

Preparing for the New Lectionary



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Preparing *for the* New Lectionary



National Centre
for Liturgy

ST PAULS Publishing
Moyglare Road, Maynooth,
Co. Kildare, Ireland
www.stpauls.ie

ST PAULS Publishing
ST PAULS by Westminster Cathedral
Morpeth Terrace, Victoria, London SW1P 1EP
www.stpauls.org.uk

First published in 2025 by ST PAULS Publishing

The translation of the Introduction to the Lectionary © ICEL
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Francis and Apostolic Letter Issued *Motu Proprio* by the
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ISBN: 978-1-911178-71-2

Cover design and typesetting by LcL.
Printed by Melita Press, Malta.

*ST PAULS is an activity of the priests and brothers of the Society of St Paul
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*for READERS by whose ministry the Word is proclaimed
for PREACHERS who break open and share God's Word
for the BAPTISED who seek to embody the Word*



PREFACE

THE IRISH CHURCH is embarking on a project to publish a new edition of the Lectionary for Mass. The Lectionary is collection of books that contains all the Scripture readings for use at the celebration of the Eucharist or Mass. The last edition was published 40 years ago, so this is a once in a generation event. This new edition will be based on the *Revised New Jerusalem Bible*. This 2018 edition is the third edition of the *Jerusalem Bible* and is best understood as the “grandchild” of the original *Jerusalem Bible* that is currently in use in our parishes.

As the preparation of a Lectionary is a major publishing project, the Irish bishops are embarking on this endeavour in cooperation with the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference and the New Zealand Catholic Bishops’ Conference. The new editions will be shared by Catholics in the three countries and this cooperation will make the publication easier and also allow for a sharing of resources and expertise between the three countries.

After the tragedy of the divisions among Christians following the Reformation in the Sixteenth Century, there was a sad tendency for Catholics not to read the Bible. There was a certain mistrust of the Scripture with many Catholics holding the mistaken attitude that the Bible is a “Protestant Book” and that it wasn’t quite normal for Catholics to read it. But for well over a century the Popes have been fighting against this attitude and

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encouraging Catholics to have a living relationship with God as revealed to us when the Scripture readings are proclaimed and heard.¹

The process of Catholicism's official openness to the Bible is marked by number of important milestones. The École Biblique, a specialist school to train professors of Scripture, was founded in Jerusalem in 1890 with the blessing of Pope Leo XIII who dedicated his 1893 papal encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* to the founding of this school. The École Biblique, a specialist school to train professors of Scripture, was founded in Jerusalem in 1890 with the blessing of Pope Leo XIII who dedicated his 1893 papal encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* to the founding of this school and to promote the study of Sacred Scripture in the Catholic Church as a whole. Shortly afterwards Pope St. Pius X founded the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome in 1909, another university that specializes in Biblical studies. In 1943, a few years before the Second Vatican Council, Pope Pius XII wrote *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, this enormously important encyclical letter gave the charter to modern Catholic Scripture scholarship.

But it should be no surprise that the main attitude to the Bible today among Catholics is shaped by the Second Vatican Council. When Pope St. John XXIII called for the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's he was not trying to answer some particular problem. In his opening address to the Council he stated that while the Church has answered many doctrinal problems and confusions in earlier centuries, "today, however, Christ's Bride prefers the balm of mercy to the weapon of severity. She believes that present needs are best served by explaining

¹ For an in-depth treatment of the theology of the Word of God in the liturgy see the excellent recently published work, Marco Benini, *Liturgical Hermeneutics of Sacred Scripture*. Brian Mc Neil, trans. (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2023).

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more fully the purport of her doctrines, rather than by publishing condemnations.”

Given that one of the surest ways for people to meet the balm of Christ’s mercy is by listening to the proclamation of the Word of God, the importance of Bible was to be emphasized in the Council. In particular, the Council was to say that the presence of Jesus when the Bible is proclaimed is analogous to his presence when the Eucharist is celebrated:

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God’s word and of Christ’s body. She has always maintained them, and continues to do so, together with sacred tradition, as the supreme rule of faith, since, as inspired by God and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the word of God Himself without change, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and Apostles. Therefore, like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. Consequently these words are perfectly applicable to Sacred Scripture: “For the word of God is living and active” (Heb. 4:12) and “it has power to build you up

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and give you your heritage among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32; see 1 Thess. 2:13).²

