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*Lay Off the Critics in the Pews—
and Your Bathroom Mirror!*

Can you think of anything in your life and your Catholic Faith that has something in common with both your eighth-grade graduation and your sixty-fourth birthday? Regardless of your age, try if you can, to find something of value from a very young and a very old (or not so old) age.

For me, that's over fifty years to find a common bond at its beginning and end, and that's through many Church evolutions for my generation.

When I was our eighth-grade graduation Mass Lector for my Class of 1971 parochial school in what was then a small but emerging upstate New York community, the value of the Lectionary did not occur to me as a fourteen-year-old boy on my way to nearby Rochester's most recognized Catholic high school. I literally took an open Bible from the Marian side altar, carried it over to the pulpit, and started the reading. Our doctoral-level pastor noticed, and I trust others did as well!

As we begin our journey together into a deeper meaning for this ministry, I'm a week past my last Lector assignment 400 miles away from what will always be home, during a global pandemic. The times require more discipline: Two-thirds of the pews are blocked off, the lights are turned on in my suburban Columbus church after waiting outside to be escorted in, the Lectionary is placed on the pulpit, and the tip (please, only the tip) of the microphone is adjusted. There is no processing in and out, at least for yours truly there is none of that. A kind of spiritual Karate Kid comes into play, but instead of "Wax on, wax off," it's Mask On, Mask Off as the readings are completed and then resumed.

Between that more recent week and my young graduation day, many opportunities to serve in the Lector ministry have come and gone across many cities, settings, and places across the United States. Our new parish in the hometown was my first parish "assignment" in high school, and from there my undergraduate school came with its great Gesu Church, its small yet iconic St Joan of Arc Chapel, and its personally memorable dormitory liturgies with great Jesuits such as the late Fr. John Naus, S.J. Graduate school followed, but this time my Lector parish was a mile walk away.

Over time, I would serve in this capacity in many other cities nationally. Thirty-five of these combined Lector years stand out: Seven at a phenomenal Raleigh parish that now has over twenty-five years of Jesuit service; eight of immense privilege at Washington's Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception; and, almost two decades more in an incredibly faithful parish that guided our selection of a new community and new home where our twentieth wedding anniversary was recently celebrated.

Perhaps there are many memories and ways of relating your Lector story to mine, but many more people plant roots in very special, multi-generational communities all their lives and Lector in the same church where they were baptized, indeed, where their great-grandkids were baptized. Countless stories are in between. With so many different stories, how can one book possibly succeed in bringing deeper meaning to the Lector ministry for all of you besides "having to read this Sunday"?

I believe we all come together here in this way: With the possible exception of the Priest or the Deacon providing the Homily at Mass, you as a Lector are seen and heard most visibly in a parish setting, much more so than most any other lay role in your local Catholic community.

There is even more visibility seen and heard for you than for a Eucharistic Minister, although it can be definitely argued that this latter ministry is more profoundly and inherently Catholic than ours. The visibility can also dwarf that of a parish council president, and again, that responsibility is immense, especially in parishes with congregations over 10,000 that need over \$25,000 in the collection plate weekly to support million dollar-plus budgets.

What is the issue with being seen and heard so visibly for us?

It is that very real, and that very thorny word Judgment.

There's a lot of ways to view this term, some of which are objective, others spiritual, others more pejorative in nature, and still others from many culturally diverse perspectives. For us as Lectors in the Catholic church, a "give it to you straight" meaning of the word judgment from the dictionary strikes the closest nerve: "The forming of an opinion, estimate, notion, or conclusion, as from circumstances presented to the mind."

Can you possibly relate out there!

We are out front, sometimes in front of 1,000 or more parishioners (or at the National Shrine or my undergrad Baccalaureate Mass, 8,000 or more), and our Lector service is quite literally “circumstances presented to the mind” of many people we know, and many more we will never know. From the millisecond we approach the pulpit, countless communicative, metacommunicative, proxemic, and non-communicative variables are forming opinions, estimates, notions, and certainly conclusions about us, our dress, our volume, pitch, and intonations of voice, and we know this list can go on and on indefinitely.

These opinions, estimates, notions, and conclusions can be quite excellent, and they can also be extremely poor. It gets even more complicated when we draw many, many more opinions, estimates, notions, and conclusions about ourselves than the people in the pews do.

