

Excerpts from video presentation at Boston College by Sr. Eileen Schuller, O.S.U., 2022

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## **Reading the Bible in the Lectionary: Gift and Challenge** **by Sr. Eileen Schuller, O.S.U.**

### **Second Vatican Council and the Development of Our Modern Lectionary**

The current lectionary is widely acknowledged as one of the major fruits of the Second Vatican Council. *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* gave rather explicit instructions, and I'll quote here from Section 51, "in order that believers can be provided with a richer diet of God's word, the rich heritage of the Bible is to be opened more widely in such a way that a fuller and more nourishing selection of the scriptures gets read to the people within a fixed period of years." This was the mandate of the Council Fathers to the Study Group 11 -- that's its official title -- a group of about twenty scholars who were tasked to rework the lectionary that had been used for almost 400 years since at least 1570 -- a one year lectionary with special readings for many feast days, and a very limited use of the Old Testament.

That group did a massive amount of work in a surprisingly short time between 1964 and 1969. The lectionary was officially promulgated by Pope Paul VI in May 1969, and introduced in most places throughout the world on the first Sunday of Advent 1971. So it is now in its 50th year.

### **The Sunday Lectionary**

The Sunday Lectionary implicitly and in practice forms a canon within a canon. And even for Catholics who are engaged in personal Bible reading and study, it is still the case that certain passages, especially from the Gospels, are experienced in a special way when and because they are read within a liturgical context. You can think about standing at the Gospel procession, a decorated book, a vocal communal response, and above all a context that is orientated toward the Eucharistic celebration.

So now let us move more specifically to consider how the Sunday lectionary has and has not fulfilled the mandate that it was given. That is, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy asks that the "treasures of the Bible be opened up more lavishly so that a richer share of God's word may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word." Many of you will recognize that quote and there is no doubt that we are hearing more scripture read within the liturgical context of Sunday mass than prior to Vatican II, and for this we can only be immensely grateful.

This has given many Catholics a sense of familiarity that the Bible is not such a strange closed book accessible only to the elites, whether academically or spiritually. Remember that the three year cycle repeats over and over and we are now reading most passages for the 16th or 17th time. Some passages even more than that if they are repeats. And of course, certain passages still do come up quite rarely because of the calendar of the church year.

### **The 1993 Pontifical Biblical Commission on the Limits of the Lectionary**

In 1993, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, which is a distinguished group of about twenty officially appointed biblical scholars from around the world, in a major publication called “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” commented on precisely the passage in the “Constitution for the Liturgy” that asked for readings from the Bible to be more abundant, more varied and more suitable. The commission made quite a blunt judgment. It's said in its present state, “the lectionary only partially fulfills its goal.”

### **Omissions and Problems in the Lectionary**

So what is the problem or to word the question more carefully, "How do we uncover some of the underlying roots of what we perceive to be the problem?"

The Pontifical Biblical Commission did not get down to specifics in how the lectionary only partially fulfills its goals. But over the past decades, there have been many evaluations, critiques and attempts to articulate the problems. The formulation may be somewhat different depending on if one is starting from a biblical liturgical or pastoral perspective, but on reviewing literature, I find that much of the discussion falls into a few specific categories. And given the limitations of time today, I will focus on two issues and then one specific consequence of each that is particularly relevant today.

- The first has to do with omissions what is and what is not included in the Sunday lectionary.
- Secondly is how the Old Testament is presented. I will use the term Old Testament, although I know others might prefer terms like First Testament, First Covenant.

Although the intent of lectionary reform was to open up the treasure of God's word, the aim has never been simply to read as much as the Bible as possible, particularly on an individual Sunday.

People are often surprised, even disturbed to find that on Sundays and feast days we hear only about 40% of the New Testament and closer to 4% of the Old Testament.

In the introduction to the lectionary, there is a section that bears close reading. It is entitled "Main Criteria Applied in Choosing and Arranging the Readings: Section 73 – 77. Four criteria are given: a) Respect for the longstanding liturgical tradition in assigning certain books for particular liturgical seasons (The Acts of the Apostles for Easter season, Isaiah for Advent; b) and the criteria arising from the issue that we have just discussed on length. The other two criteria named explicitly are c) difficult texts and d) omission of texts.

The introduction admits quite bluntly, "Texts that present real difficulties are avoided for pastoral reasons." And it goes on to explain that a difficulty may be objective, complex, literary critical or exegetical problems or the difficulties may lie in the faithful's ability to understand the texts a bit later it talks of omitting verses that are suited pastorally or that involves truly difficult problems.

