

Sing to the Lord and Psalmody in the Life of the Church

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Many Catholics might be surprised by the statement “The Psalter is the basic songbook of the Liturgy” (*Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* [STL], 115b). For parishes used to a smorgasbord of musical choices for the liturgy, this statement can be quite an eye-opener. In this essay, we’ll look at why the Church considers the psalms its primary liturgical song. We’ll look at how STL encourages a fuller use of psalmody in our liturgical celebrations, examining what the document says about the Responsorial Psalm, the entrance and Communion chants, and the Liturgy of the Hours. Along the way, we’ll consider tensions present in the document and challenges involved in implementing its directives, and try to offer a balanced way to move toward what STL envisions.

WHY THE CHURCH SINGS THE PSALMS

STL does not state why the psalms play such a significant part in the liturgical prayer of the Church. It is essential, however, that we understand the reasons for the normative place of the psalms in the Church’s prayer. The Christian community inherited the psalms from the Jewish community, who, in these poetic texts, expressed in very human terms the ups and downs of their journey to faith in the one true God. The Christian community recognized this story as their own; more importantly, they recognized Christ as the fulfillment of that story, the endpoint of the salvation history journey.¹ They recognized the psalms as the prayer of Christ, the God-man responding in the fullness of his humanity to the saving love of Abba-God. For the Church, the psalms not only speak of Christ, but Christ himself speaks in them. When the Church prays the psalms, then, “it is the very prayer which Christ himself, together with his Body, addresses to the Father” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* [SC], 84).

Several points are salient here. First, in the psalms, the Church hears the prayer of Christ. This is the prayer of Christ’s lifting the joys and sufferings of all humanity to the Father (SC, 83). This is the prayer of Christ’s offering himself in love for the salvation of all. Second, in the psalms, the Church unites herself with this prayer of Christ. With him, the Church takes on all the joys and sufferings of humanity and offers them in praise and petition to the Father (SC, 83). Such prayer is never private but always is the communal prayer of the whole body of Christ united with its head and with one another. Such prayer, then, draws us out of ourselves to become more fully who we are because of Baptism: one body in Christ given over for the salvation of the world.



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STL and Psalmody

The Responsorial Psalm. Widely implemented as part of the liturgical renewal of the Second Vatican Council, the singing of the Responsorial Psalm, particularly at the Sunday eucharistic celebration, is now standard practice in most parishes. STL advances our understanding of the Responsorial Psalm by making an important distinction between the psalmist, who leads the singing of the psalm (STL, 34) and the cantor, who leads other aspects of congregational singing (STL, 37). This distinction properly elevates the importance of the Responsorial Psalm. STL then identifies in fuller detail than previous documents the skills needed by a person designated to be psalmist. In addition to the vocal and verbal skills required, one called to the ministry of psalmist must also possess the gift “to proclaim the text of the Psalm with clarity, conviction, and sensitivity to the text, the musical setting, and those who are listening” (STL, 35). Exploration of each quality reveals that singing the Responsorial Psalm is no simple task.



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Clarity and conviction: The psalmist must sing with faith in the God who inspired the psalms. The psalmist must recognize in the psalms his or her story of salvation, his or her experience of and relationship with God. Moreover, he or she must recognize the psalm as the story of the whole Church unfolding here and now in this liturgical celebration. Does the psalmist believe the psalm text is the revealed word of God? Does he or she believe the psalm text is human word responding to what God is doing—here and now—for salvation?

Sensitivity to the text: The psalmist needs to know the type of text the psalm is (that is, a lament, a hymn of praise, a song of ascents, a royal psalm, etc.) and how its genre shapes its content and images and colors its words. More importantly, he or she must understand the relationship between the psalm text and the readings of the day to which it is juxtaposed. Within the context of this particular Liturgy of the Word, the psalm is meant to lead the assembly to a Paschal Mystery encounter with Christ in the Gospel reading. It is the psalmist's role to lead the assembly to this encounter; to do so, he or she must have already walked this journey.²

Musical setting: Verbal text and musical context work together to communicate meaning. The psalmist must understand this relationship and be able to use the innate phrasing and dynamics of the musical setting, whether it be a psalm tone or a melodic composition, to communicate the intended meaning.

Sensitivity to the listeners: The attention of the psalmist must be directed outward toward the assembly. Effective communication requires that the psalmist engage via the psalm text

in a personal encounter with God, but this individual encounter is not the end point. The end point is the assembly's engagement in a shared liturgical encounter with God; the psalmist's personal encounter is a means to this end. This calls for a giving over of self on the part of the psalmist that places the needs of the assembly above personal gratification.

