Liturgical Music Ministry as Communion for Mission

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Our assigned task is to take a critical look at what *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (hereafter STL)¹ has to say about ministry in general and liturgical ministry in particular. We are faced at the outset, however, with a problem, for STL says nothing about ministry in general and nothing about liturgical ministries other than that of liturgical music. What I offer here, then, is not a commentary on the notion of ministry in STL. Instead, I take the image of communion for mission used in *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* (hereafter CVL),² the document on lay ecclesial ministry promulgated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2005, to see how that image forms and fleshes out the notion of ministry in STL.

Our procedure is simple and unfolds in three related steps. First, we consider ecclesial ministry in relation to the Trinity, Christ’s mission, and ordained ministry. Second, we consider how STL views liturgical singing. Finally, we pull the two together, using communion for mission as our lens. In the end we will find that much of what STL asserts about music ministry can, in fact, be said about all liturgical ministries because all these ministries serve the same purpose: to enable the liturgical action initiated by the Trinity to transform the Church into deeper communion for mission.

Theological Foundations in *Co-Workers*

The bishops’ statement *Co-Workers in the Vineyard* is remarkable both for its endorsement of lay ecclesial ministry³ within the Church and for the theological foundations on which it bases this endorsement. We can summarize these foundations under three headings.

**Communion for mission.** Theologically, CVL builds on developments in
ecclesiology and lay ministry which marked the latter half of the twentieth century, influenced the documents of Vatican II, and catalyzed an exponential growth in lay ecclesial ministry in the United States. The core of CVL’s approach to Church and ministry is found in its integration of communion and mission: “Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other to the point that communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion.”

Both communion and mission begin in the Trinity: “The mystery of God is one of love, the love of Trinitarian communion revealed in mission” (CVL, 19). CVL defines the Church in the same terms. The Church, “a communion in which members are given a share in the union with God brought about by Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit” (CVL, 19), is “a mystery of Trinitarian communion in missionary tension.” The Church, founded by Christ, “finds its source and purpose in the life and activity of the Triune God” (CVL, 19). The Church does not make itself, nor empower itself, nor determine for itself its mission. Rather, the life, power, and activity of the Church are gifts of the Trinity given for the purpose of leading all of humanity into the very life of God, that is, into that communion of self-giving love in which all have fullness of life.

Defining God as “communion revealed in mission” and Church as participation in this divine communion for mission opens up a new dimension in understanding the Church and its ministry. Church is communion in service of mission. Moreover, the mission is communion, our communion with God, our communion with one another in the Church as Body of Christ, and our communion with all humanity as brothers and sisters called to live divine life in the reign of God.

All are called to communion for mission. Because of baptism, all members of the Church are gifted to live out in some specific way this communion for mission which begins in the Trinity and is the source of the life and activity of the Church: “Baptism initiates all into the one priesthood of Christ, giving each of the baptized, in different ways, a share in his priestly, prophetic, and kingly work. And so every one of the baptized, confirmed in faith through the gifts of God’s Spirit according to his or her calling, is incorporated into the fullness of Christ’s mission to celebrate, proclaim, and serve the reign of God” (CVL, 18). While re-affirming the distinctive nature and role of ordained ministry, CVL clearly moves away from a dualistic ecclesiology which holds that only some are called and gifted by the Spirit to continue the mission of Christ. Within a hierarchical structure the Church is called to a relational, complementary, and collaborative model of ministry which identifies, validates, and uses the charisms given to all members of the Church. Such collaboration marks the communion which is the Church and reveals the relational life of the Trinity as the source of the Church’s life and ministry.

Ordered communion for mission. The Church, the Body of Christ, has many parts, many gifts, all oriented toward fulfillment of the Church’s mission. Nonetheless, by virtue of the sacrament of orders, the ordained participate in the priesthood of Christ in a manner that is different both in degree and essence from the participation of the lay faithful. Ordained ministry holds a unique place in the Church and carries a unique empowerment. All other ministries function in relation to it (CVL, 21).
Here CVL reveals the ongoing tension in the Church between the rise of lay ecclesial ministry and the role of the ordained, between the hierarchical priesthood and the common priesthood of all the baptized. By grounding all ministry in the communion of the Trinity, however, CVL clearly follows a shift initiated at Vatican II from “viewing the common priesthood in terms of the hierarchical priesthood to viewing the common priesthood in terms of the community, the whole church in its relationship to Christ.”

