SING TO THE LORD: AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

My first call to religious life was as a Jesuit novice. In teaching us how to make the daily examen, our novice master told us that St. Ignatius asked his companions to reflect on the positive before moving to the negative. They were to ask first: “Where did I see or reveal the presence of Jesus today?” Only then were they to ask: “Where did I miss seeing Jesus or an opportunity to reveal Jesus today?” Or: “Where did I reveal what was not Jesus today?” I still find this method helpful.

Recently, our bishops gave us Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship (STL), a revision of the 1972 document Music in Catholic Worship, “to guide and oversee liturgical song in each particular church . . . [and] . . . draw all who worship the Lord into the fullness of liturgical, musical prayer” (Foreword). The April-May 2008 issue of Pastoral Music is devoted to general articles about this document, but I believe that a reflective, critical, and careful reading of this text offers a kind of examination of conscience (an examen) for us who are clergy—specifically the sections on bishops, presbyters, and deacons, numbers 16–23.

The Bishop. STL states that “the diocesan bishop is particularly concerned with the promotion of the dignity of liturgical celebrations, ‘the beauty of the sacred place, of music, and of art’” (STL, 16, quoting GIRM, 22). How is the bishop to accomplish these goals? “Through the example of his own celebration of the Sacred Liturgy, encouraging sung participation by his own example; by his attention to the practice of liturgical music in the parishes and communities of his diocese, especially in his own cathedral church; by his promotion of the continuing musical education and formation of clergy and musicians; and by his careful attention to the musical training of future priests and deacons” (STL, 16). Staffs of diocesan offices of worship and/or members of the diocesan music and liturgical commissions provide “valuable assistance in promoting sacred music together with pastoral liturgical action in the diocese” (Musicam Sacram [MS], 68, quoted in STL, 17).

The Priest. When talking about the ordained priest, STL states that “no other single factor affects the Liturgy as much as the attitude, style, and bearing of the priest celebrating” (STL, 18). If this observation were not strong enough, it adds that “the importance of the priest’s participation in the Liturgy, especially by singing, cannot be overemphasized . . . . [H]e encourages sung participation in the Liturgy by his own example, joining in the congregational song. ‘If, however . . . the priest . . . does not possess a voice suitable for the proper execution of singing, he can render without singing one or more of the more difficult parts which concern him, reciting them in a loud and distinct voice. However, this must not be done merely for the convenience of the priest or minister’” (MS, 8, quoted in STL, 19).

The Deacon. Similarly, STL states that “after the priest, the deacon is first among the liturgical ministers, and he should provide an example by actively participating in the song of the gathered assembly” (STL, 22). Therefore, as they are able, “deacons should be prepared to sing those parts of the Liturgy that belong to them” (STL, 23). This means that deacons need “training in singing the dialogues between deacon and people, such as those at the Gospel and at the dismissal” (STL, 23). The training that deacons receive should also pay attention to the Exsultet, the tropes in form three of the act of penitence, the prayer of the faithful, and the chanting of the Gospel.

AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

These quotes emphasize the importance of personal and ministerial example. The way in which we participate in the liturgy can either help or hinder the participation of all the baptized. Training in music and liturgy contributes greatly to our ability to participate with confidence and comfort. Musical and liturgical formation of future clergy and laity will
make the difference between whether or not the assembly’s full, active, and conscious participation in the liturgy is helped or hindered. Finally, then, it’s not about us. Collaboration with worship staff on the diocesan and parish levels is valuable in “promoting sacred music together with pastoral liturgical action” (STL, 17). These key elements and paragraphs 16–23 are the basis for the questions I offer in this examination of conscience.

- Do I actively participate in the song of the gathered assembly (22)?
- Do I pick up a hymnal or worship aid to enable that participation (16, 19, 22)?
- Do I sing the presidential prayers and dialogues of the liturgy according to my capabilities (19)?
- What do my attitude, style, and bearing convey to the rest of the liturgical assembly when I preside (18)?
- Am I willing to have my musical capabilities stretched, or do I let myself off the hook due to fear or inconvenience (19)?
- Do I sing the dialogues between the ordained and other people, sensitive to their dialogic nature, so that I don’t sing the people’s response with them (21)?
- Do I sing the parts of the Eucharistic Prayer and other chants like the Exsultet, for which musical notation is provided in the missal, when appropriate (20, 23)?
- If my voice is not “suitable for the proper execution of the singing,” do I recite in a loud and distinct voice (19)?
- Do I chant the Gospel on more solemn occasions (20, 23)?
- Am I attentive to the cantor and psalmist as they lead the assembly (21)?
- Because singing is a corporate act, do I turn off or step back from the microphone when my role is to sing with the assembly (21)?
- Do I put resources into the musical training of clergy, seminarians, liturgists, and musicians (16, 20, 23)?
- Have I asked that programs of priestly and diaconal formation offer compulsory courses in chant and the song of the liturgy (16, 20, 23)?
- As a bishop, do I have an office of worship and/or liturgical and music commissions (17)?
- Do I collaborate with the liturgical music staff or commissions to promote full, active, and conscious participation (16)?

