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## Christ in You Is Your Hope of Glory: Exploring Colossians in the Sunday Lectionary

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**ABSTRACT:**

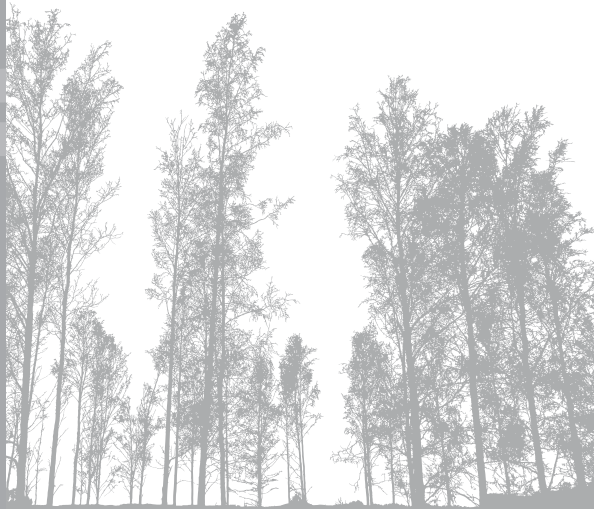
This article was submitted in the fall of 2022 as an assignment for LTGY 421: The Liturgical Year and the Word of God, exploring the use of Paul's letter to the Colossians in the lectionary cycle.

# Christ in You Is Your Hope of Glory

## Exploring Colossians in the Sunday Lectionary

*by Maggie Nadalin*

Readings included in the lectionary for Sundays and feast days are generally selected to have practical theological significance for Christians today. Though containing certain passages that offend our modern sensibilities, Paul's letter to



the Colossians discusses many issues that can help listeners understand their dignity as baptized Christians and offers a worthy Christological canticle. This paper will explore the selections of Colossians in the *Ordo Lectionum Missae* and *Revised Common Lectionary* and, when appropriate, suggest changes that could make the pericopes more effective, with special consideration given to homiletic applications.

## BACKGROUND

Paul's epistle to the Church at Colossae was written in the sixth decade of the first century to the faithful in a community near present day Honaz, Turkey. The two major themes of Colossians are Christology and the moral conduct of the community at Colossae. The first two chapters clearly form the Christological section, while the last half of the book deals with the community's behavior. Popular lessons from Colossians include the great Christological hymn, proclaiming Christ as the firstborn of all creation (1:15-20); Paul suffering for the sake of the Church (1:24-29); burial in baptism and new life in Christ (2:12-13); one instance of Paul's famous "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (3:16)<sup>1</sup>; and the morals of home and household (3:18-4:1). In addition to the lectionary, Paul's hymn in the first chapter is used as part of the psalmody for Wednesday Evening Prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours, and verses twelve through seventeen of chapter three are often heard at wedding liturgies.

## USE IN THE ORDO LECTIONUM MISSAE AND REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

In both the *Ordo Lectionum Missae* (OLM) and *Revised Common Lectionary* (RCL), Colossians appears in various parts of the liturgical year, but the majority is proclaimed during Ordinary Time of Year C. The following chart shows the pericopes from the RCL and OLM as well as on what liturgical day they are proclaimed.

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1 The other being Ephesians 5:19.

Day	RCL Pericope	Day	OLM Pericope
		Holy Family (A)	3:12-21 (12-17)
Easter Day (A)	3:1-4	Easter Day (ABC)	3:1-4
Proper 10 (C)	1:1-4	Ordinary Time 15 (C)	1:15-20
Proper 11 (C)	1:15-28	Ordinary Time 16 (C)	1:24-28
Proper 12 (C)	2:6-15 (16-19)	Ordinary Time 17 (C)	2:12-14
Proper 13 (C)	3:1-11	Ordinary Time 18 (C)	3:1-5, 9-11
Christ the King (C)	1:11-20	Christ the King (C)	1:12-20

The total number of verses included in the RCL lectionary is fifty-seven, while the OLM has forty-five; the entirety of the epistle to the Colossians contains ninety-five verses. Approximately 60 percent of the epistle is read using the RCL, while approximately 48 percent is read using the Roman lectionary. Despite having an additional day and reading for proclamation, the Roman lectionary uses less than the RCL due to large gaps in the pericopes. The quantity read, however, is not as important as how well-suited the readings are to the liturgical calendar and how applicable they are to the congregation. To evaluate the variances in the selection of these pericopes, we will look at each liturgical day and how the RCL and OLM selections compare in content as well as practical theology.

## THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY

The feast of the Holy Family only occurs in the Roman Catholic liturgical year, generally on the Sunday within the Octave of Christmas.<sup>2</sup> This passage exhorts the listener to “put on...heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another” (Colossians 3:12-13). Further, the listener is admonished to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,” a fitting reflection on the Incarnation within the Octave

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2 When Christmas Day falls on a Sunday, as it did in 2022, there is no Sunday within the Octave of Christmas, and this feast is transferred to December 30. The next time this will happen is 2033.

of Christmas (Colossians 3:16). As we commemorate Christ's coming to us in human flesh, the reality of *verbum caro factus est* is aptly echoed in the liturgical proclamation of Paul's letter. The lectionary gives options for a shorter pericope (verses twelve to seventeen), or a longer one terminating with verse twenty-one. The optional verses — eighteen through twenty-one — are problematic for many. These verses admonish wives to “be subordinate to [their] husbands, as is proper in the Lord” (Colossians 3:18). It is immediately understandable as to why these verses are omitted when this pericope is selected for a wedding liturgy. Rooted in Hellenistic philosophy, Paul's two-millennia old admonition is incredibly offensive in our own time when we realize and expect the equality of two individuals in a loving, committed relationship. While a careful homilist is able to present a sincere, nuanced exposition on this verse, it is better to omit these four verses completely, lest the homily lose sight of its intended purpose.

## EASTER DAY

Both the RCL and OLM designate verses one through four of chapter three for the epistle lesson on Easter Day; the OLM uses the same reading for all three lectionary cycles, whereas the RCL appoints it only for Year A. This passage succinctly explains the joy of Easter: “If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above...When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory” (Colossians 3:1 and 4). As we have died with Christ in our baptism, we are also raised with Him. The RCL, using the New Revised Standard Version translation, presents verse four more aptly, translating φανερώω as “revealed” rather than “appears” as the New American Bible does.<sup>3</sup>

## PROPER 10/ORDINARY TIME 15

This Sunday, occurring in July, features two pericopes from Colossians. The OLM appoints 1:15-20 for this Sunday, while the RCL appoints 1:1-14. Verses one and two are the typical epistolatory address while verses three through fourteen are the writer's thanksgiving for the faith present in the Church in Colossae and a prayer for their continued steadfastness in the faith. In the New Covenant commentary series, Michael Bird

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3 Colossians 3:4, *Revised Common Lectionary*: Episcopal Edition (Wichita: St. Mark's Press, 2001).

observes, “Central to [this] prayer is the connection of the gospel to the Colossian assembly, their spiritual nourishment, the transformation of their minds and the worthiness of their behavior before the Lord.”<sup>4</sup> The Roman lectionary loses a great meditation on the Christian life by omitting verses three through fourteen. While we are separated from the Colossians by 2,000 years, Paul’s admonitions to them and teachings on our dignity as the baptized can still find value in our contemporary lives. Verses eleven through fourteen especially provide great reflection on the strength we receive from Christ’s glorious power, sharing the inheritance of the saints in the light. It could also be useful for a homilist to explain that, in opening his letter with encouragement to the Colossian community for their commitment to the way of Christ, Paul is using a typical Hellenistic style. As Bird points out, noting the structure as Hellenistic not only helps understand the letter from a historical point of view but also assists in the interpretation of certain passages.

The pericope for this day in the OLM, 1:15-20, is the famous canticle praising Christ as the head of all creation. Adrian Nocent notes the tripartite structure of the canticle: “The first gives praise to Christ as the Creator of all things; the second gives thanks for the Redeemer, the Head of the Body which is the Church; the third honors him who has reconciled everything in himself.”<sup>5</sup> Kevin Irwin further observes that, “One interesting aspect of this hymn is that it parallels closely the Jewish prayer of blessing from which the eucharistic anaphora has been derived.”<sup>6</sup> Connecting the roots of the Eucharistic celebration not only with the lived liturgical experience of our Jewish siblings but also with the Pauline letters might be a worthy topic for a homilist to consider in a time of what the Roman Catholic bishops of the United States have dubbed a Eucharistic revival.

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4 Michael F. Bird, *Colossians and Philemon* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), 36-37.