In this light, ordained ministry, while unique in essence and distinct in forms of service, is fundamentally an ordering for the sake of communion for mission. Thus the diocesan bishop is the locus, guide, and protector of communion for mission in the local church: “The ontological and functional differentiation that sets the Bishop before the other faithful, based on his reception of the fullness of the Sacraments of Orders, is a manner of being for the other members of the faithful which in no way removes him from being with them.” The pastor is locus, guide, and protector of communion for mission in the parish: “The ministry of the priest is entirely on behalf of the Church; it aims at promoting the exercise of the common priesthood of the entire People of God.”

CVL makes clear, then, that its endorsement of lay ecclesial ministry does not undermine ordained ministry as an essential and constitutive element of the Church. Both forms of ministry are needed, each serving different aspects of Church life; both arise from the same baptismal communion; both serve the same mission of Christ. The ordained priesthood and the common priesthood of all the baptized are ordered to one another so that all members of the Church may grow in holiness and service (CVL, 21). Hence the model for interaction between ordained and lay is to be one of collaboration, one that honors varying gifts and authorities and uses all in faithful service to the Church's communion and the Church's mission. The appropriate model of the Church is not a vertical structure which divides laity from ordained but concentric circles, each of which delineates appropriate lines of authority and responsibility and all of which interact to further the mission of Christ, both within the Church and in the world. Within these circles some are called by the Spirit to ordained ministry, others are called to lay ministry, but all are called to live in communion and serve the same mission: that of the coming of the reign of God.

**Summary.** CVL defines the Church as communion called into being by the Trinity and missioned in communion to draw all humankind into the relational life of the Trinity. Because of baptism, all members of the Church are gifted for and called to ministry in furtherance of this mission. All ecclesial ministry—that is, ministry within the Church on behalf of its life and activity—is directed toward enabling the Church to deepen its self-identity as communion for mission. Ecclesial ministry serves to build up the communion of the Church so that it may serve the mission of the Church more effectively. Because the source of the Church's communion for mission is the relational life of the Trinity, all such ministry must be marked by collaboration, respect for differentiation, and unity in diversity.

**Theological Foundations in *Sing to the Lord***

*Liturgical song comes from God.* “God has bestowed upon his people the gift of song. God dwells within each human person, in the place where music
takes its source” (STL, 1). God gives us song that it might lead us beyond our earthbound selves to higher realms (STL, 2). Song begins, then, as the gift of a God who loves us into greater being.

We generally think of music as a human creation, but STL suggests that we are the object for whom God creates song rather than its subject. We become its subject when we use song to sing back our love to the God who first loves us and sings within us. One implication of this theological insight is that we do not generate who we are, what we have, or what we do; all is gift from the God who holds nothing in reserve. Such gifting defines the very nature of the Trinity: three Persons who exist in a communion of self-giving love and whose self-giving flows into the divine work of creation, incarnation, redemption, and, ultimately, the divinization of humankind.

A second implication is that liturgical singing is not our self-expression but God’s self-expression in and through us. What God expresses in our song is the mystery of Trinitarian life given for the sake of the other. This mystery is most fully revealed in the “song” of Jesus on the cross: “Into your hands, Lord, I give up my spirit” (Luke 23:46). In an act of ultimate self-offering, Jesus gives the Father back the breath given him at his human birth. In Trinitarian terms he returns the Spirit continually given him by the Father. Every time we celebrate the liturgy we enter ritually into this mystery of the cross: We join our self-offering to the self-offering of Jesus. We express this self-offering through our singing because this is the way we give our spirit back to the God who first gave it to us. This self-gift is not generated by us, however, but is instigated by God, who gives us the Spirit and a body-soul created to sing. Even our self-giving is not self-expression, then, but is God’s self-revelation in and through us.

