

## The Second Reading

After the Responsorial Psalm comes the Second Reading in the Liturgy of the Word. And, if we turn to the Roman Missal, to the Liturgy of the Word, and we look at the section on the Biblical readings, this is what the Missal says is to be done for the Second Reading. This is #12 in the Liturgy of the Word in the Order of Mass in the Roman Missal:

*After this, if there is to be a Second Reading, a reader reads it from the ambo, as above.*

To indicate the end of the reading, the reader acclaims:

*The word of the Lord.*

All reply:

*Thanks be to God.*<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so a couple things you will notice there from the description of the Second Reading is that there is not always going to be a Second Reading. And, obviously, the example here would be daily Mass. So if you go to daily Mass you may have noticed that you have a First Readings and then a Responsorial Psalm and then a Gospel. There is not going to be a Second Reading in the same way that you would have at a Sunday Mass. The Sunday Mass ordinarily has a cycle of three readings: First Reading, Responsorial Psalm, Second Reading, and then the Gospel. And so, as we've mentioned already, the Second Reading is almost always taken from the letters of St. Paul. And if it's not from the letters of Paul, it's from one of the other Apostolic letters in the New Testament.

If you look at the actual lectionary, the collection of readings for the Mass, as I pointed out elsewhere, there's a description of the Second Reading. And this is a very helpful chart in this edition of Lectionary that shows you that the Second Reading is also on a three year cycle, just like the Gospels are on a cycle: Year A, Year B, and Year C. The Second Reading for Sunday Masses is also on a cycle of semi-continuous reading, and the purpose of that Second Reading, by and large, is to walk through on Sundays...the majority of them are readings from the letters of

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<sup>1</sup> Roman Missal, *The Order of Mass*, no. 12.

St. Paul. So for example, in Year A you read through 1 Corinthians (chapters 1 to 4), Romans, many weeks there in Romans, I can't count them from here,, four weeks on Philippians, 5 weeks on 1st Thessalonians. In Year B we spend another five weeks working through 1 Corinthians again, seven or eight weeks on 2 Corinthians, 6 weeks on Ephesians. And you'll notice here four or five weeks on James. So the Second Reading, the reason it's not just called the Epistle of Paul or the reading from Paul is because other Apostolic letters are ready. James is for Year B and then again in Year C.

We always start with 1 Corinthians, which is kind of interesting because that's like Paul's letter to the church that really needs a little help and it's very oriented toward church issues, the First Letter to the Corinthians. And then we spend about five or six weeks on Galatians, Colossians, the Letter to the Hebrews, which is formally anonymous, but which in the Roman tradition was often associated with Paul as its author, and then other shorter letters like Philemon, First and Second Timothy, and Second Thessalonians. So, what I want you to see from this chart is that the Second Reading is by and large a kind of survey of the letters of St. Paul, right? So you could refer to this Second Reading as, you know, the Apostle or the letters of the Apostles. Because, in addition to the Old Testament, the Church is trying to give us the teaching and the preaching of the Apostles. Especially, and this is crucial, the moral and spiritual teachings of St. Paul and the Apostles.

When we're looking at the lectionary, as I've mentioned in other videos, the Old Testament reading, the Gospel reading, and the Responsorial Psalm, often, especially for Sundays in Ordinary Time, are a kind of bridge from the Old to the New, from prophecy to fulfillment, from prefiguration to culmination, with the Responsorial Psalm acting as the bridge between the Old and New Testament reading. The Second Reading, however, is really on an independent track, that's meant to take us through the letters of Paul, the letter of James, the teaching of the Apostles, and give us moral and spiritual instruction for the Christian life. So whereas the Gospel and Old Testament often give us prophecy and fulfillment, kind of show us typology, the Second Reading will often deal with morality and spirituality. And if you want more detail in that, in my series *The Mass Readings Explained*, those of you who may have gone through that will already be familiar with this, but we don't just have a series on the Sunday reading three-year cycle of

Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Year A, B, and C), we also did a whole separate series on all of the Second Readings. Precisely because, during Ordinary Time at least, they're on an independent, largely independent track of topics and teachings.

Now, during the seasons of Lent and Easter, as well as Christmas time, those Second Readings are going to tend to be chosen to correlate with the Gospel and the Old Testament thematically. So it's not always true for every Sunday that they're kind of independent, but for most Sundays in Ordinary Time that is in fact the case. So if you really want to dive into the reading of Paul with the heart and mind of the Church, pay attention to the Second Reading. So I guess that is kind of my my encouragement to you here, because I do think that with regard to the reformed Lectionary, with the contemporary Lectionary of the Roman Church, although we've done a really good job, or at least I think we're doing a good job, of grasping the fact that the lectionary is showing us the Old Testament prefiguration and the Gospel fulfillment, it does seem to me that the Second Reading can sometimes be lost on the shuffle, that we're not exactly sure always what to do with it.