### **Omissions of Women in the Lectionary**

If we draw out the underlining thrust of this criteria and the concern for pastoral realities and combine this with the concern expressed elsewhere about the need for the word of God to provide the faithful with the knowledge of the whole of God's world (I'm quoting from Section 60), I think we have the basis for adjudicating and reinforcing one of the most persistent and strident critiques of the lectionary -- the passages about women, both what is included and what is not included.

So much has been written on this topic in recent years and hopefully I do not need to even repeat the basic facts here, although I want to note that the issues were already being articulated in the early 1980s. That is within a decade of the first completion of the three year cycle, so this is not a new issue.

The non-inclusion of many of the passages in which women are named and where women take an active or a leadership role, as well as, the tendency to omit sections about women when a short version of a reading is given as an alternative mean that, for our Sunday Catholic, many of the rich biblical resources about the role of women in the Old Testament and especially in the early Christian communities are still simply unknown.

I don't know how many times students in an Introductory Bible class at university or in a parish study setting students have asked, "Why didn't I hear that in church? Why haven't I heard these names? Shiprah and Puah? The daughter of Abraham who is healed? The only Lucan miracle that's not included on a Sunday? The women in the early church -- Tabitha, Lydia, and Priscilla?

Furthermore, the realities of our world, the changed role of women in secular society and at least to some extent in the church, the documented studies of how the Bible has been used to justify domestic abuse. These are obvious pastoral reasons for both the inclusion and the exclusion of certain texts.

### **What can be done now in the context of the present lectionary?**

There are possibilities admittedly limited of what can be done within the context of the present lectionary, choosing the longer reading when it includes a reference to women preaching on passages even if they are not read, drawing on passages about women included elsewhere in the lectionary, for instance, in masses for special occasions, and we can deliberately choose passages omitted in the lectionary for non-liturgical occasions such as parish meetings, prayer sessions, and so on.

### **Omissions from the Old/First Testament**

The second area that has been most frequently highlighted as problematic and in need of ongoing attention and revision is the readings from the Old Testament. On the one hand, in comparison with the pre Vatican era, we should not underestimate the impact of simply having a weekly reading from the Old Testament. There is an impact that is both didactic and psychological. We respond, thanks be to God, to a reading from one of the great prophets from Chronicles, from Proverbs, with the same acclimation of gratitude as we respond to a reading from the Apostle Paul at present in ordinary time. The Old Testament reading is chosen because of its correlation, and I take that word specifically from the introduction, "its correlation with the gospel reading of the day." In Advent lent an Easter. There is again, "A harmony of a different kind as all the readings fit into the season."

Unfortunately, correlation has sometimes been applied according to a patristic typological principle that is little understood by most hearers today or by a simplistic prophecy fulfillment relationship that easily slides into supersessionism or at worse by a paradigm. Nice. Good Jesus mean bad Jews. I mean the classical example that is often used is the pairing of Jesus's healing of a leper with the Levitical law about ostracizing lepers. There are other ways of including the Old Testament, especially as a more focused semi-continuous reading of key books in the Old Testament, as has been introduced for the Sundays of ordinary time in the revised common lectionary or simply a matter of more judicious and fair pairing. For example, in the revised common lectionary, it pairs the gospel healing of the leper with the narrative of Alicia and the healing of the leper naman.

Now furthermore, just as the broader context of omissions in the lectionary has a specific resonance in terms of women, so too, concern about the use of the Old Testament has specific

implications for understanding relations between Christianity and Judaism, both historically and in the present. We can turn to another document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Jewish people in the Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible." Section ten calls attention to the relationship between how we understand the Old Testament and the New Testament and how we think about the links between Christian Church and the Jewish people.

Where do so many people get their ideas about Jews and Judaism? Conceptions such as the dichotomy between Jewish law and Christian grace? Or that the laws of the Jewish piety are unjust and burdensome and responsible for routinely marginalizing women, children, the poor and the disabled, in contrast to Christian welcome and openness. In certain parts of the world, Africa, Asian, and even in certain parts of North America where the Jewish population is very small, many people do not have firsthand experience, with religiously practicing contemporary Jews as individuals. Their understanding of Jews and Judaism is shaped often in unconscious ways by what they have read on Sunday from the Old Testament and from the New Testament.

