

The Liturgy of the Word

Part IV: Ministry of the Word

The office of lector is an ancient and honored ministry in the Church. Tertullian (160-230) is the first to mention an "officially" recognized lector in the community. But the appointment of a special reader, always someone other than the leader of the divine service, is evident

even in the writings of Justin Martyr (ca. 150).

It is clear in Justin's "First Apology" that the minister of the faithful, speaks the Word which rises from the Church to God. From this reference it also seems clear that lectors were to have received a certain amount

of education which distinguished them from the rest of the community. Nevertheless, from Tertullian on the presence of a lector has been attested to in Churches of the West as well as the East. Both Hippolytus of Rome (3rd Century) and St. Augustine (5th Century) describe the Office and even the installation of the lector.


organizational structures were adopted. And the general human tendency to institutionalize a charism surrounded the ministry of lector with increasing juridical norms and procedures.

Before long, the presbyteral ministry began to incorporate the functions of other ministries and create a division between "minister" and "those ministered to." After the 6th century the lay ministry of lector disappeared and was supplanted almost entirely by a minor clerical order.

Not until Aug. 15, 1972, in the document "Ministeria quaedam," was the "ministry of lector" reestablished as an office in the Church, no longer reserved to candidates for the sacrament of Orders.

Today the Church has recognized again the need for responsible non-clerical yet well-prepared ministers of the Word of God - men and women entrusted by the community with the right and duty to serve the community as capable successors to the ancient office of lector.

WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Lk. 14:25-33. (R1) Wis. 9:13-18. (R2) Phlm. 9-17.

Wisdom was the last book of the Old Testament to be written (in Alexandria, around 90 B.C.). Alexandria at that time posed serious problems for the Jewish faith. The first century Hellenists of Alexandria were much like our 20th century intellectuals: they felt self-sufficient, that there was no need of God.

Not so long ago, a man sought to justify his non-practice of religion by saying to me, "I live a good life I don't hurt anyone. I am a good man. Why should I go to church?" My answer, unbeknownst to me at the time, was practically the same as that of the author of Wisdom

I had said to him, "How do you know your life is good? How do you know it is pleasing to God? Or that it is even Christian?" The author of Wisdom had said, "What man knows God's counsel, or who can conceive what the Lord intends?" In a word, to know God's will, revelation is needed. Man unaided cannot arrive at the fulness of truth

This is especially true of morality. Man by himself will make what is fair foul, and what is foul fair. He'll "foul up" the distinction between good and evil. What moral aberrations are countenanced today in the name of reason and common sense unenlightened by God's revelations: artificial contraception, abortion, homosexuality, divorce, and so on and on. Wisdom tells us why. "The deliberations of mortals are timid, their plans unsure." Why? Because man is mortal. His life is short. Death is at the end of every mortal road. He has not time enough on his own to probe all truth. Then, too, man is a bundle of needs and passions. The needs of our "earthen shelter," the body, causes a busyness that can choke out truth. The tumult and the shouting of our passions can blind us to it. "The corruptible body burdens the soul and the earthen shelter weighs down the mind that has many concerns."

Add to this the puniness of the human mind. It can hardly know everything there is to know about the things man can see, feel, touch and hear. "What is within our grasp we find with difficulty." There's much of mystery even in the splash and gurgle of a brook. Tennyson confessed that a single wild flower baffled his understanding. Flower in the crannied

wall, — I pluck you out of the crannies, — I hold you here, root and all, in my hand, — Little flower— but if I could understand — What you are, root and all, and all in all... If I could but understand— and yet we dare presume, on our own, to scan the long savannahs of the blue, to unbolt Nature's secreties, to fly with Pegasus wings to the throne of God, and aspire, Lucifer-like, to divine knowledge without the help of the Divine.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis show where man goes on his own— he ends up in a Babel of confusion. So God sent Wisdom, His Son and His Holy Spirit to set man's steps right

Yet modern man tends to slough off God again. As a result, his wisdom turns to folly. Wisdom said that to follow God's way one must carry a cross. The hallmark of secularistic society today, however, is permissiveness, incessant catering to the whims and fancies, lusts and licenses of man. And God's verdict on all this? "Their end is destruction."

We need God's revelation. He has made it. It continues to unfold in a teaching Church and a people of God living the Faith. Apart from that Church and people, man by himself will no more walk straight than a toddler without a helping hand from its mother

Well might we pray with the psalmist "Teach us that we may gain wisdom of heart"

A very detailed document dating from the year 303 AD records an event which took place at the end of the last great persecution. It reports that a Roman official, Munatus Felix by name, arrived at the house of a bishop named Paul where the Christian assembly customarily met, and demanded that Paul deliver up the scriptures to him. Apparently, they would be used as evidence against the Christians if necessary.

However, Paul had to answer, "The lectors have the scriptures." If he wanted the Christian scriptures, the Roman official must ask those who were given charge of them. Later, it turns out that not even the lectors had all the scriptures because the deacons were responsible for the Gospel books

This account indicates that each— Bishop, deacons, and lectors— was a significant member of the Christian community to whom was entrusted a specific responsibility according to their ministry. As ministers of the Word, the lectors were responsible for the proclamation and care of the scriptures— even to guarding them within their homes.

Yet, as time went on, the ancient dignity of the ministry of lector became ever more clericalized. The immediacy of the experience of the Risen Lord began to fade. The Church grew numerically and expanded culturally. Civil

Occupying a position of leadership in the liturgical assembly, lectors must develop a sense of the immense importance of the Ministry of the Word. This work of proclaiming the Word in the assembly and in their lives is at the heart of the Church's mission. Essentially, it is a work of faith.

Diarmuid McGann writes:

"A word given
Is a revelation and a
Communication, an
expression
And manifestation of the
person
It speaks of his mission
And testifies to his
Meaning."

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