And many, many people aren't familiar with the fact that the priest or deacon can actually preach the whole homily just on the Second Reading. In fact, you could work through the letter of Romans over the course of 12 weeks or whatever it is, 15 weeks, with a homily series on Paul. The new Lectionary is very Pauline. It's designed to preach Paul. It's not a coincidence that it was given to us by Pope Paul VI, who took his name from the Apostle Paul. He had a great devotion to St. Paul and to the proclamation of the Gospel. Because it is important, as we look at the Lectionary, not only to have the kind of theological formation of seeing the Old and New Testaments and how they go together, but also the spiritual and moral formation that St. Paul will often give to the churches. Now that you've been baptized, now that you've entered into the New Covenant, how do I live? How now should I live? How should I live the gospel as a Christian, as a person who is in Christ, a member of the mystical body of Christ? That's what the Second Reading is for. That's what the Second Reading is all about. It's moral and spiritual formation, not exclusively, but definitely primarily, here's a lot of emphasis on that.

So that's a kind of a general overview of the Second Reading in the Lectionary and in the Missal. Where does this idea of a Second Reading from St. Paul come from? I mean, what is so important about St. Paul? Especially when Paul's a controversial figure. You know, lots of people who love Jesus, or everybody loves Jesus, right? But many people say, I'll take Jesus, but you can keep Paul. They don't like Paul. Paul has a lot of controversial topics, a lot of controversial viewpoints, a lot of controversial teachings. Jesus does too, but people don't often read him so carefully that they're familiar with them. So a lot of people will be somewhat resistant to Paul. Well, they say, well, I'd accept that if Jesus says this but not Saint Paul. So why do we have readings from Paul in the liturgy?

Well, obviously as Catholics, we believe that all Scripture is inspired by God, not just the Gospels. Catholics don't follow Jesus, but not Paul. They follow Jesus and Paul. It's a both/and. And so the Church in her wisdom in the Lectionary really wants to not only give us the preaching of Christ, but also the preaching of St. Paul and the other Apostles. Because remember, and this is important, by and large, for the most part, all of Jesus' teachings and preachings are delivered to Jews, delivered to believing Jews who accept the Law, accept the Prophets and that kind of thing. There are a few exceptions where he's in Gentile territory, but mostly he's preaching and teaching Jews. But St. Paul is also the Apostle to the Gentiles, so there's also a kind of universalism in not only having a gospel that Jesus preached to the Jewish people, but also an epistle that St. Paul preaches to the Gentiles, often who do not know the Scriptures and don't know the history of Israel. So, way back, if you go all the way back to the beginning of the Church, from the very beginnings of the early Church, when the Scriptures would be read in the Church, a custom developed of also reading the letters of Paul.

Now, early on this was a case of necessity because Paul was the Apostle to churches in various areas and he couldn't be everywhere at once. So in order to teach the churches he had founded and the members of the churches he had founded, but at which he was not present, he would send letters. He would use epistles to kind of be his virtual presence in the churches. So, for example, if you take out St. Paul's letter to the Colossians and turn to Colossians 4, when Paul's writing to the church at Colossae, he actually explicitly commands for the letter to be read in church. So this is what it says: Colossians 4:16-18:

*And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfil the ministry which you have received in the Lord." I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my fetters. Grace be with you.*<sup>2</sup>

So, notice here what's happening. Well, Colossians is one of the so-called prison epistles. So Paul's in prison, he can't be with the church at Colossae, so he can't be with the Colossians. So he writes a letter to them in his absence and preaches the gospel to them through the written word. The letter is then sent to the church there, and he instructs that it is to be read not just privately by the pastor there or, you know, by some of the presbyters, elders who might be leading the church, but to be read in the church. So in the liturgical assembly, right. So we know that the early Christians read the scriptures in the assembly. Here we see them beginning to read the letters of the Apostles in the assembly. And Paul says, you know, also have it read in the church at Laodicea. So notice, although the letter of Paul is written particularly to a local church, he doesn't preclude it being read to other churches. In fact, he assumes it will be, and commands that it should be, so that there's a implicit, universal destination of the teaching that's in this letter to the Colossians.

So, in other words, Paul preaches to multiple churches at the same time through his letters. Now that's in Paul's own letters, if we look elsewhere in the New Testament, for example, to 2 Peter 3, we actually see an early witness in the New Testament itself to the fact that Paul's letters were not only being read by the churches to which they were written, but they were being gathered together, apparently into a collection and then read in the churches at large. So 2 Peter 3:15-16 says this about the letters of Paul:

*So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some*

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, *as they do the other scriptures*.