And no, none of this has anything to do with the Sacred Scriptures. There is no connection here to God, or to Jesus, or to Our Blessed Mother, either. If there is a link from these opinions, estimates, notions, or conclusions to our Church or The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, it’s escaped me all these years in this ministry. Can any of you connect these dots to Death, Judgment (that Judgment), Heaven, or Hell? I can’t, either.

But we must start with these opinions, estimates, notions, and conclusions to start over with our Lector ministry. Did the title of this chapter surprise, even shock any of you? Well, that is what we must do!

It is time for a summary layoff of the critics out there in the pews—and we are even issuing a pink slip to the Lector in your bathroom mirror!

Sometimes it takes a good old-fashioned reduction in force to reform the task at hand, and as someone who once applied for 1700 jobs during eighteen months of joblessness while recovering from three months of chemotherapy and five hours of cancer surgery, I do not use this analogy lightly.

We'll keep you personally on the volunteer roster, but everybody else and that guy you see every morning before you take a shower has got to go! As a Church we certainly believe in God's Mercy, but this time a furlough just isn't good enough (and it simply isn't practical with reflective glass nailed to the wall).

Why did we just place an entire parish population on unemployment? It's because this role in the Mass—this blessed privilege of sharing God's Word with others—is not about you, it is not about me, and it is not about the critics in the pews, nor the glass critic near our toothbrush and hairbrush at home.

The reforms of the Second Vatican Council entrusted the laity with the Lector role, and in priestly formation, seminarians progress through the Acolyte and Lector ministries prior to that of a Deacon and eventually Priest. This is also how we process into Mass, led by our altar server Acolytes, followed by us Lectors, then our Deacon, and finally our Priest In Persona Christi.

While most parishes have always entrusted both men and women to this ministry, our priestly function at the pulpit as Lectors must be more closely examined. For many years going back to our childhoods, we've heard that you and me—ordinary folks—are called to be priest, prophet, and king with others near and especially far from the pews on Sunday. This is an essential element of the priesthood of the laity in the post-conciliar church.

These are way more than "circumstances presented to the mind" that merely or randomly elicit opinions, estimates, notions, and conclusions. In the Liturgy of the Word of The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, we as Lectors are presented with a time of great impact on people's hearts, minds, and most vitally, their souls. This is also the Mass of the Catechumens where Catholics-to-be first experienced their faith before joining their RCIA sponsors and formation instructors later during the liturgy. We cannot grasp this great impact on both new and old Catholics alike unless we can have a Relational God Joy ourselves and bring it to others through Scripture.

This is so much more than “having to read next Sunday at 8:30 AM Mass” We—you and I—have so much more at stake here than “being assigned next Saturday evening before I go out to dinner with the family.” And this is why this book on the Lector ministry reframes this conversation from that of performance in ministry—the How—to where we are going in our spiritual and evangelical formation—the Why, or the basis for our book title Our Marian Pulpit.

It’s a different title for a book on the subject, to be sure. The chapter titles clearly do not read like a Speech Communication textbook—and yes, that also is the point.

Before we approach Our Marian Pulpit, we must know, love, reinforce, and be deeply and personally devoted to several foundational principles. Remember, the layoffs are now in effect, the critics in the pews aren’t around anymore, and bathroom mirrors can’t write their own resumes!

As Lectors, we are now free to reexamine God in all of God’s Glory and meaning. From there, the purpose of Jesus in our own personal salvation history (this is ours now, not just words we’re supposed to read well) can come into sharper focus.

We’ll soon discover how difficult this will be on our own, though, so this is why Mary as Our Blessed Model (and not just Our Blessed Mother) now leads us to her pulpit, where we will lead others to salvation in Heaven through her dearly beloved Son.

And yet, our frustrations will continue if we try to renew this life purpose on our own. Here is where our One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church brings us together principally through The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass—and, where you and me as Lectors will lead others to Jesus through the Sacred Scriptures at Our Marian Pulpit.

Only then can we address the How of the Lector ministry, but we will be much more joyously equipped now, because we know the Why of our service. This book is just the beginning but trust me on this point: It will profoundly surprise you and deeply amaze you that the communicative and logistical mechanics of being a Lector will now fall into place so easily and so effectively.

And this may be the very best surprise: When it's your Sunday to Lector, the gift you give yourself at Our Marian Pulpit may well surpass your greatest expectations, and when the critics in the pews return from unemployment, it will almost be as if you never cared about their opinions, estimates, notions, and conclusions in the first place. Your bathroom mirror will also thank you after it gets a well-deserved promotion, starting now as we move from the How of our Lector purpose to the Why of our great destiny someday.