Spirituality



The daily Scripture readings used at Mass during Ordinary Time provide Christians with the opportunity to get acquainted with the Bible. The title "Ordinary" actually comes from "ordinal," as in "ordinal numbers," since these weeks are numbered. (Courtesy of Adam Dimmick)



Thomas Reese

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January 16, 2018
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The beginning of the calendar year is a time for making resolutions, but in the Catholic liturgical year it is called "Ordinary Time" — a boring title for the part of the year that's not Advent, Christmas, Lent or Easter.

But it is also an opportunity to be an extraordinary Catholic — one who reads the Scriptures daily.

In the bad old days, Catholics were discouraged from reading the Scriptures because clerics feared their parishioners would become like Protestants and start thinking for themselves. "You don't need the Scriptures; just memorize the catechism and do what I tell you."

Today, the church encourages Catholics to nourish themselves with God's word, and has some of the best Scripture scholars in the world. But sadly polls show that Catholics still read the Scriptures less than their Protestant brothers and sisters. Only 17 percent of Catholics read the Bible every day as compared to 38 percent of Protestants.

There are lots of ways to read the Scriptures, but one of the best is to read the passages used during Mass, even if you do not attend daily Mass. Over its two-year cycle, the weekday lectionary gives readers a comprehensive taste of the best passages in the Old and New Testaments. The Sunday lectionary follows a three-year cycle.

These lectionaries are also used by many Protestant churches. When you pray over these readings, you are united with Christians across the world who are reading the same passages. It is an experience that can be shared in prayer groups or with family and friends.

The daily Scripture readings during Ordinary Time provide Christians with the opportunity to get acquainted with the Bible. The word "ordinary" comes from "ordinal," as in "ordinal numbers," since these weeks are numbered. The first weeks of Ordinary Time use the first chapters of Mark’s Gospel, and during even numbered years, the first reading is from the Book of Samuel.

These readings often have relevance today.

For example, during the first week in Ordinary Time, the First Book of Samuel begins with his mother, Hannah, who like many women today is being badly treated by her culture and her priest. She is told she has no value unless she has a son. When she prays in the temple, the priest Eli accuses her of being drunk. The only person on her side is God who hears her prayer.

I first got acquainted with the Gospel of Mark in high school when for homework we were told to read one of the Gospels from beginning to end. Word quickly spread that Mark was the shortest Gospel, so being high school seniors, you know which Gospel we read.

Later, as a student of theology, I learned more about Mark. It is generally thought by scholars to be the first written Gospel, which Matthew and Luke had at their sides when they wrote their Gospels. Most scholars also believe that the original Gospel ended with the appearance of Jesus to the women at the tomb.

Mark is a challenging. Mark’s Jesus demands uncompromising personal commitment. In Mark’s mind, nobody understands Jesus, not even the Apostles and his mother Mary. At the end of the Gospel, the women do not tell the disciples that Jesus is risen. Rather, they "fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

With such a downer for an ending, it is no surprise that someone added to Mark's Gospel the appearances to Mary Magdalene and the disciples. It was not that Mark was ignorant of the appearances; he did not include them because he wanted to keep on message to his fellow Christians: "You just don’t get it."

Mark’s Gospel was sufficient in the early days of Christianity when people had to make a personal choice for Christ, but as time went on it was hard to live with his relentless calls to total commitment. Matthew realized that Christianity was not only about personal commitment, but about a Christian community that needs teaching,

structure and rules. Luke understood that we never are as committed as Mark wanted and therefore need a compassionate message that gives hope.

Each of the four Gospels has a special message. At the beginning of Ordinary Time, Mark tells us that we need to make a personal commitment to Christ and this commitment needs to be absolute. But lest we get too proud, we also need to be reminded that no one really understands Jesus. If we think we do, we need to return to Mark.

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There are many ways to get the daily Mass Scripture readings, including buying hardbound missals or monthly missalettes with the readings. The readings are also online in text and audio at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

For those with smartphones or tablets, there are also free apps, like iBreviary. Or they can be heard on iTunes in "Daily Readings from the New American Bible."

Catholics need to be nourished by the word of God, and this is a way to do it with the whole Catholic community, even if they don't go to Mass every day. This is a great New Year’s resolution. If every day is more than you are willing to commit, at least read the Sunday Scripture readings during the week before attending Mass.

[Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese is a columnist for Religion News Service and author of *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church*.]