So notice, what is 2 Peter showing us here? It shows us, number one, that there's a collection of Pauline letters. Number 2, that these letters are being read, and not only being read, but put on par with the other scriptures, right? So just as the scriptures are the word of God, Paul's letters are being described as the word of God. They too are like the word of God, like the scriptures, in that they contain the word of God and can be, unfortunately, twisted or distorted like the other scriptures. So we see Paul's preaching being put on par with the Scriptures. And then third, and I love this, we also see 2 Peter saying very clearly that Paul's letters are hard to understand? That there is stuff that is in them that is difficult and complicated and easily twisted by those who are either ignorant or unstable, and can lead people into grave error, that can lead them into heresy, would be another term for it. So this is really important. We see already in the New Testament itself, the reading of Paul's letters in the Church is part of, shall we say, Apostolic Tradition. All right, so that's Sacred Scripture. We see a biblical foundation for the Second Reading from St. Paul.

What about Sacred Tradition? Well, in this case we can look back to the traditions of the early Church and some of the customs they had of readings and see an example of how Paul was being used in the early Church. One example that I want to give here is from an ancient Christian writing that describes the liturgy known as the *Apostolic Constitutions*. This is a four-volume collection of Liturgical Documents from the Early Church, edited by Lawrence Johnson. It's a really valuable collection, and the *Apostolic Constitutions* is normally associated by scholars with the liturgy in the 4th century, a description of the liturgy in the 4th century. Sometimes it's associated with the Church at Antioch, other times it's associated with actually the figure of St. Clement of Rome, who was one of the bishops of Rome right after St. Peter. But in this ancient description of the liturgy known as the *Apostolic Constitutions*, we get a window into how the readings function in the early Church. And here it describes the reading of the letters of Paul. So let's hear what it has to say about the early Church's practice of liturgical readings.

The reader, standing in the middle and in a raised location, reads the writings of Moses and Joshua the son of Nun, of Judges and Kings, of Chronicles and what was written after the return from exile; also the writings of Job, Solomon, and the sixteen prophets.

In other words, there can be a selection from these various books of the Old Testament.

*After two readings another person sings the hymns of David, and the people respond by singing the refrain.*

That's your Responsorial Psalm.

*Then is read our Acts and the letters sent by Paul our fellow-worker to the churches under the impulse of the Holy Spirit; then a presbyter or a deacon reads one of the Gospels which we, Matthew and John, have passed down to you and which Paul's fellow-workers—namely, Luke and Mark—have received and have handed down to you.<sup>3</sup>*

Basically, so what this document is attempting to describe is the liturgical practices of the apostles, hence the first person reading there. Although most scholars do not think this is actually authored by the Apostles. But what it does give us an insight into is the reading of the letters by Paul, which are regarded as composed under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. So this is this an important window into the early Christian belief, this is crucial, that the reason Paul's letters are read during the liturgy is because Paul's letters are not just letters of Paul, they're actually the word of God, right? So one of the things you'll see in the early liturgy, as it develops, is a gradual exclusion from reading in the liturgical assembly anything that is not considered inspired Scripture, considered the Word of God. So sometimes you have examples in the early Church, in the liturgy, where they will read maybe a part of a life of a Saint or maybe one of the letters of a Bishop. At one point St. Gregory the Great actually finds out that one church in the 6th century is reading

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<sup>3</sup> *Apostolic Constitutions* 2.57.5. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 2:221.

his commentary on the book of Job during Mass, and he says cut it out. That's not meant for the liturgy.

The liturgy is the place where the inspired word of God is read, whether it's from the Old Testament, like we just saw from all those books, or from the New Testament, whether it be the Gospels or the letters of Paul or Peter or James or John, eventually, what would come to be the New Testament canon, the canon of the Bible. Although we tend to think of the Bible as a book, really what it was was a library of books which had one thing in common, or two things, really. They are the inspired word of God, number one. And because they are inspired by God, they can be read in the liturgy. They can be read during the Mass, they can be read in the Liturgical Assembly. And to this day, that's how the Church functions, right? We have hundreds of papal encyclicals. We have thousands and thousands of pages of writings of Saints and Doctors of the Church, Augustine's *Confessions*, St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, on and on and on. But we don't read encyclicals during Mass. We don't read the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas during the Mass. We don't read the writings of St. Augustine or St. Therese or St. Theresa of Avila or the great mystics. None of that is read during the liturgy. What's read during the liturgy is the inspired word of God, namely the Bible. That's what the liturgy of the word is focused on. So that's where in the tradition we see from the beginning, all the way through the early centuries, St. Paul's letters are part of the readings of the liturgy, both in the East and in the West.