Throughout the history of Christianity, the Sunday Eucharist (or Mass) is the place where most Christians came into contact with Scripture readings. While the readings may have been taken from an actual Bible in the earliest Church, very early on separate volumes that excerpted the Scripture readings for use in the Eucharist began to be used. The Lectionary and the Book of Gospels, were the books that were most often used for this function. In the early Church every minister had the book that contained the texts that they proclaimed in the liturgy. During the Middle Ages, these books gradually merged to form a new book called the Missal that combined all the texts needed to celebrate the Eucharist. Perhaps the earliest surviving example of this can be found in the ninth century *Stowe Missal* which was written in Ireland and is associated with the Church of Lorrha, Co. Tipperary.³ This type of book, containing both the prayers and the Scripture readings needed to celebrate, was to become almost universal in the Catholic Church. However, the standard Roman Missal as revised in the wake of the Council of Trent under the guidance of Pope St. Pius V, actually contained a very small selection of readings. While the readings always remained part of the liturgy of the Eucharist, many theologians considered the Offertory to be the most important part of the Eucharist after the Consecration and thus considered the readings to be necessary but not hugely important.

But the rediscovery of the importance of the Bible in the Catholic Church during twentieth century prepared the way

² Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution On Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, 18 November 1965,” sec. 21 (hereafter cited as *DV*). English translation taken from the Vatican website.

³ Neil Xavier O’Donoghue, *The Eucharist in Pre-Norman Ireland* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 62-71.

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for the liturgical renewal called for by the Second Vatican Council. During the first half of the twentieth century many priests began to read the Scripture readings in English before the sermon. Prior to this the readings were exclusively in Latin and directed to the East and away from the assembly (some older readers may remember the altar boy having to move the Missal from one side of the altar to the other as the Epistle and Gospel readings were directed towards the two different corners of the altar that faced the back wall of the church).

The Council was to encourage a new emphasis on the proclamation of the Bible in the Catholic Church. The 1570 Lectionary in use since the Council of Trent had a limited selection of Scripture, only about 22% of the Gospels, 11% of the New Testament Letters, and a very miserly 0.8% of the Old Testament (exclusive the Psalms) was ever proclaimed in the Celebration of the Eucharist. Therefore, it should be of no surprise that the bishops gathered at Vatican II recommended that a new Lectionary with more readings be prepared.

The treasures of the bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word. In this way a more representative portion of the holy scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years.⁴

This new Lectionary was prepared by an international team of experts after the Council.⁵ The decision was made to separate the Lectionary (and Gospel Book) from the rest of the Roman

⁴Second Vatican Council, "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 4 December 1963," sec. 51 (hereafter cited as *SC*). English translation taken from the Vatican website.

⁵For an accessible history of the process of preparation of the Lectionary see Paul Turner, *Words without Alloy: A Biography of the Lectionary for Mass* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2022).

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Missal and publish it in separate volumes. The new Lectionary was first published in 1969 (with a slightly revised second edition in 1981) and it now contains about 90% of the Gospels and 55% of the rest of the New Testament, as well as about 13% of the Old Testament (a sixteen-fold increase). There is a dedicated two year cycle of readings for weekdays and a three year Sunday cycle of readings.

As with all of the liturgical books prepared since Vatican II, the Lectionary contains an important introduction that explains its importance and helps Catholics to participate more fully in the Liturgy of the Word. In the first edition of the Lectionary this was rather basic and mainly gave instructions on how to celebrate properly, but the second 1981 edition fully revised this and it now includes a lot of theological richness that it can encourage and inform a more fruitful proclamation of the Word in the liturgical assembly.

Many of our readers will never have read this General Introduction to the Lectionary and those who have might not remember all of the details. The purpose of this present volume prepared under the auspices of the National Centre for Liturgy in Maynooth is to present this introduction to our readers, accompanying it with a number of short essays to help appreciate different aspects of it. Whether reading the introduction to the Lectionary for the first time or coming back to it after many years, we believe that a careful reading of it is one of the best ways to prepare for the new edition. The new edition of the Lectionary will take a number of years to edit. It might surprise many to know that the task of preparing a new edition that meets all of the Roman guidelines is a very a complicated process. As this work is carried out, every bishop in the country will have to examine and approve each and every reading, thousands of pages of Scripture text in total. But this time of

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preparation of the books is an opportunity for liturgical formation (which Pope Francis unceasingly calls for). It is our hope that other publications will be offered to parishes over the following years. However, this is an initial offering to facilitate the beginnings of preparation of the People of God for our new edition of the Lectionary.

