

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 9: Chopping up the Bible

Consider this challenge: Take the whole Bible and figure out how to cut it up into bite-sized pieces that can be used over 156 Sundays, plus a few dozen major feast days. Take into account the seasons of the liturgical year, as well as 2000 years of previous ways of doing the same thing. Then, when you have all the Sundays and major feasts figured out, decide how to divide what's left into about six hundred weekdays to create a two-year list of readings for daily Mass. Add to that another whole set of Masses for special needs and occasions, including weddings and funerals, all of which need a number of readings for different circumstances.

In the process, of course, you will have to decide which verses of the Bible are most important and which ones we should never read out loud in church. You have to determine how long each reading should be and where to start and stop each passage. Then you have to choose appropriate psalms for the responsorial psalm after the first reading and appropriate verses for the acclamation before the gospel.

Those are just some of the challenges faced by those who created the book of readings that we call the lectionary. In making their decisions, they used two main patterns for choosing readings.

Generally the first reading is from the Old Testament, though during the Easter season it comes from the Acts of the Apostles. The second reading is from the New Testament letters or the Book of Revelation, and the third text is from one of the four gospels. For major feasts, like Christmas and Easter, all the readings are chosen to fit the feast, so they all fit together well.

In Ordinary Time, outside the major festal seasons, a different principle comes into play. We read through the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, one each year, in what is called a semi-continuous reading. We don't read every verse, but we work through the gospel chapter by chapter. John's gospel is used most often during the Easter season in all three years.

The first reading is then chosen to relate to the gospel passage, and the psalm is chosen to respond to that first reading. The second reading, though, is also a semi-continuous reading of other New Testament books, especially the letters of St. Paul. This means it goes its merry way, not necessarily linked to the other readings but giving us another set of ideas to ponder.

The goal of this rather complicated structure is simple: to expose us to more of the Bible than we used to hear in church. Before 1970, the Lectionary had only one year's worth of readings; now there is a three-year cycle for Sundays and a two-year cycle for weekdays.

The reason for this, of course, is that Christians look to the Bible as the source of wisdom and as a way to meet the Lord. Beyond our use of the scriptures in church, we should really be reading them at home, too. The more familiar we are with the Bible and the characters and stories it contains, the more we will benefit when we hear the readings at Mass.