A third implication is that since singing is not human self-revelation but the self-revelation of God, our liturgical singing needs to be an act of self-emptying so that God can give the divine self to us and reshape us according to the divine life poured into us. What a paradox: Singing, which is by nature an activity of self-awareness and self-expression, becomes, in the context of liturgical celebration, an activity of self-emptying.

**Liturgical song is sacramental.** Because song is God’s gift to us, liturgical singing is a sacramental revelation of divine presence (STL, 1). Moreover, this singing reveals our presence to one another as Church (STL, 2). Liturgical singing is a sacramental sign of God’s presence within and among us and of our presence to and union with one another as Body of Christ. Liturgical singing makes God’s love for us and our interior response of self-gift to God and to one another physically present and tangibly felt.

When we sing liturgically, then, far more goes on than the mere production of musical sounds. The song generated by vibrations within our body is revelation of the unseen vibration of God’s presence within us. Our body-song vibrations reveal the interiority of both the deep presence of God within us and our choice to make that Presence known to others.

**Liturgical song binds together the Body of Christ.** “By its very nature song has both an individual and a communal dimension” (STL, 2). The shared resonance generated by our liturgical singing binds us together as the community of Christ’s presence in the world. The vibrations our song sends out into physical space enter the bodies of all the other persons in the space, causing them to vibrate in synchronization with us. Song binds persons together in
a reciprocity of physical vibrations generated by unseen will and intention. The vibrations are tangible; the interior dispositions which generate them are not. The shared resonance which marks communal liturgical singing is more than a symbiosis of physical vibrations in ear, bone, and brain. What is shared when we join together in liturgical singing is the resonance of our common will and intention to be one Body of Christ given over to the worship of God and to the mission of the Church.¹³

One of the outcomes of this shared resonance is that those strong in faith support those who are weak (STL, 5). Those in the assembly who feel doubt or diffidence are embraced by the shared resonance of the rest of the community singing its faith and commitment. On days when our faith is wavering or marginal, those whose will and intention are sure and strong carry us, and vice-versa. The compassion and care the liturgy calls each of us to show the world begin already during the liturgy itself and are made sacramentally present through our singing.

_Liturgical song celebrates the paschal mystery._ “The primordial song of the Liturgy is the canticle of victory over sin and death” (STL, 7), the canticle of the paschal mystery that death undertaken out of self-giving love yields new and greater life. Every celebration of liturgy is a ritual enactment of the paschal mystery in which we unite ourselves with the self-offering of Christ and are filled with the new life which communion with him and with one another brings. In this ritual enactment we confront head-on that we must die to self in order to receive this new life. In order to be filled by God with God’s own life we must empty ourselves.

So, like Christ, ours is a song of self-emptying. But our song of self-emptying is also one of unimaginable fulfillment. Our self-emptying makes room for the God who, from the beginning of time, has never ceased to make room for us. We are taken up into the life of the Trinity (STL, 10). The self-giving which our liturgical singing reveals and expresses is simply response to the God who has first given self to us. Where is the sting in a death such as this?

_Liturgical song propels us to mission._ “The Paschal hymn, of course, does not cease when a liturgical celebration ends. Christ, whose praises we have sung, remains with us and leads us through church doors to the whole world, with its joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties. The words Jesus chose from the book of Isaiah at the beginning of his ministry become the song of the Body of Christ” (STL, 8).

The gift of song which flows from God to each of us, and from each of us to one another as Body of Christ, now flows from the Body of Christ to the body of the world. Song which is given that we might offer God praise is also given that we might offer care and compassion to our neighbor. The song which sacramentalizes our love for God and our union with one another also sacramentalizes our mission to the world.