**DO AS I DO, OR DO AS I SAY?**

Actions do speak louder than words. The psalms remind us that witness is strongest when deeds match words. *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* takes these phrases to heart, emphasizing the example of the ordained in sung participation during the celebration of the liturgy. *Sing to the Lord* takes these phrases to heart, asking us to put our resources of time, effort, and money where our mouths are and to provide for the musical formation of all members of the liturgical assembly, especially those responsible for leadership: bishop, presbyter, deacon, and liturgical musician.

I know that our plates are full and our time feels too stretched, even on our “easier” days. However, one of our primary ministries is to lead the assembly in the celebration of the liturgy. I hope that a periodic examination of conscience based on the consciousness raised in STL will help us sing the liturgy more fully and be a source of mutual support for all our assemblies.

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**Trying to Keep Up**

The number of priests and seminarians is increasing throughout the world but not as fast as the general Catholic population, according to statistics in the 2008 edition of the Annuario Pontifico, the Vatican’s yearbook on the worldwide Church. The statistics, which actually were compiled at the end of 2006, were released at the Vatican on February 29. According to the statistics in the Annuario, the global Catholic population increased during 2006 by 1.4 percent, to a total of 1.131 billion. At the end of 2006, there were 851 more priests in the world than at the beginning of the year, for a total of 407,262. The Annuario also noted a continuing shift in the center of vocational increase from Europe and the Americas to Africa and Asia.

**Mutual Support Online**

An online service that offers idea and resource sharing among clergy completed its first year on January 1, 2008. Launched and organized by Father Alex Yeung, a Legionary of Christ at the Sacerdos Institute in Thornwood, New York, ePriest offers weekly homily packs, ideas for “best practices” in running a parish, and a library of articles and news for continuing formation of the clergy. Some of the services require that you register (for free) in order to access the materials. The site, which has subscribers in thirty countries, is available at http://www.epriest.com.

**National Ministry Summit**

About 1,200 clergy, religious, and lay Catholics gathered in Orlando, Florida, April 21–23, to focus on changes in models of pastoral leadership that will be required by a changing Catholic Church in the United States. The center of this meeting was a four-year study conducted under a grant from the Lilly Endowment by six Catholic national organizations: National Association for Lay Ministry, Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development, National Association of Church Personnel Administrators, National Association of Diaconate Directors, National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association, and National Federation of Priests’ Councils. Marti R. Jewell, project director of the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project, presented the major findings of the study as a basis for discussion among the participants.

Key to the study’s findings is the fact that the number of priests and vowed religious is declining in the United States, while the number of Catholics continues to increase, and the diversity of the Catholic population continues to expand. There are about 28,000 diocesan priests in the United States, the report noted, and seventy percent of them are older than fifty-five. With the clergy shortage, dioceses are moving toward clusters of parishes under the care of a single pastor, and nearly half of all Catholic churches in the United States currently share their pastor with another parish or mission. Many of these parishes are increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural.

The number of deacons and lay ecclesial ministers continues to increase at a steady pace, but lay people are increasingly better educated than former parishioners were, and they are requiring or expecting better and more informed ministry than earlier generations might have expected.

In this situation, collaboration between clergy and laity is key. But the study also revealed that lay people in leadership roles—particularly at the diocesan or organizational level—need education about the legal and civil implications of the Church as an employer. For example, fewer than forty percent of U.S. parishes provide continuing education, retirement plans, or other benefits to their lay employees—a situation that must change if the Church is to make use of more lay ecclesial ministers in the future.

**Parishes Lost in New Orleans**

The damage caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita continues to be felt. In mid-April, the Archdiocese of New Orleans announced plans to close permanently twenty-seven churches, some of them “with a rich religious history,” according to Archbishop Alfred Hughes. Seventeen of the parishes to be closed have not re-opened since the hurricanes, and others are being closed because of the smaller Catholic population, now that many people have been unable or unwilling to return, and because of the continuing clergy shortage.

**Syncretistic Christianity in China**

Xinzhong Yao and Paul Badham are the authors of Religious Experience in Contemporary China (University of Wales Press), which reports the results of a survey conducted by the University of Wales that show that at the end of the twentieth century many of the twenty million to thirty million Christians in China (most of them Protestant) are practicing an indigenized syncretistic faith that includes prayer to non-Christian deities.

Such syncretistic belief and practice is typical of Chinese religious belief in general, according to the authors of this book. For example, just 2.5 percent of respondents to a survey claimed to be Christian, but another 2.5 percent said that they had been to a Christian service in the previous year, and 11 percent of the respondents thought that they should follow the teachings of the Christian God.
Other results show that three-quarters of those identifying themselves as Christians are women, and Chinese Christians have a lower educational level than the national average, but a higher proportion of Christians are willing to say that they pray than are those who identify themselves as Buddhists and Daoists.

While admitting that religious belief and practice will remain a part of Chinese life, the Communist Party in China has tried to restrict the various forms of faith through “patriotic associations” that monitor the major religious traditions and cut them off from overseas counterparts—a restriction that particularly affects Christians.

The Party has also tried to harness religious practice as a force for social stability in accord with President Hu Jintao’s goal of a “harmonious society,” according to the authors of this book. Rather than being persecuted, as in the past, religion is now being tolerated in China, so long as it remains within official bounds.

**Pauline Year Approaching**

The Pauline Year begins on June 28, 2008, and lasts until June 29, 2009. The official website for the Year, offering details of events and aids to celebrating St. Paul’s place in the development of Christianity, is now available in English: http://www.annopaolino.org.