

Why we use special texts for sacred reading



Question: The new priest in our parish is upset that many of us read the Liturgy of the Hours from our phones and devices. We pray this prayer together after Mass with him. He wants us all to read from books, but this takes time. We have to call out page numbers and set ribbons. Also, one of our best lectors usually brings her reading device to the pulpit because she says she can read better from it than the Lectionary. The priest told her to stop. What is so wrong with this? Shouldn't the Church embrace this new technology?

– Name and place withheld

Answer: Something of a balance needs to be found in this matter. On the one hand, the priest has a point that has been made by Cardinal Robert Sarah and a few other bishops around the world. An electronic device is not "sacred." This does not mean that the device is evil or unholy. Rather, the term "sacred" refers to something that is "wholly set apart" for something special. Hence a chalice is set apart to hold the precious blood at Mass. We should never consider using it for anything else, such as drinking beer from it or using it at an ordinary dinner party in the rectory. Neither should we bring ordinary china from the rectory meant for ordinary food to the church for use on the altar.

In the case of a book such as a lectionary, missal or breviary, these books contain only religious and scriptural texts and are used only in the liturgy. This is appropriate for Scripture and other liturgical texts to be in a special book wholly dedicated to their presentation.

The problem with an electronic device such as a cellphone or

iPad or other electronic reader is that anything can be displayed or read on them, not just the scriptural texts. One might look at the news, a video, email or, heaven forbid, even sinful material. And then, one switches to the breviary or the readings for the day. Hence the ordinary and possibly even sinful is admixed with the holy.

Some argue that, at least for the liturgy, we should read from books that are wholly set apart for the display of the biblical or liturgical texts. These are special prayers and texts that deserve to be displayed in mediums wholly devoted to them, wholly set apart for them.

Thus while in Church, and certainly for those in the sanctuary, the use of electronic reading devices presents a problem for the reasons stated. A lector should not walk to the pulpit with an electronic reader. A pastor is able and right to insist that the proper books be used.

As for people in the pew, there is perhaps more leeway. No one can forbid them from following the texts on their devices. But even they, if possible, should be encouraged to read from books set apart solely for the presentation of sacred texts or simply listen to the proclaimed word.

Regarding the breviary, all the same can apply. Using an electronic device is problematic especially for those who lead the prayer. It is allowable for those in the pews, but still not ideal. Admittedly, there is a certain convenience in having the often-complicated parts of the breviary conveniently assembled by breviary services.

In the end, sacred texts deserve sacred books – books set apart for only one purpose. Yet, there can be exceptions when one is traveling or needs the convenience of having access to the liturgical texts in a way that is accurate and compact.

By the way, some people have argued for years that seasonal missalettes printed on newsprint and thrown away are also a

violation of the dignity of the sacred text. I couldn't agree more. However, it is a hard habit to break, and the convenient and cheap alternative persists in parishes despite the objection of liturgists. At some point in all these matters, we have to balance convenience and cost with what is sacred and deserving of special treatment. And even though we have learned to tolerate the missalettes, it doesn't follow that further erosions of the special nature of sacred texts should suffer further harm.

Msgr. Charles Pope is the pastor of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian in Washington, D.C., and writes for the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. at blog.adw.org. Send questions to msgrpope@osv.com.