

Ministers to Sung Worship: The Choir

When congregational singing was introduced into the celebration of the Sunday liturgy in the 1960s, many musicians, clergy, and ordinary Catholics thought that there would no longer be a need for choirs. As it turned out, however, choirs are more needed than ever. Liturgical documents highlight the choir's ministry, and pastoral experience has demonstrated the choir's importance in supporting and leading the singing of the whole assembly. In fact, many parishes today boast a variety of choirs that sing music in various styles. In addition to the standard mixed-voice adult choir, there are Gospel choirs, contemporary music ensembles, children's choirs, youth choirs, funeral choirs, and family choirs.

The primary ministerial role of the choir is to sing various parts of the Mass in dialogue or in alternation with the rest of the assembly. Some parts of the Mass, like the *Kyrie* and the *Agnus Dei*, have the back-and-forth form of a litany, so they work well as this kind of dialogue. Other parts have a call-and-response form, in which the choir intones a line that is repeated by the congregation. The Gospel acclamation works a bit like this. Other parts of the Mass may be sung in various ways—sometimes by the choir alone, sometimes by the whole assembly, sometimes in alternation between the choir (or a cantor) and everyone else. Two long texts may be sung this way: The *Gloria* may be sung by everyone together, or by the congregation alternately with the choir, or even by the choir alone; and the profession of faith may be sung by all together or alternately between the congregation and the choir. The three major processional chants of the liturgy—the entrance, offertory, and Communion chants—may be sung alternately between the choir and the congregation or even by the choir alone, and the first two (entrance and offertory) may be sung by all together.

The place for the choir in the building reflects its ritual function: The official texts say that the choir should be located where it is clearly part of the whole assembly but also where it can best do its assigned tasks.



Whether singing with the rest of the assembly, in alternation, or alone, the choir's role is always understood in relation to the full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful. When it is not singing its own special repertoire, the choir joins the song of the whole assembly, supporting the congregation and adding beauty and variety to the singing by harmonies and descants.

To perform their liturgical task, choirs need plenty of rehearsal, for it is only when the music is well prepared that the choir can really support the singing of the whole assembly. Thorough preparation is also needed if choral singing is to express the mystery of God through beauty and if it is to foster the dignity of the celebration.

The participation of the assembly receives an enormous boost if a parish has a good liturgical choir, but the role of the choir is always *ministerial*, serving the action of the liturgy and fostering the participation of those who have gathered.