Just as our liturgical singing is not self-generated, neither is it self-serving: “Charity, justice, and evangelization are thus the normal consequences of liturgical celebration. Particularly inspired by sung participation, the body of the Word Incarnate goes forth to spread the Gospel with full force and compassion” (STL, 9). We do not sing to entertain ourselves, or to satisfy ourselves, or to bloat our sense of self. Rather, we sing so that we might march together with greater courage and conviction into the melee of the
world where injustice, violence, poverty, oppression, and division fracture the body of humankind. Emboldened by the paschal mystery song of the Body of Christ, we gather these fragmented parts into the healing embrace of Christ. With Christ, we sing over the world. With Christ, we become God’s song for the world, willingly emptying ourselves that God’s melody may blow where it will, bringing life.

Authentic liturgical singing enables us to participate fully, consciously, and actively not only in the liturgy but also in the life of the world as agents of salvation. In both liturgy and living such participation is challenging, “but Christ always invites us to enter into song, to rise above our own preoccupations, and to give our entire selves to the hymn of his Paschal Sacrifice for the honor and glory of the Most Blessed Trinity” (STL, 14).

**Liturgical Music Ministry and Communion for Mission**

While STL does not explicitly define ministry, the document certainly follows the lead of CVL. For example, STL indicates that all members of the assembly share in the mission of the Church and in the ministry of liturgical music. To this end all musical choices for liturgy are to be directed toward full, active, conscious participation of the assembly in the liturgical action. By implication, STL is indicating that liturgical music ministry is an ecclesial ministry serving to build up the Church as communion for mission.

*The purpose of liturgy is communion for mission.* The purpose of the liturgy is to draw the gathered assembly more deeply into the life of the Trinity (STL, 10). Our liturgical singing is a sacramental revelation of the presence of God (STL, 2, 6) and of our communion with one another in Christ (STL, 10). In our liturgical singing we both receive one another as members of the Body of Christ and strengthen one another in this union (STL, 5). The deepest meaning of full, active, and conscious participation in the liturgy is that we open ourselves to God’s offer of divine life and surrender ourselves to the action of the liturgy as it transforms us into being more perfectly the Body of Christ sent on mission to the world.

*All members of the assembly are called to communion for mission.* Through baptism all members of the assembly—ordained and lay—have been drawn into the communion of the Church and are called to full, active, conscious participation in the liturgy (STL, 10–11). All are to join themselves with Christ’s self-offering to the Father in the Spirit. The participation of all in the celebration of liturgy is an activity of collaboration, first with the Trinity who initiates the action, and secondly with one another as each member fulfills his or her proper role in order to enable the others to fulfill their proper roles. For the sake of communion for mission, every member of the assembly must let go of self-preoccupation and individualism. The role of liturgical music is to facilitate this surrender so that all gathered for the celebration may become the one body offered with Christ for the sake of his mission in the world.

Furthermore, because the communion of the Church is universal, music chosen for liturgy must reflect the diverse cultures and languages of those gathered for celebration (STL, 57–60). Responding to the multicultural diversity and intercultural relationships characterizing many American parishes is one of the greatest challenges facing liturgical music ministers today. Liturgical music must be chosen with regard for the cultural and linguistic
diversity of the people who have gathered for celebration, but it must also respect the demands of the rite. Two things are at stake here. The first is the unity in diversity of the communion of the Church. The second is the power of the liturgical rite to transform those who have gathered into being this communion more perfectly. These two values stand in “missionary tension,” and dealing with this tension requires collaboration and self-emptying on the part of all members of the Church.

Liturgical music is ordered for communion for mission. By beginning with the musical role of the bishop, chapter two of STL indicates that the ministry of liturgical music is ordered. Read through the lens of CVL, this ordering is for the sake of communion for mission. The primary person responsible for the use of music in the liturgy is the local bishop, who encourages sung liturgy by his own example; pays attention to the practice of liturgical music in his diocese; and promotes the musical education and formation of clergy, seminarians, deacons, and musicians (STL, 16).

Second in importance is the priest-presider, who is the visible presence of Christ leading his Church in prayer. He is to join in the assembly’s singing of the acclamations, chants, hymns, and songs (STL, 21) and, to the extent possible, to sing the presidential prayers and dialogues (STL, 19). The dialogues are among the most important elements in the liturgy to be sung because they “foster and bring about communion between priest and people.”14 The priest-presider’s chief ministry is to “convey to the faithful the living presence of Christ.”15 In other words, he is to be the locus through whose leadership the communion of the gathered assembly is deepened.

