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ON LITURGY AND LECTIONARY: THE WORD OF LIFE IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

Martin Connell

Decades before my dad's ancestors sailed from County Cork (1870s), or my mom's came a generation later from Calabria and Abruzzi in Italy (1910s), to where I would be born, the city was torn apart by Bible riots.¹ In 1843 the Catholic bishop of Philadelphia, Francis Patrick Kenrick, wrote to the Public School Board of Controllers to ask that Catholic children be spared reading of the Protestant Bible [the King James Version, KJV] and that anti-Catholic vitriol be excised from textbooks of the public schools. Bishop Kenrick turned to precedent, for on December 9, 1834 it had been:

RESOLVED, That this Board cannot but consider the introduction or use of any religious exercises, books, or lessons into the Public Schools, which have not been adopted by the Board, as contrary to the law; and the use of any such religious exercises, book, or lessons, is hereby directed to be discontinued.²

Ignoring the board's indictment of proselytizing, public-school teachers continued to use Protestant hymns in class, to lead recitations of the "Lord's Prayer"—a text different from the "Our Father," as Catholics call it—and the Ten Commandments, and to teach English grammar with passages from the KJV. Bishop Kenrick asked not that the Bible be removed from the classroom—as later detractors would claim—only that classroom rites draw from and not insult Catholic tradition. Historians focus on the translation divide—the Protestant King James Version versus the Catholic Douai-Rheims—but the issue closer to the heart of the matter was ritual formation (and malformation) of Christian believers, well-heeled Protestants versus poor Catholics.

Bible reading was not something Catholic families did; even now, Bible reading in Catholic homes is not, for the most part, central to the faith. Catholics prayed rosaries and novenas, and invoked patron and favorite saints in times of adversity, but Bible reading was not a common religious devotion. What happened in the summer 1844, I suggest, was more accurately *Rite Riots* rather than Bible Riots, as they are usually tagged; the toll was grave: at least fifteen dead, fifty injured.

Experience of the word of God for Catholics comes from hearing readings for Mass on Sundays from the lectionary, the church's selection of readings from the much, much longer text of the Bible. Reading the Bible is more common among non-Catholic Christians, perhaps, even though many more Catholics study the Bible today than in 1844. But, still, "faith," as Paul tells us squarely, "comes from what is heard" (Romans 10:17), not so much from reading, I add, because Christian faith is essentially a social, corporal experience of the people of God, the Word of God, Jesus Christ, incarnate, who said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God" (Luke 11:28). The First Letter of John describes the "word of life" as that which "from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at, and touched with our hands" (1:1).

Though common among many Christians in America, Bible reading mutes the body of Christ and its senses; the word of God is a two-edged sword, living and active (Hebrews 4:12), which the lectionary promotes.

Since the death of Jesus of Nazareth, more Christians have heard the word of God than read it. Before the printing press and the Reformation, most communities had only one Bible, so what Christians experienced at Christian masses and daily prayer was the *sound* of the word of God; communicating sounds was and is the purpose of the lectionary, ever the living body of Christ's circumscribed readings from the enormous canon of the Bible, readings prescribed and proclaimed for nourishment and endurance through trial, for conversion and reconciliation, for the salvation and freedom of all God's saints.

Bibles were few until the fifteenth century because all texts until then were handwritten and dear.³ This was not only an exigency of history; the social dynamism instigated by the lectionary carries the word of God to us hell-bound sinners more impressively than the inanimate object of the Bible. The difference between reading the Bible or hearing the lectionary is comparable to receiving an e-mail or a kiss from someone you love; in the latter, you lean in to see, smell, hear, before you touch lips to lips (or to cheek or hand or neck).⁴

The media of human bodies, tongues, and ears are required for the lectionary—the living word of God in the society of living, baptized Body of Christ—for its use is unifying, saving, and irreplaceable. The ordinary, solitary, easy reading of the Bible is no more saving than, say, reading Lorrie Moore's "People Like That Are the Only People Here" or Nathan Englander's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank." (Both required reading—just saying.)

