

The Gift of Reading

This short article is written to help with this question, “*I was asked to do a reading at a Catholic wedding or funeral. I have never done one before. Any help or suggestions?*” Similarly, readers who read all the time find themselves in a different parish, with a different microphone, looking at a different book than they normally expect.

First, **how nice to have been chosen!** The ministry of reader is one of the important ministries in the liturgy. Through your voice we will all hear God speaking directly to us. In Catholic tradition, this is an opportunity to play a more meaningful role in the celebration of the wedding or funeral than you would normally as just a family member or friend or other.

Usually when you are asked, the family also has the text already selected and you can go over the wording so you are comfortable reading it. Our parish can give you a copy of the reading exactly as it will appear on the page when you read.

The Nitty-Gritty of the Ministry of Reader

So you have prepared and are confident in your skills to proclaim the scripture. You have even looked at the exact version of the text as it will appear on the stand where the text will be read from (called the **Ambo**.)



The readings have normally been set in place, in a special book, on the Ambo by the **sacristan**. (A sacristan looks after setting everything in place for the service.) If you arrive early, there is nothing wrong with checking that everything is ready. Introduce yourself to the sacristan or other church workers. They will be only too glad to help you. This can be difficult when you are entering with the family or bridal party. Many readers arrive early, check the readings, and then go to the back to be with the family.

At many services the **Deacon** or other minister assists as a **Master-of-Ceremonies**. He or she will come down and meet you, escorting you to and from the Ambo. Follow their lead and the quiet instructions they may give you.

Getting to the Ambo

After the Opening Prayer everyone will be seated. If you are the first reader, don't sit down, come directly to the Ambo. You can use the few seconds while people get settled to also settle yourself. Sometimes the celebrant will ask that all of the readers come up as a group.

If you cross in front of the main altar, it is customary to pause, face the altar and bow. This bow is normally made slowly and reverently from the waist. At a funeral, the coffin or cremated remains are also in front of the altar.

What about genuflecting: the touching the right knee to the ground? Catholics genuflect as we enter and leave the church when there is a reserve / tabernacle behind the main altar, not normally during the

service. The dignified bow (from the waist) to the main altar is the proper reverence.

Adjust the microphone if needed and remember that your goal is to allow the congregation to hear the message of the biblical text.

Reading the First or Second Reading

- The readings are part of the Church's Liturgy. They are part of the sacred rhythm of the liturgy. The reader should not take too long to be in place, nor exit in a jarring fashion. He or she is a member of the worshipping community, assuming for a moment a leadership role within that community.
- **The beginning of the reading should not be rushed.** One of the most common faults is to begin before the congregation is seated and attentive. To do this loses not just the beginning of the reading, but the sense of the reader ministering to the community. After the community is seated and quiet, the reader looks at the community and then begins.
- **Eye contact** is important throughout, but especially at the beginning of the reading and at the end. The Word from God is being shared between people of faith.
- Everyone will be looking at the reader during the reading. With attentive listening, they are receiving the Word of God from one of their fellow pilgrims in faith. The sense of God speaking to us in the scriptures read is enhanced by visual communication between reader and community. It is important to **limit any distractions**.
- You will begin the reading by saying, "*A reading from the*" followed by a brief pause. You then continue to read the text. Everything you will say is on the sheet in front of you.
- You will end the reading with a brief pause, followed by "*The Word of the Lord.*" to which the congregation will respond with "*Thanks be to God.*"
- There is a pause, so that this presentation of God's Word can be received, after each of the readings. Simply stay in place for about 10 seconds and then step back, returning to your seat unless you are reading the Psalm or the second reading.

I've been asked to lead the Responsorial Psalm!