There are also New Testament passages that can, can lend themselves to an anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish interpretation. Whether such passages are inherently antisemitic is another question and a much debated point in current New Testament scholarship and Jewish Christian dialogue. One immediately thinks of a passage like Matthew 27:25, "His blood be upon us and his children." Now directives from various church bodies, from bishop's conferences state clearly that that passage must be heard within the context of "Nostra Aetate" and numerous subsequent church documents that have gone far beyond "Nostra Aetate" toward a new understanding of the enduring covenant relationship between God and Israel. But these documents are usually unfamiliar, completely unknown to our Sunday Catholic who is hearing the readings.

Often the immediate reaction or solution is to call for the removal of such passages from the lectionary, and this would involve not only verses in the passion narratives but also in the Gospel of John and many of the readings from the acts of the Apostle post-Easter season. But I don't think its exclusion is the answer, not only because of the issues it raises in terms of the integrity of scripture, but for more practical reasons. At this time in our history. It is by hearing these problematic passages and wrestling with them both as the ordinary Sunday Catholic and especially for our theologians and experts in dialogues, this is how they are challenged to deepen our exploration of as yet unresolved questions, yet unexplored paths toward a new relationship under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

To articulate problems with the lectionary to name the ways it does not always fulfill its goal is of course only a very first step and perhaps the easiest step. Can we, and even should we be thinking of a significant revision of the lectionary after 50 years? This is not happening, at least as far as I know at the official level. It does not seem to be a high priority, but perhaps there's more behind the scene activities than I know about. And as I have implied in my discussion of Jewish Christian relations, this may not yet be the time for revision. There are issues -

theological, biblical, and liturgical that need further reflection and study on a much broader scale before the fruits of such a development can find expression in the lectionary.

But what can be done at present? I'll close with only a few points to get you thinking.

Of course, there is the obvious and often repeated exhortation to supplement the lectionary with good preaching, Bible study, *Lexio Divina*. That is not to ask of the lectionary more than it can or should do. The task of opening the scriptures involves more than the lectionary. In addition, we can make a concerted effort to use the present resources of the lectionary as comprehensively as possible. We might even make conscious choice of texts that are not going to be heard in the Sunday lectionary.

This intermittent time when we recognize the problems that do not yet have a revision is also a time to reflect on the reality of our pastoral experience. I'm not sure we have given enough thought about communication realities, both the good and the bad of our social media orientated society. How does this affect how we hear scripture? Has the attention span changed the capacity to listen? What does it mean when regular attendance at mass is no longer a given when we cannot assume that the hearers of the word on a given Sunday were present to hear the readings last Sunday? How might that affect the structuring of the lectionary?

And this interim time can also be a time of learning -- learning from the experience of those churches who have been using the Revised Common Lectionary, learning from their what they have seen as advantages and disadvantages. There are formal more ongoing discussions within bodies such as the consultation on Christian on Common Texts, but there's much to be learned and shared from discussions among local groups of pastors who are regularly preaching on different versions of the lectionary. And there is a place for ongoing discussion with those who have experimented more radically to develop alternate lectionaries -- The Comprehensive Catholic Lectionary, The Women's Lectionary, Lectionary for the Seasons of Creation revisions, especially for the Advent and Lenten cycles. We know these texts are circulating and being used. The insight and wisdom gleaned from both their successes and their failures needs to be brought somehow into the discussion.

### **The 2008 Synod on the Word: Proposition 16 &**

And finally, to conclude, I would like to quote from the 2008 Synod on the Word of God. One of the propositions that was put forward to the Pope by the Synod Fathers was Proposition 16, that an "examination be carried out of the Roman lectionary to see if the current selection and ordering at the readings is truly adequate to the mission of this historical moment". It has often been noted that Pope Benedict in his post Synod document, "*Verbum Domini*," did not choose

to adopt this proposition. Rather, in Section 57 of *Verbum Domini*, he spoke of the importance of the lectionary and how it has "born fruit in a richer access to Sacred Scripture, which is now offered in abundance at Sunday mass.

He goes on to acknowledge difficulties in sometimes seeing the relationship between readings and urged that these difficulties be approached, referring to what he calls the inherent unity of the Bible as a whole and by better catechetical resources. The last sentence is somewhat unexpected. It acknowledges, "there are other problems and difficulties." These should be brought to the attention of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments."

Now, I'm not just suggesting a letter writing campaign to Rome, although that might be of some value. I do see in Pope Benedict's comments a certain realism. This is a time for praise and thanksgiving for the gift of the lectionary, but also a time to acknowledge that there are challenges and unresolved issues as we look ahead to the next 50 years.