5 Adrian Nocent, OSB, *The Liturgical Year: Sundays in Ordinary Time* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1977), 322.

6 Kevin Irwin, *Sunday Worship: A Planning Guide to Celebration* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1983), 300.

## PROPER 11/ORDINARY TIME 16

This Sunday's pericopes align somewhat, with the RCL appointing verses fifteen through twenty-eight of chapter one, while the OLM prescribes verses twenty-four through twenty-eight of the same chapter. Hearing verses fifteen through twenty-eight in one lesson can be overwhelming for some; it also provides the homilist with too much material to prepare a succinct and memorable homily if they choose to preach on the epistle. The Roman lectionary allowing the Christological canticle in verses fifteen to twenty to stand on its own as a reading on the previous Sunday, as previously discussed, is a stronger way to include this selection.

The highlight of verses twenty-one through twenty-three is the theme of the Colossians having their share in salvation. Paul reminds the Colossians that their reconciliation has been brought about by the Passion and that they may appear "blameless and irreproachable" before Christ as long as they persevere in the faith.<sup>7</sup> While this is not enough text to stand as a reading on its own, pairing it with verses twenty-four through twenty-eight would be a wise decision in future iterations of the OLM. Verses twenty-four through twenty-eight begin with Paul speaking of his rejoicing in his own suffering for the sake of the Church. Adrian Nocent argues that Paul's attitude

is a "moral" one, but also a good deal more. Christ's sufferings were undoubtedly efficacious and do not inherently need to be completed. But the Body of Christ is unfinished and is constantly being built. It is therefore the sufferings of Christ as experienced by his Body that Paul shares through his own sufferings.<sup>8</sup>

Paul then continues, discussing Christ as the fulfillment of the "mystery hidden from ages and from generations past" that has been manifested to the Gentiles (Colossians 1:26-27). This mystery is Christ Himself in us, the hope of our glory. Verses twenty-one through twenty-eight

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7 Colossians 1:22-23, *Revised Common Lectionary: Episcopal Edition*.

8 Nocent, *Liturgical Year*, 328-329.

proclaimed as a single unit provide much material for a homilist to preach on Christ's indwelling presence while remaining intelligible and not becoming a too formidable auditory experience.

#### PROPER 12/ORDINARY TIME 17

The entirety of the OLM pericope, 2:12-14, is enveloped by the RCL selection of verses six through fifteen, with the optional addition of verses sixteen through nineteen. Verses six through eight are an admonition against falling into traps of “philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition” (Colossians 2:8).<sup>9</sup> The philosophy against which Paul is warning is either purely Jewish in origin, or a “syncretistic movement, combining Jewish elements with aspects of Paganism” according to Margaret MacDonald.<sup>10</sup> While an interesting historical discussion, the relevance to modern listeners is insignificant at best and could stand to be removed from future iterations of lectionaries.

Verses nine through fifteen discuss circumcision, but a spiritual one: “In [Christ] also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ” (Colossians 2:11).<sup>11</sup> This section leads into the entirety of the text from the Roman lectionary, which treats the topic of being buried in baptism and being raised with Christ. Omitting verse eleven regarding spiritual circumcision in the Roman lectionary is unfortunate, as verse thirteen mentions the “uncircumcision of your flesh” (Colossians 2:13). Without the prior context, this verse loses much of its potency, and if a homilist wishes to provide further exposition, they must reference the omitted verses. This can obviously lead to confusion and linguistic juggling within a homily. Unfortunately, given the pairing of Luke's account of the Lord's Prayer for the gospel on this Sunday, homilists will most likely not mention the epistle at all.

The optional inclusion of verses sixteen through nineteen in the RCL contains Paul's warning against false asceticism. Paul encourages the

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<sup>9</sup> *Revised Common Lectionary: Episcopal Edition.*

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Sacra Pagina: Colossians and Ephesians* (Colleville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Revised Common Lectionary: Episcopal Edition.*



Colossians not to worry about those who condemn them “in matters of food and drink, or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths,” because these things “are only a shadow of what is to come” (Colossians 2:16-17).<sup>12</sup> Paul asserts that those who condemn are rooted in human ways of thinking, and that “the substance belongs to Christ” (Colossians 2:16-17).<sup>13</sup> These verses would be a welcome addition to the Roman lectionary, as they are a wonderful opportunity for the homilist to connect the Lord’s Prayer in the gospel to the authentic austerity that Paul endorses in the epistle; this would serve well in connecting the epistle and gospel of the day, not allowing the Our Father to solely dominate the homily.