The psalm follows the first reading and is usually sung. It is rarely read. Make certain the church musicians are not about to sing the psalm. If you have been asked to read it, then you need to know a few things:

- The psalm is read "responsively" which means there is a line (called an **antiphon**) that everyone repeats and there are verses that you would read.
- You begin by **stating the antiphon which will immediately be repeated by everyone**, for example: "*The Lord is compassionate to all.*" Look up, gesture to the people, and repeat the line with everyone: "*The Lord is compassionate to all.*"

- Now read the first stanza. At the end (sometimes marked with an “R” or even the word “Response”) you look up and repeat the antiphon with the assembly. Some leaders continue to make a small gesture towards the congregation to give them a cue. You should never give a verbal cue, particularly saying “response”. **A simple, inviting look, can be all that is needed to cue the response.**
- One of the hallmarks of a good psalm leader is pacing. You are presenting some beautiful poetry, the heart of the “sung prayer” of the liturgy. It needs to be read and presented like that. This is why psalms are best sung. Another hallmark is that they will back away in volume on the refrain, allowing the congregation to predominate in the phrase.
- The psalm concludes with a very short pause. Unlike the readings, the congregation speaks and prays through the psalm text. There is no need to delay more than the length of a good breath, or the time it takes to turn the page when needed.

I've been asked to offer the prayers?

- The “**Universal Prayer**”, “**Prayer of the Faithful**” or “**Bidding Prayer**” (what used to be called the “General Intercessions”) should also be read meaningfully and not as if by rote. They should be read from the Ambo at a pace such that the congregation can make the prayers their own.
- Exactly who is reading which prayer should be carefully worked out before the service begins so that, as always, the overall experience can be prayerful and not give the impression of a jumbled fulfilling of tasks. **When a Deacon is present these prayers are usually presented by him.** Leading these prayers is part of the Deacon's ministry within the church.
- Like the Responsorial Psalms, the prayers contain a repeated phrase, often “*Lord, hear our prayer*” or “*Hear our prayer*” or numerous other options. As reader you always have a consistent key phrase such as “*We pray to the Lord*” or “*To the Lord we pray*” or even “*Lord, in your mercy*” that precedes the people's response.
- Traditionally, the prayers at a funeral are offered **right after the homily**. At a wedding they normally occur after the exchange of rings. The prayers begin with a short introduction by the service leader, then the petitions are presented by the reader, and the prayers conclude with a short prayer by the service leader.
- One of the signs of a good prayer reader is that they will read the first petition and lead the first full response. After that they read the petition and cue the response but not say it aloud. Stay in your place until the people say “Amen” to conclude all of the prayers.

Returning to your seat

- It is as simple as reversing the steps that got you there with one exception ... before you leave the Ambo we always try to leave it set up for the next person. Sometimes this is not possible since we may not be familiar with the book set out for the readings but always do a quick check to ensure that you are not leaving papers, tissues etc.

- Return to your seat remembering to pause, face and bow to the main altar only if we are crossing in front of it.

Are there any other things to consider?



Whenever possible use the book (called the **Lectionary**) that is in place at the Ambo and always prepare beforehand.

A good reader, having read beforehand the passage several times and having prayed over it, will find himself or herself drawn to one or two lines in the reading that may be the "high points". There is often more than one way to read a passage and still be faithful to it. Another reader may highlight different elements of the reading. A good reader reads so that none of the "main themes" are lost and the whole text is be read such that a meaningful message from God can come through. It takes careful, prayerful, preparation.

Preparation includes reading the passage aloud, and more than once, if only to yourself. This is really important. There is a need not just to let your mind become familiar with the ideas and words, but also to let them "get around your tongue" as you practice the rhythm of the phrasing of the words.

This word is difficult! How do you pronounce it?

There are several good website that can help you hear those challenging names and words. One of them is: **The Bible Basics Pronunciation Guide** (<http://netministries.org/Bbasics/bwords.htm>) hosted by NET Ministries. There are many others available.

In summary ...

Don't rush. Read with a full voice and slowly, and don't forget to breathe between sentences!

Practice out loud a couple of times first and make sure you know how to pronounce any difficult names or places. Ask someone or check a pronunciation guide if you're not sure.

Keep your head high - don't speak down into your chest or the mic won't pick you up or you might sound muffled. Try to look up from the book from time to time, if you can do it without losing your place (some people hold a bookmark under the line they're reading and move it down the page so they don't get lost), but just look at the wall above the congregation so they don't make you more nervous.

And remember, everyone will be nervous but know that they're all on your side. Don't worry about it.