Clearly, STL raises the implicit challenge for the need for more thorough training for those entrusted with the ministry of psalmist. Much more is involved in singing the psalms than possessing a good voice. The psalmist needs to have a broad knowledge of the psalms and their history, their genres, and their spirituality. The psalmist needs to understand how Christ is the messianic fulfillment of the psalms, how the psalms are the prayer of Christ and consequently of the Church. The psalmist needs to possess a conscious awareness of how the psalms articulate his or her personal faith journey. He or she needs a clear sense of how the psalm on a given day interfaces with the readings of the day. He or she needs to be imbued with a liturgical spirituality that shapes how the psalms are to be understood and sung. Adjunct to this challenge is the need for music directors to be more judicious in discerning who possesses the necessary gifts of the Spirit to be a psalmist.

By clarifying the role of the psalmist and identifying the qualities necessary for the ministry of psalmist, STL increases our appreciation of the importance of the Responsorial Psalm. But STL muddies this appreciation when stating that the psalm "is in effect a reading from Scripture" (STL, 155) and when using the term "proclaim" in reference to the psalm (STL, 34–35). The *Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass* (ILM), 19–22, identifies the psalm as a song which, even when not sung, is to be "recited in a manner conducive to meditation on the word of God." The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM), 57–61, distinguishes between the readings and the Responsorial Psalm and never refers to the psalm as proclamation.³ Both documents present the psalm as meditative response to the word of God heard in proclamation. A meditative sung response is a very different type of speech act than proclamation. Referring to the singing of the psalm as proclamation erases the proclamation-response dynamic between the readings and the psalm and weakens the role of the psalm. We would do well in pastoral practice, I think, if we downplayed the use of this term in reference to the psalm and examined more carefully the function of the psalm during the Liturgy of the Word.

Psalmody in the Entrance and Communion Chants.

A second area where psalmody is employed in the liturgy is in the processional chants at the entrance rite and during Communion. "The Entrance and Communion chants with their psalm verses serve to accompany the two most important processions of the Mass: the entrance procession, by which the Mass begins, and the Communion procession, by which the faithful approach the altar to receive Communion" (STL, 115b). These antiphons with accompanying psalm verses are not as familiar to us as the Responsorial Psalm because they have been less accessible to us. The post-Second Vatican Council revised Lectionary provided us with the texts of the Responsorial

Psalms, but no comparable vernacular collection was ever produced for the entrance and Communion chants. The chants offered in the revised *Graduale Romanum* of 1974 follow a one-year cycle that does not entirely correspond with the three-year cycle of the revised Lectionary. Moreover, these chants are intended to be sung by trained choirs capable of dealing with the intricacies of the Latin language and Gregorian chant. Although simplified, the *Graduale Simplex* issued in 1975 for use by congregations is inaccessible because its melodies and Latin language remain beyond the reach of the average parish. It comes as no surprise, then, that the proper entrance and Communion chants have been widely supplanted in the United States by more user-friendly hymns and songs.

Assessing the situation, STL, 144 and 190, reiterate the wide range of options outlined in GIRM, 48 and 87. For the entrance and Communion chants, we may sing an antiphon and psalm drawn from the *Graduale Romanum* or the *Graduale Simplex*. We may choose an antiphon and psalm from another episcopally approved collection. We may sing a hymn or song that is in keeping with the purpose of the entrance or Communion chant and that carries the stamp of episcopal approval. This openness to options balances Church tradition with contemporary needs while upholding the normative value of psalmody in the liturgy. Whatever the music we sing at these processional moments, it must support the liturgical action and be in accord with the spirit of the liturgy. The proper antiphons with their accompanying psalm verses offer us a much needed model for this and point us in two possible directions for implementation.

The first is to make use of the growing number of vernacular settings of the entrance and Communion antiphons becoming available to us. These include, for example, James Biery's "Communion Antiphons for the Advent Season" and "Communion Antiphons for the Lenten Season," published by Morningstar; Charles Thatcher's "Eleven Communion Chants for Lent, Triduum, and the Easter Season," published by World Library; Richard Proulx's "Eight Choral Introits for Feasts and Solemnities" and "Six Choral Introits for the Church Year," also published by World Library; GIA's Corpus Christi Cathedral Series, in which Lynn Trapp and Delores Dufner present English adaptations of the Introits for various seasons and solemnities; and Paul Ford's *By Flowing Waters: Chant for the Liturgy* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), which sets the entire repertoire of the *Graduale Simplex* to traditional chant modes updated for contemporary English.

These English-language settings of the entrance and Communion chants, well-crafted and liturgically appropriate as they are, will not work, however, in every parish. The fact is that, for more than two generations in the United States, we have



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As the basic songbook of the liturgy, psalmody shapes the life of the Church.

sung hymns and songs during these processions. The issue is one of not throwing out the baby with the bath water. And in this case, we have two babies in the tub. This quandary leads to the second direction in which we need to move, and that is to use the model of the traditional entrance and Communion chants and psalms as a hermeneutic for selecting the hymns and songs we sing for these processions. How closely does a given musical choice align with the liturgical season or feast and with the readings of the day? Will it, both textually and musically, draw this assembly to participate more fully in this liturgy? Will it enable them to surrender themselves more fully to the action of God's unfolding during this rite? Will they hear in this song, as the Church does in the singing of the psalms, the prayer of Christ and recognize it as their own?

