

Lectionary Based Catechesis

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Lectionary based catechesis is a *conversation* between the world of the Sunday Scriptures and the world of the user(s). It is intended to facilitate conversion and immerse the learners in the values of the Scripture. When it is done well, it helps those who participate to come to a better understanding of how the Scriptures continue to call us to *conversion* in our contemporary world. In recent decades, lectionary based catechesis has emerged as one form of catechesis offered for adults, children and intergenerational groups in many parishes. The momentum for this form of catechesis seems to have received its energy from the liturgical reform of the **Second Vatican Council** and the development of catechetical structures for the **Rite of Christian Initiation**.

The current lectionary is the result of decisions made by the bishops at the Second Vatican Council, in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. The Fathers of the Council wished to provide Catholics with a much richer selection of Scripture readings than they were accustomed to hearing. They said:

Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. . . . Thus to achieve the restoration, progress, and adaptation of the sacred liturgy, it is essential to promote that sweet and living love for scripture to which the venerable tradition of both eastern and western rites gives testimony. (#24)... That the intimate connection between rite and words may be more apparent in the liturgy: 1) In sacred celebrations there is to be more ample, more varied, and more suitable reading from sacred Scripture should be restored. (#35)... The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word. In this way a more representative part of the sacred Scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years. (#51)

As a result of these directives, an entirely new lectionary for the Roman Catholic Church was drawn up and promulgated on May 25, 1969. In the Apostolic Constitution *Missale Romanum* (April 3, 1969), Pope Paul VI referred to the revision of the lectionary and indicated that its purpose was ". . .to provide a fuller exposition of the continuing process of the mystery of salvation, as shown in the words of divine revelation." ". . .In accord with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, all will thus regard sacred Scripture as the abiding source of spiritual life, the foundation for Christian instruction, and the core of all theological study."

These not-so-modest hopes for the new lectionary have proven to be prophetic. So impressive is the current Catholic lectionary that it has served as the basis for a widely accepted common lectionary shared by a number of Christian denominations.

In the Roman lectionary and increasingly in other Christian churches, the Sunday cycle of readings is spread out over three years, rather than crunched in a single year as was previously the case. Each Sunday, there is a selection from the Old Testament (except during the Easter season, when the Acts of the Apostles is used), a psalm sung after the first reading, a second reading from one of the New Testament books, and the Gospel text. The first year of the cycle (A) features the Gospel according to Matthew, the second (B) the Gospel according to Mark, and the third (C) the Gospel according to Luke. Texts from the Gospel according to John are

interspersed at various times in all three years. The new lectionary also provides a volume for weekday readings (on a two-year cycle) as well as texts for various feasts, seasons, and other ritual celebrations.

It is safe to say that lectionary based catechesis as a method in the United States began as catechumenate leaders attempted to implement and integrate the following instructions in the Rite:

- During the catechumenate there should be celebrations of the word that contribute to the instruction of catechumens. (par.81-82)
- Some of these should be held on Sunday. (par 83.1)
- Catechumens should be dismissed after the Liturgy of the Word. (par 83.2)

Over a period of years, what has come to be called “lectionary based catechesis” evolved as a *specific method* in which the starting point is the Sunday Reading(s). It may focus on one or all of the readings. The usual method is that the initial proclamation of the word is heard during the Liturgy of the Word. At some later time, which could be immediately after dismissal for catechumens, or during the week for other groups, the word is reflected upon again, usually in a prayerful setting and participants articulate what word or phrase was meaningful for them in the readings and homily. The facilitator or catechist then gives input on the reading(s), which they have prepared by reading some commentaries. They may situate the reading by talking about what comes before and after, whether it is part of a larger story, a discourse, a miracle, a parable, or call attention to who it is addressed. After these comments, the reading is read again and the group engages in dialogue about what the reading is saying about Christian life today and what it is teaching about God, the Church, and/or the life of discipleship. The catechesis concludes with response to the question “What is this reading calling (me or the Church) to do this week in order to live it out?” Oftentimes with catechumens, adult study groups, or children’s religious education settings, lectionary based catechesis is followed by more doctrinal catechesis on a given theme or topic.

The bishops at Vatican II who mandated a reform of the lectionary envisioned the word of God as one of the chief instruments for the renewal of the entire Church—this renewal being the Council’s fundamental aim. Such renewal begins, of course, within the heart of each individual believer. But true renewal must always extend to the life of the larger community to which we as individuals belong. If the Church universal is to be renewed through the proclamation of the Scriptures, that is, through the lectionary, it will only happen one parish community at a time. For this reason, more and more parishes offer Scripture study opportunities tied to the Sunday lectionary cycle. Some parishes even base their entire catechetical program (for children in parish religion programs and for adults and children in the catechumenate) on the Sunday readings. In many places, small faith communities and even parish groups such as ministry teams and committees devote a portion of their meeting time to a reflection on the Sunday lectionary readings and to sharing how those texts can guide and direct our lives. Thus we read in the introduction to the lectionary:

When God communicates his word, he expects a response.... The Holy Spirit makes that response effective, so that what is heard in the celebration of the Liturgy may be carried out in a way of life: “Be doers of the word and not hearers only” (Jas. 1:22).... Thus, [the faithful] endeavor to conform their way of life to what they celebrate in the Liturgy, and then in turn to bring to the celebration of the Liturgy all that they do in life. (#6) ...

Baptism and confirmation in the Spirit have made all Christ's faithful into messengers of God's word because of the grace of hearing they have received. They must therefore be the bearers of the same word in the Church and in the world, at least by the witness of their lives. (#7)