Changing liturgical books is never easy, but, when handled well, change can help us to grow. It is hoped that this collection can be the first chapter in a process of renewal that will prepare our parishes and worshipping assemblies to better know Christ by listening to the Scripture as proclaimed in the Celebration of the Eucharist, enabling us to truly know his balm of mercy for, as St. Jerome reminds us, “ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”⁶

⁶As quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 37.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHOICE THE REVISED NEW JERUSALEM BIBLE AS THE BASIS OF THE NEW IRISH LECTIONARY

Neil Xavier O'Donoghue¹

ONE OF THE main liturgical changes after Vatican II was that the option was given for some of the prayers of the liturgy to be prayed in the language of the country or region in question. This option for the local language, or vernacular to give it its technical name, proved to be hugely popular. In fact, it was a return to the practice of the early Church. The first Christians prayed in languages they understood, but there is a complicated history that eventually led to the vast majority of liturgies in the West being celebrated in Latin, a language that was no longer spoken or understood by the vast majority of people.²

After the Council, initially there was a hybrid celebration of the Eucharist with a liturgy still mainly in Latin and only some parts in the local language. But once people began to hear the prayers of the liturgy in their own language, they really appreciated it and almost immediately their bishops petitioned for the initially limited permission of the Council to be

¹ Fr. Neil Xavier O'Donoghue currently serves as Director of Liturgical Programmes in St Patrick's Pontifical University, Maynooth, where he is also the acting director of the National Centre for Liturgy.

² For more on the history of the vernacular see Neil Xavier O'Donoghue, "Words of Salvation: the Vernacular in Contemporary Catholic Liturgy" in Thomas R. Whelan and Liam M. Tracey, eds., *Serving Liturgical Renewal: Pastoral and Theological Questions. Essays in Honour of Patrick Jones* (Dublin: Veritas, 2015), 55-69.

THE BASIS OF THE NEW IRISH LECTIONARY

Now that we have been using a *Jerusalem Bible* Lectionary for more than 50 years it is time to produce a new edition. The Vatican prefers that liturgical books be revised at least every generation. At a practical level most parishes are currently using books whose covers have been rebound numerous times and many of them are simply worn out. There have been a number of additional changes that need to be made to a future edition. With the new edition of the translation of the Ordinary of Mass in the Roman Missal, “This is the Word of the Lord” was replaced by “The Word of the Lord,” and there have been some other changes such as the 1994 revision of the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference that allowed a shorter version of Ephesians 5 (without the “wives give way to your husbands” passage). Additionally other revisions need to be added, a number of new feast days have been added since 1984 and some Masses now have new selections of readings, such as the Vigil of Pentecost.

The *Jerusalem Bible* at the basis of the current Lectionary is a Catholic Biblical translation that finds its roots in the twentieth-century Biblical Movement. In 1956 a new French translation was produced at the Dominican *École Biblique* in Jerusalem. Rather than basing their translation on the Latin Vulgate as older Catholic editions of the Bible did, this new French translation was based on the original languages. The French edition was remarkably successful and inspired similar editions in many languages. An English edition was produced by a team of scholars under the editorship of Alexander Jones (the translation team included the novelist J.R.R. Tolkien). Almost immediately the English *Jerusalem Bible* proved to be very popular and within a year of its publication it was adopted by the bishops of England and Wales for liturgical use.³ Since

³ For more on the translation see Henry Wansbrough, “The Word Made Fresh: The Story of the Jerusalem Bible on its 50th Birthday,” *The Tablet* 09 July 2016, 4-5.

remains an issue with the revised Lectionary for Mass, the relatively small number of passages taken from the Hebrew Bible and whether they are used solely as proof texts for the New Testament passages they have been linked with in a particular liturgical moment.

As participants in the liturgy, disciples are called not just to celebrate the liturgy well and with full, active and conscious participation but to also bring what they have celebrated into the whole of their lives. It is not just a matter of hearing and attending to the Word of God, but it is a challenge to allow this Word to shape our lives and live out what it proclaims in all that we do. This surely is the way that the Christian community, the Church is built and will continue to grow. This is of course an action of the Spirit of God who gathers the liturgical assembly, which in its turn becomes a sign of the wonders that God has done for humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. It is the passage from being just a hearer of the Word of God to bearing it in the very stuff of life. The proclamation of the Word of God does not just address the here and now of life but looks back to the past and remembers all the wonders that God has done not just for us for every generation from the moment of creation and looks forward to the fulfilment of creation when Christ will be all in all. It is a Word of hope much needed in our troubled and divided world.

