

Why do we have a cycle of readings at Mass?

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JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS

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By Sister Mary Garascia

My four aunts again – the ones I’ve written about before – often lamented about our Catholic religion and made me think through seemingly simple questions. One was, “Sister Mary, why do we always hear the same scriptures at Mass? Can’t we hear some new ones?” I think of their question now as we get ready to end one liturgical year (Year C, Luke) and begin another (Year A, Matthew) on the first Sunday of Advent, Nov. 27.

We “always hear the same scriptures” because we are a Lectionary Church. The Lectionary is a three year cycle of Sunday scriptures, and for us Catholics, also a cycle of daily Mass scriptures. On Sunday, a book called the Lectionary is placed on the Ambo for lectors to use when reading the first two scriptures. Then a separate part of the Lectionary, the Book of the Gospel, is usually brought forward to give special honor to the Gospel. Using a lectionary is part of the Catholic style of being Christian, but many Protestant Churches also use one: Episcopalians (Anglicans) or Missouri Synod Lutherans, for example.

When I was in graduate school, I listened as my fellow Protestant classmates debated about the use of the lectionary, because many other Protestant churches do not use a Lectionary, like Baptists and unaffiliated or non-denominational congregations. Why? Because the Lectionary limits the preacher. He or she cannot choose a scripture he or she has prayerfully discerned that his congregation needs at the moment or choose scripture passages that might resonate with world events as they occur, like hurricanes, the war in Ukraine or the death of George Floyd. Another limitation of the lectionary is that it does not include all New Testament passages. Women scripture scholars note the exclusion of some texts of interest to women.

Our Catholic liturgical style is meant to nourish our personal spirituality, so understanding why we use a lectionary helps with that. Many Catholic study Bibles have a good article about the Lectionary with a chart showing which books of Scripture we read during each cycle.

One benefit of the Lectionary that if we attend Sunday Mass regularly, we hear selections from the whole Bible, including difficult passages that the preacher or congregation might not like. So we have to listen to Jesus’ teaching against divorce, to the many scripture passages about the dangers of riches, to scriptures about a warlike God who strikes down enemies, and at this time of year to rather scary readings about the end of time. The Lectionary therefore keeps us from “sanitizing” Jesus; we have to take him as he is, face his hard sayings, and accept the necessity of suffering in a life lived for God.

Another benefit of the Lectionary is that the Gospel passages emphasizing the Paschal Mystery recur frequently throughout the three lectionary cycles, and not just Lent and the Easter season. The connection between Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, Jesus’ suffering

path to Glory, and His call to live that pattern in our own lives hopefully penetrates into our deep consciousness as we hear this teaching again and again.

The lectionary also has a unifying function. All Church members hear the same readings, no matter where they happen to be on a given day. At times Bishops in other parts of our world used this advantage and broadcasted one homily to their nations, thus building a common understanding of faith and action among their people.

The feasts and seasons of the liturgical year also help build a common understanding of faith. What Catholic does not know the faith meaning of Advent, Lent, Incarnation, sacrifice and Resurrection through just “being there” at liturgy.

This unifying possibility of Sunday liturgy sometimes is obscured these days. More than fifty years ago, Vatican II tried to teach us to understand Mass the way the early Church understood it. In the centuries closer to the time of Christ, Eucharist was the public prayer of Church, the community of believers gathered to hear the Word and share a sacred meal. As the Church grew in numbers, Mass was the universal Church united through the community of Bishops and their authorized presiders, and united through the risen Christ alive in each member.

Vatican II changes such as using the vernacular language, singing congregational hymns, lay participation in roles like lector, acolyte, welcomers and greeters at the doors all emphasized the communal aspect of Mass. It was worship everyone should be able to understand and participate in. The lectionary we use came from Vatican II, and so did the encouragement for all of us to do scripture study. Placing saints less prominently in the sanctuary and having a separate location for the tabernacle re-emphasized the risen Christ as the One who gathers us to join with Him in His liturgy of praise of his Father; the priest represents Christ at Mass. Today there seems be considerable slipping back into practices that present Mass as a “me and God” moment of instead of personal prayer and adoration instead of an “us and Christ” experience of ongoing incarnation and redemption.

It is November now, so as we approach the end of our liturgical year, may we appreciate our connection and unity with one another, with Christ through our scriptures, with our fellow Catholics throughout the world, and with those who have gone before us. Say “happy new year” to those you worship with on Nov. 27!

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