



One Reading, Multiple Languages

During liturgies in a multicultural setting, the proclamation of a scriptural passage in two languages could often challenge the assembly's patience, but when done well, using an appropriate model of proclamation, these liturgical moments could become an opportunity for scriptural and intercultural enrichment. What we want to avoid is proclaiming an entire reading twice—the first time in one language, followed by a repetition of the same reading in a second language. While this may work if the scriptural passage is very short, more often than not this ping-pong effect can be quite tedious from the assembly's perspective since it inhibits the ritual flow and rhythm of good proclamation.

A good model for proclamation of Scripture in two languages is analogous to a good model of preaching in two languages. On one occasion a few years ago, I participated as a member of the assembly during a Mandarin-language eucharistic celebration. Because I was a novice in this language, I appreciated the effort made by the preacher to insert very short, one-sentence translations throughout the homily; all together there were four short summary sentences in English interwoven at different points. His method not only helped the few of us who did not understand Mandarin to better understand the content and theme of the homily, but it also became a clear gesture of Christian hospitality. Here, while there were two languages being spoken, there was only one principal language, which, in this case, was Mandarin. The preacher's intercultural sensibility was well noted and appreciated by those of us who were not fluent in Mandarin. I felt welcomed and was able to follow along. His method did not inhibit the ritual flow of the preaching event: the English insertions were neither too long nor too distracting from the overall shape and flow.

Determining the Principle Language

In *Multicultural Celebrations: A Guide* (OCP 44761TL), Viatorian Father Mark Francis suggests that the lector proclaim the reading in one principal language. This principal language is determined by asking the following question: in this assembly, which language is understood by the majority of the people? For example, you may have a situation where the make-up of the assembly is Hispanic, Vietnamese, and Filipino. In this context, the language understood

by the majority of the people may be English. The key is to determine which language is *understood* by the majority of those assembled, not necessarily which native language is *spoken* by the majority group. Once this is determined, the key proclamations and prayers throughout the entire service should be spoken in this principal language, and the other languages should only be used sparingly.

One-Sentence Summary

Francis suggests that the lector insert a short summary of the reading in an alternative language in between the introduction and the first sentence of the actual Scriptural text to help those who may not understand the principal language. A good summary of the reading can often be found in red ink above each of the readings in the Lectionary.

Pauses and Brief Insertions

I would like to add my own thoughts to Francis' suggestions. First, in addition to a clear proclamation style, the use of short pauses throughout the reading in this context is crucial. Short pauses allow everyone to follow the structural flow of the reading, especially when there is a language not everyone understands. For example, pausing at the very end of the scriptural passage and right before "The word of the Lord" allows the entire assembly to respond "Thanks be to God" at the same time. If there is no pause and the reader hurries straight into the invitation, only those who understand the principal language are able to voice their response in a timely manner. (Even when a reading is proclaimed in one language, the use of appropriate pauses demonstrates good oratory skills!)

Second, there could be a moment or a few moments in the scriptural proclamation when a key word or phrase (provided that it is short) could be immediately repeated in the alternative language. This very short insertion places an emphasis on a particular theme or word that may be important to hear in both languages. Because it is only a repeated word, phrase, or sentence, the ritual flow of the proclamation does not become disrupted. In addition, this insertion may be a key phrase that the preacher may want to break open and explain later on in the homily that follows. The rule of thumb is not to have too many insertions—I prefer doing this only once to three times—otherwise long and multiple insertions tend to lean towards the ping-pong model.

Finally, these insertions may be seen as an extension to the one-phrase summary that was heard at the beginning of the reading.

A Sample Reading

Let us now turn to a specific reading to illustrate this model, number 62A in the Lectionary. In this particular context, the principal language of the assembly is English, while Spanish serves as an alternative language. Furthermore, in an ideal situation, the lector and preacher have corresponded with one another (maybe they even reflected on all the scriptural readings sometime earlier). They have decided that a key theme of the following reading is centered on the outpouring of the spirit and how this outpouring leads each of us to call on the name of the Lord.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet
Joel (*pause*)

*Derramaré mi espíritu sobre mis
siervos y mis siervas. (pause)*

Thus says the Lord:

I will pour out my spirit upon
all flesh.