Third among the liturgical ministers is the deacon who, like the priest-presider, is to join in the singing of the assembly and, to the extent possible, to sing those parts of the liturgy assigned to him, such as, for example, the dialogues at the Gospel proclamation and at the dismissal (STL, 22–23). In particular, his proclaiming the Gospel, announcing the intercessory prayers, and dismissing the people from the liturgy indicate his chief ministry is to send the Body of Christ on its mission to the world.

Listed fourth among music ministers is the gathered liturgical assembly, but STL’s presentation here is muddled. The relevant paragraphs (STL, 24–27) do not do justice to the musical role of the assembly other than to state that “singing is one of the primary ways that the assembly of the faithful participates actively in the Liturgy” (STL, 26) and to imply that this singing is an avenue for the assembly to eschew “individualism and division” (STL, 25). The section then jumps to the need for continual musical formation of the assembly (a ministerial role for pastor and the music director) and to the necessity of choosing music within a given assembly’s musical capability (another role for the pastor and the music director). Nothing is said to explicate the meaning of full, conscious, active participation in the liturgy. Nothing is said about how the assembly through their communal singing is enabled to enter more fully into the liturgical dynamic of becoming communion for mission. STL would be a stronger document if it addressed the music ministry of the assembly more thoroughly.

STL next describes the ministerial roles of the various specialized ministers of music: the choir, the psalmist, the cantor, the organist and other instrumentalists, and the director of music ministries. Concerning the role of the choir, STL affirms its importance but adds the caution that it must
never “minimize the musical participation of the faithful” (STL, 28). Even when singing alone, the choir’s role is to serve the liturgical participation of the assembly. Choir members are to see themselves as members of the assembly, joining in the congregational singing and participating fully in the ritual action (STL, 31–32). What STL offers here is a concrete example of the self-emptying that is to mark all music ministry and the collaboration that is to characterize all ecclesial ministry.

Indicating how much we have grown in understanding the importance of the responsorial psalm in the Liturgy of the Word, the section on the ministry of the psalmist (STL, 34–36) offers new material. This ministry requires not only musical capability but also spiritual and pastoral skills. The psalmist must be able to express the text of the psalm not only with clarity but also with the conviction of personal faith; he or she must be able to sing with sensitivity not only to the text and its musical setting but also to the assembly members who are listening. Not said but implied is the principle that the ministry of the psalmist is to build up faith within the members of the assembly and to lead them to deeper communion with the God who speaks the Word of life and with one another who have gathered to receive this Word. The psalmist’s ministry, then, is to collaborate with the Trinity in building up communion for mission.

The section on the cantor (STL, 37–40) clearly offers a collaborative, others-serving model of music ministry. As song leader, the cantor has two principal roles: to sing in alternation or dialogue with the assembly for such musical elements as the Gospel acclamation and to assist when the assembly needs help to do its part. In the latter situation the cantor’s voice should never dominate the singing of the assembly. Moreover, the cantor should only be seen by the assembly when needed and never in such a way that he or she draws attention away from the liturgical action. Clearly, the ministry of the cantor is one which minimizes self for the sake of building up the assembly.

The ministry of the organist and other instrumentalists is also one of collaboration for the sake of supporting others in their ministry. Instrumentalists are to lead the singing without dominating or overpowering (STL, 41). STL indicates times when instruments may be played alone as part of the liturgy (STL, 43–44) and, while not explicitly saying it, the document implies that whatever is played is appropriate to the liturgy, never a distraction from the liturgical action, and is directed toward leading the assembly to its full, conscious, and active participation in the celebration.

Finally, the director of music ministries—parish or diocesan—collaborates with both ordained and lay people in overseeing, planning, and coordinating a program of liturgical music that ensures the active participation of the assembly and promotes the involvement of many individuals in the doing of music ministry (STL, 45–47). Here STL directly quotes CVL, defining the role of the director as one that “finds its place within the communion of the Church and serves the mission of Christ in the Spirit.”