Okay, so with that said then, as I mentioned, the Second Reading, it's kind of one of those parts of the liturgy that's easier to kind of let fly by, it's easy to overlook or it's easy to not take it seriously enough to where we focus on it. So the question is what am I supposed to be doing during the Second Reading? What's happening mystagogically during the Second Reading. I know what's happening visibly, a reading from the letter of St. Paul to the Colossians, right? Or to the Philippians, or whatever it might be. By the way, notice it's Philippians, not Filipinos. Sometimes I'll hear readers say that and I'm like "No, no, no, that's the reading to the Philippians." So what's happening at that moments spiritually, interiorly? Well, two things are important to help us hear it. First, it's important to remember that if you look at the lectionary and the description of the order of readings for mass that's at the beginning of the lectionary, it will actually tell us the reason these readings are



chosen. And this is what it says in paragraph 107. Listen to this about the readings from the apostles, that's what it refers to the second reading as:

There is a semi-continuous reading of the Letters of Paul and James. (The Letters of Peter and John are read during the Easter and Christmas seasons.)<sup>4</sup>

Okay, so notice. What the church is saying here is that the Second Reading is about reading the writings of Paul and James, and during Easter Peter and John. So what clue does that give us into the function of the Second Reading? Well, I would suggest to you that what it shows us is that the Second Reading is meant to place in our ear, so to speak, the same Apostolic preaching that the early Church would have heard. So if you were living in Corinth in the 1st century, if you were living in Rome, you would have heard the words of St. Paul read to you at that church when that letter came in, and the Gospel would have been preached in that way. So that's what we do through most of the ordinary time of the year. But in Easter in particular, notice the church says we read the letters of Peter and John.

Why? Well notice, it's in the book of Acts. If you read the first 8 chapters of the book of Acts, before Paul ever converts, when the Church is beginning to spread, after the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, after the resurrection of Christ, who were the first to Apostles singled out in the book of Acts to preach and teach in Jerusalem? It's Peter and John. Okay, so after Easter, this is really cool, what the Church effectively does is during Easter season, after the resurrection, we kind of put ourselves back in the place of the early Church. First, we hear the preaching of Peter and John in the letters of Peter and John in the New Testament, just like the church in Jerusalem would have heard the preaching of Peter and John as they spread the Gospel. Then, after Paul converts, we hear the preaching of Paul, who is the great Apostle to the nations, and we listen to that for the rest of the year. In Ordinary Time, it's Paul, Paul, Paul, Paul, Paul, with a little James thrown in, in Year B for good measure, because you can't forget James as well. So, in other words, if the First Reading puts us in the position of the Jewish people hearing the Law and the Prophets read, and if the Responsorial Psalm puts us in the place of the Jewish people, you know, chanting the Psalms like in the synagogue? The

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<sup>4</sup> *Ordo Lectionum Missae* no. 107.

Second Reading puts us in the place of the early Church, both the Jews who heard Peter and John preach in the beginnings of the Church of Jerusalem, those Jewish Christians, and the Gentiles, who heard St. Paul preach, as the gospel spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. And then the Gospel reading, as we'll see, is going to put us in the position of those who heard Christ himself preach the good news as he moved throughout the land of Galilee and Judea.

So there's a real sense in which the Liturgy of the Word is constantly putting us back into...it moves us back in time, in a sense, to the place of the people, the Jewish people who are waiting for the good news of the Messiah, and then those Jews and Gentiles who recognized him as the Messiah and then heard the preaching of St. Paul, St. Peter, St. John and St. James as the Gospel spread to the ends of the earth. And on that note, you don't have to take my word for it, you can just take the word of the late Pope Benedict XVI, who did a whole year of general audiences devoted to St. Paul. And at the end of this, this is a beautiful book, Pope Benedict XVI has this to say about Paul's role in the lectionary. So I'll leave you with this as he's reflecting on the impact of St. Paul in particular

“It is above all important to note that Saint Paul’s Letters very soon entered the liturgy; where the structure of prophet-apostle-Gospel...

That’s the three readings

...is crucial for the form of the Liturgy of the Word. *Thus, thanks to this “presence” in the Church’s liturgy, the Apostle’s thought immediately gave spiritual nourishment to the faithful of every epoch.*<sup>5</sup>

So what is Pope Benedict saying there? He's saying two things. First, that the three reading structure: Prophet, Apostle, and Gospel, is an integral part of the liturgy. This is a foundational structure to the liturgy. Second, that by the reading of the Second Reading, the reading of the Apostle, especially the Apostle Paul, what happens is Paul continues to preach the Gospel even to this day, even though Paul

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<sup>5</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience (February 4, 2009). In Pope Benedict XVI, *Saint Paul* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 2009), 128-129.

was beheaded by Caesar Nero in the 60s of the 1st century AD. Even though he met his in as a martyr, through his letters, Paul is still bringing the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Through the liturgy, Paul's word is preached every time the Second Reading is read at Mass, and he is still, in that instance, the evangelist of the nations, the Apostle to the Gentiles, the Great Apostle or The Apostle, which is actually what he's called in the Roman tradition, because he brought the Gospel to the ends of the earth.