Your sons and daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall
dream dreams,
your young men shall
see visions;

even upon the servants and
the handmaids,
in those days, I will pour out
my spirit.

And I will work wonders in the heavens
and on the earth,
blood, fire, and columns
of smoke;

the sun will be turned to darkness,
and the moon to blood,
at the coming of the day of the Lord,
the great and terrible day.

Then everyone shall be rescued
who calls on the name of the Lord;
(*pause*)

*Quando invoquen el nombre del
Señor se salvarán; (pause)*

for on Mount Zion there shall be
a remnant,
as the Lord has said,
and in Jerusalem survivors
whom the Lord shall call. (*pause*)

The Word of the Lord.

Assembly (simultaneously): Thanks be to
God./*Te alabamos, Señor.*

Of course, the two languages could easily be switched around, with the Spanish serving as the principal language of this reading, if, for example, the Gospel were to be proclaimed mostly in English. In other words, if this proclamation were to take place within a eucharistic celebration, then it may be best to proclaim the Gospel reading in the principal language (in this case, English). The first and second readings, in turn, could be proclaimed in the other language, with a short summary in the principle language at the beginning of these readings.

Also, we have to keep in mind that throughout the process of liturgical inculturation there will always be a give and take from all cultures involved. This reality remains an area that we have yet to embrace in our North American parishes. More can be done, however, to better facilitate an assembly's comprehension of the scriptural text. For example, if a homily follows, the preacher may consider breaking open the reading further.

Three or More Languages

There may be specific occasions when the readings are to be proclaimed in three or more languages. For example, there may be a parish that has three separate eucharistic celebrations each Sunday for three linguistically distinct cultural groups. During feast days or solemnities there may be a desire to incorporate all three languages within one celebration. This may also occur during larger diocesan or national liturgical gatherings or events. In such instances, I would maintain that the principles illustrated would equally apply: the determination of the principal language for the key prayers and readings of the service; good proclamative skills of the lectors who are able to maintain ritual flow while employing timely pauses; and one to three short insertions (though this number, in the end, is relative) in the other languages throughout the reading that place particular emphasis on key phrases or sentences, when appropriate.

If, on the other hand, this type of proclamation were to occur during a liturgy that has only one reading (e.g., Liturgy of the Hours, reconciliation services, etc.), then the following example, taken from the first Book of Samuel (3:3b–10, 19), may be useful. The story recounts the Lord calling out to Samuel in the temple in the middle of night. Upon hearing the Lord call out to him, Samuel runs to Eli and says,

“Here I am. You called me.” Eli responds, “I did not call you. Go back to sleep.” This call and response pattern occurs three times. Finally, after the third time, Eli realizes that the Lord was calling the youth. After Eli gives instructions to Samuel, the Lord once again calls Samuel. This time Samuel answers, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

This summary highlights two key phrases, both of which are relatively short: 1) “Here I am. You called me” and 2) “Speak, for your servant is listening.” The first phrase occurs three times, while the second phrase serves as a theological peak at the end of the passage.

Now, let us suppose that this reading is to be proclaimed in four languages: English, Spanish, Filipino, and Vietnamese. The principal language will most likely be English. Each of the other three languages could be repeated immediately after Samuel's responses, “Here I am. You called me.” There is probably no need to have all three languages repeated after all three occurrences of this response: the first time it occurs, the Vietnamese translation may follow; the second time, the Spanish; and the third time, the Filipino. A simple choreography will be crucial; again, a good placement of the readers that does not inhibit the ritual flow of the proclamation.

I realize that the Scripture reading demonstrated here might seem too ideal. Nevertheless, I present it only used as a model. Each reading, as you will discover, has its own dynamics. We do not use creativity for the sake of creativity. Rather, let us always remember that what and how we proclaim, in the end, points to the meaning of the text. We merely break open that word once again and allow Christ to speak through us.

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Works Cited

Francis, Mark. *Multicultural Celebrations: A Guide*. Washington, DC: Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, 1998, 2000, 2002.

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