Like them, the Bible in one's hands might stoke the imagination, but it doesn't save; only God saves, and revelation confirms this aspect of Catholic theology: that God's presence is assured only when the baptized, two or three (Matthew 18:20), congregate. As no sacrament is celebrated by a loner, thanks be to the living God—even if he is the welcome Argentine pontiff, Francis—so too with the word of God.

Philadelphia, in my childhood and now, is a majority black city. Often on Saturday mornings, a few well-dressed black women with Bibles in hand would come knocking. My parents generally panicked, torn between ready welcome, on one side, and absolute ignorance of the Bible, on the other.

We kids would sit on the steps of the row-home and watch mom and dad squirm. The women—most often Jehovah’s Witnesses, whose Bibles were complemented by free issues of “The Watchtower”—were generally combing the Catholic neighborhood to convince us that the world was about to end (about which they are still right), and that we were to be damned for our devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints, and for our birthday candles and decorated Christmas trees. (Jury still out.)

Catholics and liturgically ordered Protestants hear the word of God aloud, and the church’s gift of the lectionary—its greatest hits of the Bible—is the medium of that aural reception. I argue not that Bible reading and Bible study are fruitless, just that they are preparatory for God’s advent, perhaps, but not the divine presence of the living Word among us. Bible study and research—even done by earnest absorbers of verb conjugations and noun declensions in Masoretic Hebrew, Koine Greek, or Vulgate Latin—are not without value, but it is gnostic value. The grammar of dead languages—even of the languages that Isaiah, Ezekiel, or Jesus preached in, or that Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul wrote in—does not keep us out of the hellfire into which we humans apart from God are directed. (I write from experience of both dead languages and *peccata ad inferna*, “hell-bound sins.”) The gift of God’s word in the church is inspiration for living saints baptized into the church, not the subject of scholarship.

Since 1517, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anabaptists (and other non-Catholics) innocently and stalwartly imagined that the Reformation’s return to the Bible as the sure word of God—the GPS on the highway to heaven—would direct humanity back to God, Whom it had forsaken in the detours and diversions of evil, whorish, Romanist accretions (Martin Luther’s words, not Martin Connell’s). Reformation naiveté imagined the Bible as the unimpeded, single leap from sixteenth-century Wittenberg and Geneva, then from seventeenth-century Plymouth Rock, to first-century Palestine. But in spite of their and our quixotic hopes that in heeding God’s printed word we do what early Christians did after the death of Jesus, early Christians and Roman Catholic medieval communities were more like one another with the word of God than either of those ages were like our own age.

In an early medieval rite of baptism—*Ordo Romanus XI*, from sometime in the later sixth or early seventh centuries—“four deacons process from the sacristy with the four books of the gospels, with two candlesticks and a smoking thurible before them. They put the gospel books at each of the four corners of the altar.”⁵

The locus of supper of the Lamb was staked out by the four Gospel-books; the word of God in the Gospels literally set the table. The word of God in each corner of the altar made the church’s area for the sacrament of Christ, who was revealed in the word of each of the different Gospels proclaimed as in the consecration of bread and wine. To the infants about to be baptized, the priest catechized, “We open for you, loved children, the Gospels.” His instruction? “Behold, the One Who Speaks is present in this very place,” highlighting the essentially social, sensory nature of the word of God: “Open your ears so that your [other] senses not be blocked.” Finally, the deacon commanded the baptized assembly and the about-to-be-baptized infants: “Stand! Be quiet! Pay attention!”⁶

The deacon moved, "Taking up the book from the first corner of the altar at the left side, with two candles and a thurible before him, [the first deacon] ascends for the reading" from the beginning of the first Gospel, Matthew. Each deacon in turn read from each of the Gospels in canonical order, recognized by the spoken name of the evangelist author from the mouths of the deacons and by the seen images of the four creatures emblazoned on their covers.⁷

