the Old or New Testament. During Eastertide, in conformity with liturgical tradition, all readings are taken from the New Testament.

The new Lectionary was prepared in line with principles found in the earliest lectionaries of the ancient Church such as consecutive reading of the New Testament, selection of books traditionally associated with certain liturgical seasons, and choice of pericopes featured at great feasts or in baptismal catechesis.

In the primitive Church "all scripture" was believed to be "inspired of God" (2 Tim 3:16). From New Testament times the Old Testament has been accepted as Christian scripture. Today, in the Liturgy of the Word, the Old

Testament text is chosen to reflect on or prepare us for the Gospel reading. It either magnifies and clarifies the Gospel teaching, or presents a contrast between events or personalities in the two Testaments. Together they share "the table of the Lord."

In all liturgies the last of the readings consists of a passage from the Gospels. As well, our liturgical tradition invariably calls for special efforts to reverently distinguish the Gospel from the other readings.

The Roman practice for enhancing the Gospel reading includes a special reader (deacon, or priest other than the one presiding — i.e., not the homilist), procession, standing, sung acclamations, sign of the cross, kissing the book, prayer of purification, incensing the book (and in some cases the people following the readings), enthroning the book, bowing chanting the Gospel, listening, and binding quality volumes.

Never has the Gospel proclamation been distinguished by reading it from a second lectern. And it is as inappropriate to casually read the Gospel from a throw-away missalette as it would be to offer the Blood of Christ in a dixie-cup. The Lectionary or Book of Gospels is itself a symbol of the presence of Christ.

Essentially the service of readings manifests the mystery of the Word of God. In the Liturgy of the Word, "which has echoed forth from you resoundingly" (Thess 1:8) God's Word is a living presence. It is the Word of a self-revealing God in whom we are chosen to bear God's "yes."

CFC NOVICE

Kevin J. Bleier of Rochester was one of 11 novices admitted Aug. 6 to the Congregation of Christian Brothers, the order reported last week. The ceremony took place in St. Joseph's Church, in Kingston. Bleier, a son of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred R. Bleier of Nichols Street, attended Bishop Kearney High School and Iona College, New Rochelle.

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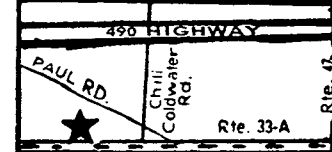
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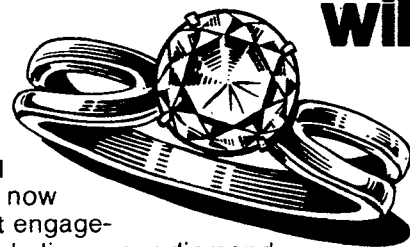
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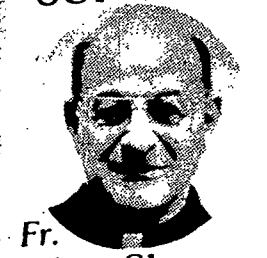
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WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Lk. 13:22-30. (R1) Is 66:18-21. (R2) Hebr. 12:5-7, 11-13.

The theme of Sunday's readings is salvation is offered to all — not just to the Chosen People: "I come to gather nations of every language." How will this be done? "I will send fugitives to the nations." Who are the fugitives? God's people, dispersed by both the Assyrian and the Babylonian Captivities. What a light Tobit was to the Assyrians! And Daniel and Esther and Nehemiah to the Babylonians and Persians!

But salvation is not automatic. Someone asked Jesus, "Lord, are they few in number who are to be saved?"

As usual, our Lord did not answer a question that merely would satisfy curiosity. Instead, he pointed out what was needed to be saved: "Try to come in through the narrow door."

First, our Lord said "try" — keep striving. A danger we can run into is to cease trying. Like the Chosen People, Catholics and Christians can delude themselves into thinking that once believers, that's the end of it. They've arrived. They no longer need to strive.

That is a pit into which many fall. There is not finality to the endeavor of the Christian life. We can never rest and say, "This is it!" "We've made it." The devil once told Don Bosco to take it easy and not work so hard. The saint retorted, "I'll rest when you do." We can never rest, because our enemy does not rest. Living the Christian life is like rowing against a fast-flowing stream; if we stop rowing, we are swept back. An Alpine guide died in an avalanche. The epitaph inscribed on his tombstone was "He died climbing." So the true Christian must live trying, striving, climbing! A saint is a sinner who keeps trying.

The second point our Lord made was that we should try to come in through the narrow gate. There's the rub! Some try to be saved,

but according to their rules. We can serve God our way or we can serve God His way. His way is the narrow way. Our way is the broad way. "My ways are not your ways." And why is this so? Because we are always cheating, deceiving ourselves. Who has himself for a judge is judged by a fool. What damned error is there, wrote Shakespeare, that some sober brow has not justified with a text of Scripture? Divorce, abortion, Gay Rights(?) euthanasia, decriminalization of drugs — these are only some of the things condoned, justified, legalized today, not by savages or barbarians, not by pagans without benefit of revelation, but by men and women who parade as Christian and civilized human beings. "How broad is the way that leads to damnation and how many there are who choose to travel it."

For this reason the gospel brings out yet another point, namely, there will be surprises in heaven. "Some who are last will be first, and some who are first will be last." St. Augustine once said that when we get to heaven, there will be three surprises for us.

First, we shall miss seeing people who we really thought would "make it," but for some reason known to God, they didn't.

Second, we shall find people there who we really didn't think deserved it, and with whom we would not care to associate.

Third, the biggest surprise of all — that we were there ourselves! "Amazing Grace."

There are four kinds of pride: face, place, race and grace. The worst is the last. To think we've got it made and need no more to try to come in the narrow gate. "I have come," said Jesus, "not to call the righteous, but sinners."



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