

HOW DOES THE LECTIONARY WORK, PART II

The first essay discussed how the Sunday Lectionary is put together. The comments I made apply also to the great solemnities of our Church, including all Holy Days of Obligation and other Solemnities (e.g., St. Joseph on March 19; Ss. Peter and Paul on June 29; Sacred Heart, the Friday after Trinity Sunday). The purpose of the Lectionary's revisions from the Second Vatican Council, in their own words, was so that

“[t]he 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 the prescribed number of years” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, #51).

This essay wants to look at how the daily readings have been assembled for us, continuing to insure that we will be fed well at the table of the Lord's Word.

I mentioned that typically, in “ordinary time,” there is no specific or intentional connection between the 2nd Reading and the rest of the Scriptural excerpts for a given Sunday. This is the more true in the daily Mass readings. The structure is to have 2 sets of “semi-continua” readings running more or less parallel to each other: one for the 1st Reading, and the other for the Gospel. Right now, for example, we are reading from the prophet Amos and the Gospel of Matthew. But I am very much ahead of the story.

The daily Mass of “ordinary time” is laid out according to the reading of the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, in that order. We don't read every single word of these, but in the “semi-continua” mode we read most of it (excluding the narrative of the passion and resurrection). This takes us through the 34 weeks of “ordinary time.”

But just as for Sundays we have Cycles A, B & C, so in Monday through Saturday we have Year I and Year II. The exact same Gospel readings are done in these years. The rule is that Year I is for odd numbered years, and Year II is for even. Therefore, we're reading from Year II. So what's the difference, you may ask?

The answer is, the 1st Reading and Psalm. Week 1 of Year II (our current Lectionary cycle year) began with I Samuel and read through II Samuel & the beginning of I Kings. It skipped over, then, to the Epistles of James, I Peter, Jude, II Peter, II Timothy, and then returned to the rest of I Kings, II Kings, & Lamentations, and that has brought us now to Amos. This is a journey that seems to have no rhyme nor reason except to try to be “semi-continua” and to give a bit of variation (Old Testament, then New Testament, then back to Old Testament...). Psalms are still picked to reflect a theme of the 1st Reading.

Year I begins differently. While still “yoked” to the same Gospel sequence, now the 1st Reading is from Hebrews. It is followed by Genesis 1-11, then Sirach, and Tobit. We move then to II Corinthians, and then return to Genesis 12 to begin the story of Abram and Sarai.

As you can see, the benefit of this overall system is indeed to expose folks (especially daily Mass folks) to the widest possible selection from the Bible, with the chance to hear an exposition of the readings from the priest or deacon in the homily. The drawback is a lack of continuity, often, between the readings, but then I don't think that's a bad thing. It gives me a chance to ignore the Gospel reading at daily Mass and focus on 1st readings that don't often appear (if at all) on Sundays. I can then concentrate on the Gospel for Sunday homilies.

This sense of being random is not found in the readings for the saints' days. In these cases readings (just like those, daily or Sunday, for the “privileged seasons” of Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter) are picked to “hang together” coherently in celebration of the saint or some special aspect of his/her life or ministry.

So thanks to the vision of the Council Fathers of Vatican II in the 1960s, we have a Lectionary that, Sunday and daily, is the richest we have ever known. Enjoy the feast: come to daily Mass (occasionally, at least) as well as Sunday Mass, and be nourished by the Bread of Life and the Word of the Lord.