The unique meaning of each Gospel's contribution to the formation of the assembly was familiar not from millennium-later, post-Enlightenment tools of biblical criticism, but from the *heard* proclamation and *seen* identifying image in processions with candles and thuribles, with the *kisses* of the divine text that had been written by a breathing believers' hands, not stamped by a lifeless machine or read on an iPad. On the books' covers, according to the ancient *ordo*, were "the face of a person" (*facies hominis*, Matthew), "the face of a lion" (*facies leonis*, Mark),⁸ those first two taken up from the right side of the altar (*a dextris*); then "the face of an ox" (*facies vituli*, Luke), and last "the face of an eagle" (*facies aquilae*, John), the latter two from the left side of the altar (*a sinistris*).⁹

The word of God was manifest from each Gospel's proclamation as newborn infants were embraced into the church of flesh, in which the babies had just heard the living-and-active word of God. (How cool is that?) With the lectionary, these ritual elements corporally announced and locatively defined the double-edged power of God's word. It's likely that the rite was further embellished by liturgical bells and whistles, bowings and genuflections, kisses and signs of the cross as the books of the four Gospels were processed through the assembled people of God for the building up of the church and for the glory of God.

Imagining that early medieval rite, I remember watching with my "God and Politics" class—fall 2007 with the first-year seminar, at Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota—when the Republican candidates for the presidency of the United States responded to a YouTube inquirer—one Joseph Dearing of Dallas, Texas, as he held up to the screen a leather-bound King James Version of the Bible—who said, first, "The answer to this question will tell us *everything* we need to know about you," then asked, "Do you believe *every* word in this book?"

With divorced Rudy Giuliani and Latter-Day Saint Mitt Romney stuttering, hesitating, and squirming about the "every word" part of the query, which was reiterated by handsome host Anderson Cooper, Governor Mike Huckabee—the only guy on stage with a graduate degree in theology—rescued the others and answered nobly. The object the punchy young man held up to the screen for his question (whatever its translation) is not what the church has discerned as the medium of God's word. God's gift to humanity is the word of God, and the medium of the church's gift is the lectionary, which realizes the sensory, social experience of the word, into which we were submerged at baptism and by which we are fed and convicted Sunday after Sunday.

The baptized can trust the church's tradition and discernment in choosing lectionary readings to arrest us, comfort us, upset us, console us, and challenge us; proclamations to punctuate the days, seasons, and celebrations

of our thanksgiving. Faith indeed comes from hearing, *deo gratias*. Reading the Bible is inspirational, perhaps, but proclaiming and hearing the word of God from the lectionary is the voice of Christ, the double-edged sword that separates “soul from spirit, joints from marrow” (Hebrews 4:12). Humanity, for better or worse, is saved not by aorist and perfect tenses, or by the silent Bible, “but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). As a gift of the church, the lectionary is the servant of the incarnate voice of Christ.

Martin Connell teaches “What We Write About When We Write About God” at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and in the Department of Theology at St. John’s University, Collegeville, Minnesota.

Notes

1. Elizabeth M. Geffen, “Industrial Development and Social Crisis, 1841–1854,” *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History* (New York: Norton, 1982), 356–58; Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800–1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1938), 142–237.
2. Hugh J. Nolan, “Francis Patrick Kenrick, First Coadjutor Bishop,” *The Archdiocese of Philadelphia*, ed. James F. Connelly (Philadelphia: Archdiocese of Philadelphia, 1976), 167–170.
3. Eric Palazzo, *A History of Liturgical Books from the Beginning to the Thirteenth Century* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998).
4. Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 23.
5. Michel Andrieu, *Les Ordines Romani du Haut Moyen Age*, vol. 2 (Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, 1960), 415–47. Translation by the author.
6. The imperative appears before the proclamation of the start of each Gospel, as in “State cum silentio, audientes intente,” *Ordines Romani*, 429, no. 46, ll. 10–11; 430, no. 51, ll. 13–14; 431, no. 55, ll. 10–11. Translation by the author.
7. Ezekiel 1:15; Revelation 4:7.
8. *Ordines Romani*, 429, no. 45, ll. 5–6. Translation by the author.
9. *Ibid.*, ll. 6–7. Translation by the author.