Analysis of STL’s hierarchical ordering of liturgical music ministries reveals an implicit understanding that these ministries are ordered to one another for the sake of communion for mission. They are also an ordering in collaboration. No liturgical music minister functions in isolation from the rest of the assembly; rather, all function for the upbuilding of the whole. This hierarchi-
cal ordering enables and assures the unity of the whole precisely because it functions in collaborative differentiation. Such collaborative differentiation requires the discipline of self-emptying, for each minister must do his or her part with integrity, then step out of the way so that other ministers may do their part, thus enabling the unity of the whole to emerge. In the very celebration of liturgy, then, music ministers are to do what they are called to do in daily living: empty themselves so that God may bring all humankind into the fullness of divine life.

**Liturgical Music Ministry as Communion for Mission**

“All pastoral musicians—professional or volunteer, full-time or part-time, director or choir member, cantor or instrumentalist—exercise a genuine liturgical ministry” (STL, 50). This ministry, as all ministry in the Church, finds its roots in baptism and rests on a personal experience of the loving embrace of the Trinity (CVL, 38). Pastoral music ministry is primarily one of enabling the assembly members through music to surrender themselves to the action of the Trinity transforming them into being more fully the Body of Christ sent in mission to hasten the coming of the reign of God. To do this ministry, pastoral musicians must first surrender themselves to this action of God. The very doing of liturgical music ministry in communion and collaboration with others will lead them in this direction. Music ministry is itself communion for mission.

On June 28, to mark the closing of the Year of Saint Paul, my parish hosted an archdiocesan celebration of solemn vespers with coadjutor Archbishop Dennis Schnurr presiding. Since the parish has a very small choir, I knew I needed to swell the ranks for this auspicious event. So I called the music directors of two neighboring parishes and made my plea, anxious about bringing relative strangers together with minimal rehearsal for such a solemn liturgy. The result, however, was marvelous because my choir plus the sixteen additional singers who joined us gave themselves over to their ministry. They knew they were there to serve the liturgy and to enable the assembly to enter into full, conscious, active participation in the rite. Collaborating for this purpose, they became a communion for mission. And everyone gathered for this liturgy followed their lead: We became Church, the Body of Christ bonded in the communion of the Trinity and nourished for the work of drawing all of humankind into this communion.

**Notes**

3. Agreement has not yet been reached on an official definition of lay ecclesial ministry. A working definition in line with current thinking on the subject would be: ministry rendered by the non-ordained within the Church on behalf of the Church’s life and activity. Ministries such as directors of religious education, directors of music ministries, directors of liturgy, and pastoral associates would fall within this category.
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7. Note that the term used here is “communion” not “community.” “Communion” refers to our union with the Trinity because of the gift of divine life given us in baptism and to our union with one another in Christ through baptism: We are daughters and sons of God; we are Body of Christ. This union with God and one another through baptismal transformation is far deeper than any sociological “community” we may ever experience, deeper even than family blood. It is not achieved by any activity on our part but is the free gift of God and the source of all authentic “community” within the Church.

8. Hahnenberg, Ministries, 173 (italics in original).


11. Hahnenberg develops the argument of Yves Congar that a shift in ecclesiology toward Church as communion necessitates a model of interaction between ordained and lay “where the community appears as the enveloping reality within which the ministries, even the instituted sacramental ministries, are placed as modes of service of what the community is called to be and do” (Congar, “My Path-Findings in the Theology of the Laity and Ministries,” The Jurist 32 [1972], 178; italics in original); cited in Hahnenberg, Ministries, 9.

12. The following section is a condensation of my Music Notes column, “Commentary on Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship, Part 1: the Underlying Theology,” Liturgical Ministry 17 (Spring 2008), 100–102.

13. For an expanded discussion of song as shared resonance and as revelation of hidden will and intention, see chapter two of my book The Mystery We Celebrate, the Song We Sing: A Theology of Liturgical Music (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2008).


15. General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 93; cited in STL, 18.

16. CVL, 17; cited in STL, 46.

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