These are serious questions meant to lead us to make better choices concerning the songs for the liturgy. Our musical choices cannot be based on personal taste, aimed at emotional manipulation, or geared toward self-satisfaction. Rather, these choices must be shaped by the spirituality of the psalms, the prayer of Christ and his body giving themselves over in obedience to the will of the Father.

Psalmody in the Liturgy of the Hours. In the Mass, whether as part of the Entrance or Communion chant, or as the Responsorial Psalm in the Liturgy of the Word, psalmody plays a supporting role. But in the Liturgy of the Hours, psalmody forms a constitutive element of the rite. In the Liturgy of the Word, for example, three or four verses of a psalm are carefully chosen to be sung in accord with the readings of the day. By contrast, in the Liturgy of the Hours every psalm is sung in its entirety, standing on its own.

STL describes various modes for singing the psalms in the Hours but offers no commentary on why the psalms are central

to this rite. Nor does it put forth any plea that the praying of Morning and Evening Prayer become normative for all members of the Church. STL simply assumes this directive in chapter four of SC is known. And it assumes the reader is familiar with the *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours* (GILH), which explains why the Church must pray the psalms. It would be a failure on our part if we did not read and study GILH and take steps to implement SC's call to make communal Morning and Evening Prayer a normative part of our parish life.

This can be a challenge, since most people are not familiar with this rite. The psalms can be difficult to understand; some are even off-putting in their language and syntax. Our task, then, is to offer both liturgical formation in Morning and Evening Prayer and education on the psalms. It is best to start small and with direct experience. The rite itself calls for adaptations to meet local circumstances. A very helpful guidebook for introducing Morning and Evening Prayer in your parish is *Morning and Evening: A Parish Celebration*, by Joyce Ann Zimmerman, CPPS (Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We began this essay with the quote "The Psalter is the basic songbook of the Liturgy." As the basic songbook of the liturgy, psalmody shapes the life of the Church. This is because the liturgical praying of the psalms transforms our self-understanding. We discover, through the singing of the psalms, that we are part of a faith journey encompassing all of human sorrow and joy and moving toward praise of the God who brings salvation. We learn through the singing of the psalms what beats in the heart of Christ, and we become one with that heartbeat. Through singing the psalms, we unite ourselves with Christ and with his body the Church in giving ourselves over for the salvation of our brothers and sisters and the praise of God.

STL states that "the Christian faithful are to be led to an ever deeper appreciation of the psalms as the voice of Christ and the voice of the Church at prayer" (STL, 117, citing Paul VI's 1970 Apostolic Constitution *Laudis canticum*, 8). May we heed that call and walk that journey to the praise and glory of God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Reflecting on the importance of the psalms in the life of the Church, what do I (does my parish) need to learn about the psalms? How might I (we) go about this?
2. For psalmists: How might you grow in the qualities STL identifies as necessary for a person called to the ministry of psalmist? Which quality do you find most challenging, and why? How might you grow in your knowledge of the psalms? In your understanding of the role of the Responsorial Psalm in the Liturgy of the Word? In your understanding of the role of the psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours?

3. For music directors: Reflecting on the qualities STL identifies as necessary for a person called to be a psalmist, how might you better go about selecting and training persons for this ministry in your parish?

4. How can our parish become more familiar with the entrance and Communion chants of the Mass? How can these chants lead us to understand better the spirit of the liturgy and the ministerial role of music? When and how might we introduce (or increase) use of the entrance and Communion chants in our celebration of the Mass? When might we use songs or hymns at these processional moments instead, and how might the texts of these chants lead us to be more discerning in the song choices we make?

5. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* called for restoration of the Liturgy of the Hours, especially Morning and Evening Prayer, to the people. Why is the praying of Morning and Evening Prayer of the Church important? How might you introduce this form of liturgical prayer in your parish? ♦

Notes

1. "Whoever says the psalms in the name of the Church should pay attention to the full meaning of the psalms, especially that messianic understanding which led the Church to adopt the Psalter," GILH, 109.
2. For more on the relationship between the Responsorial Psalm and the readings of the day and the role of the psalmist in leading the assembly through the psalm to a Paschal Mystery encounter with Christ in the Gospel, see my *The Ministry of Cantors* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004) and chapter 5 of my *The Ministry of Music* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004). See also Irene Nowell, *Sing a New Song: The Responsorial Psalm in the Sunday Lectionary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993) and Dianne Bergant's trilogy, *Preaching the New Lectionary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press), *Year A* (2001), *Year B* (1999), *Year C*. (2000).
3. GIRM, 135, 196, and 309, use the term "proclaim" in reference to the psalm, but these items must be read in the broader context of GIRM, 57–61, and uncover an inconsistency within GIRM, 57–61 are consistent with the approach to the psalm taken in ILM.

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