It is the action of the Spirit of God that brings about this process of interiorization of the Word of God in the lives of believers. Just as the Spirit of God is the true animator and force of the liturgical celebration, giving it life and purpose, so too does the Spirit enliven the Word proclaimed. This is not just for each individual but for the whole assembly gathered to worship God and in that same moment be made holy. What is celebrated in the Eucharist is announced and renewed in the

then be seen as a prayer that is local, of course the prayer is that which is prayed in silence, the intercession is a call to pray for that particular intention. This chapter of the Introduction concludes with some thoughts on the place of proclamation and the books used in the Liturgy of the Word. Both are designed to enhance the proclamation of the Word of God and are a constant reminder to the assembly of the dignity of that Word and of course when they do reach that standard they communicate a lack of respect for that same Word.

Chapter Three is a treatment of the offices and ministries of the Liturgy of the Word. The role of the one who presides and the liturgical assembly itself are of particular focus, before other ministries and offices are dealt with in later sections. Particular emphasis is placed on adequate formation for these various ministries and offices. This formation is seen to be both technical in the art of proclamation and theological and biblical in understanding what is to be proclaimed.

Chapter Four is the first section of the second part of the General Introduction and begins the treatment of the order of readings themselves, it begins by noting the concerns of the Second Vatican Council for the reform of the Lectionary and a greater and more varied use of the Scriptures in the liturgical celebrations. The pattern that is used in the plan of the Order of Readings is the Liturgical Year, that constant unfolding of the saving mystery of Christ past, present and future. The whole of God's plan for creation is found in the mystery of Christ and celebrated in the liturgy. This section continues with an outline of the principles used by the various study groups that prepared the plan of readings in the Lectionary. The order and logic used is clearly explained with the preference for the Sunday celebration throughout the year and the particularly strong moments of that year. The option of a three year cycle for Sundays

and a two year one for weekdays is outlined. Principles of harmony and semi-continuous readings are presented though in an uncritical manner and no suggestion of the possible problems with such approaches is acknowledged. Number 68 is a useful reminder to homilist to avoid trying to force the Liturgy of the Word especially in Ordinary Time into a neat and single message that would belie the very nature of the liturgical celebration itself which is always a celebration of the mystery of Christ and not a neat theme.

The next sections deal with weekdays, celebrations of the Saints and other ritual celebrations. Why some biblical books are associated or reserved for particular time of the year is also explored in this section. Though the issue of not reading from the Hebrew Scriptures is not dealt with here rather just an affirmation of the use of the Act of the Apostles, likewise the options surrounding the use of the Gospel of John are not treated. How texts have been chosen regarding their length, difficulty and omission of certain verses is treated at this point. Of interest is how the scriptures are seen as serving the liturgical celebration, it is not a classroom exercise in exegesis per se. The various options that a presider must make forms the next section as do wider options that may be made by the Episcopal Conference.

Chapter Five is a presentation of the various liturgical seasons and the scriptural passages that have been chosen for these particular times. It is a useful summary of both the Church's understanding of each season and the choices made regarding the scriptural readings. These are of particular interest and usefulness to homilists and those responsible for the preparation of liturgical celebrations in particular communities. The last section of the General Introduction treats versions, adaptations and translations of the Scriptures.

This short article has aimed to present the theological foundations of the proclamation of the Word of God in gatherings of the liturgical assembly to praise God and be rendered holy in the celebration of the liturgy. The principles are well enunciated in the Introduction to the Lectionary especially in its earlier sections. Some of the more detailed issues are treated in the later parts of the document. Not every issue regarding the Word of God in the liturgical celebration is resolved in this Introduction, indeed some of them only emerged after the publication of the Lectionary and its Introduction. The vexed issue of typological readings of the Hebrew Bible will continue to be a source of reflection and indeed dispute by scholars and those concerned with good interfaith relationships. How the Christological readings of these passages is to be understood in the light of God's ongoing covenant with the Jewish people is a critical question for all Christians. The references to the action of the Spirit of God may point to some fruitful ways forward. The (in)visibility of women in the chosen readings of the Lectionary and might they be expanded requires further attention. The broader use of the Hebrew Scriptures beyond proofing New Testament texts as an organising strategy of the Lectionary needs greater discussion. Many of these issues have already been faced by those responsible for the production of the various editions of the Revised Common Lectionary. The role of memory and remembering is the foundation of all these discourses and requires further and ongoing attention as the dynamics of memory are more clearly understood and is what liturgists understand as memory and remembering more mnemonic than simple memory, indeed if such a thing exists.

Crucial to the understanding of the Lectionary is the role of the gathered people, the Word proclaimed requires listeners

APOSTOLIC LETTER SCRIPTURAE SACRAE AFFECTUS

Given in Rome, at the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, on 30 September, the Memorial of Saint Jerome, in the year 2020, the eighth of my Pontificate.

Franciscus