#### PROPER 13/ORDINARY TIME 18

The OLM and the RCL encompass the same pericope this day (Colossians 3:1-11), but the former omits verses six through eight. The entirety of this text encourages the Colossians to seek what is above, where Christ is. The beginning verses again expound on the Easter promise of being raised with Christ. The Easter promise is reiterated, “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory” (Colossians 3:3-4).

The passage continues with an exhortation to the Colossians. Continuing the theme of seeking Christ where He is, Paul admonishes the Colossians to “put to death... the parts of you that are earthly” and then lists a number of carnal and spiritual sins (Colossians 3:5). The verses omitted from the Roman lectionary portray a God who is wrathful towards those who are disobedient. Paul reminds the Colossians that they, when living as pagans, committed these sins and that “anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language” must be banished from their mouths (Colossians 3:6-8).<sup>14</sup> It is curious that the Roman lectionary makes this omission, as the glossed over verses only add to the strength of the text and are an effective reminder for Christians today.

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12 *Revised Common Lectionary: Episcopal Edition.*

13 *Revised Common Lectionary: Episcopal Edition.*

14 *Revised Common Lectionary: Episcopal Edition.*

The passage continues with what is perhaps one of Paul’s most oft-quoted statements; “you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (Colossians 3:9).<sup>15</sup> So much can be gleaned from this one verse. At its most basic, the passage reminds the baptized that they, being clothed in the garment of salvation, cannot tolerate slander from their own tongues. This verse, however, has many pastoral implications regarding the dignity of the baptized as well as their rights and duties, expanding beyond keeping one’s speech clean to dimensions of full affirmation, acceptance, and inclusion of all of God’s children. This latter point is immediately reemphasized in the subsequent verses; “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all and in all” (Colossians 3:11).<sup>16</sup> The consequences for the Colossians are readily apparent with this litany. In our own time, we see the implications for the full inclusion of all nations and races of the earth as well as the LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, and other marginalized communities.

## CHRIST THE KING

The OLM and RCL again share the same pericope for this day, 1:12-20, with the latter including verse 11: “May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience” (Colossians 1:11).<sup>17</sup> While this does not seismically alter the context of the passage, its inclusion provides a worthy introduction to the Christological canticle, 1:15-20, previously discussed, which, with its focus on Christ’s preeminence, is a fitting reading for this feast.

## MUTUAL LECTIONARY OMISSIONS FROM COLOSSIANS

Verses 2:1-5, 2:20-23, and 3:18-4:1 are all omitted from both lectionaries. Verses one through five of chapter two do little in our contemporary reading of this epistle, as they primarily concern themselves with Paul’s physical absence from Colossae. Their inclusion in the lectionary would

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15 *Revised Common Lectionary: Episcopal Edition.*

16 (NAB).

17 *Revised Common Lectionary: Episcopal Edition.*

bear little fruit to those who hear it. Verses twenty through twenty-three of the same chapter serve to reiterate the message of verses sixteen through nineteen, namely, that the things of this earth are fleeting compared to those things that are above and should not be used to ascertain one's place in the Kingdom of God. This repetition is unnecessary during mass. As mentioned before, Colossians 3:18-4:1 is problematic for a variety of reasons. The subservience of women to their husbands and the tacit approval of slavery are incredibly insensitive in today's world. While one would do well to undertake these passages in a Bible study group where context, nuance, and historical information can further guide discussion and reading, their liturgical proclamation is problematic and their omission from the lectionary is wise. The majority of chapter four contains Paul's farewell and instructions to the Colossians; proclamation of these passages would not be time well spent within the liturgy.

## CONCLUSION

We have assessed the scope and context of Paul's epistle to the Colossians as it pertains to its inclusion in both the *Ordo Lectionum Missae* and the *Revised Common Lectionary*. Both tomes have positive aspects, and both have opportunities for improvement when and if they are reviewed and revised. While elements of this book of the Bible can be troublesome, their exclusion from the lectionary does not lessen the relevance of this epistle. The letter to the Colossians is rich in theology, and homilists would do well to give more attention to these pericopes when they appear in the lectionary cycle.



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