

# “They Sing a New Song”

Whenever the prophets or the Book of Revelation in the New Testament describe what heaven is like, they paint a picture of joyous worship, and a key part of that worship is singing. Isaiah, for example, describes angelic beings (*seraphim*) surrounding the heavenly throne and singing in responsorial form: “Holy, holy, holy . . .” (Isaiah 6:2–3). Revelation describes various groups or choirs singing God’s praise, including the “four living creatures” (Revelation 4:6–9) and the “twenty-four elders” (4:9–11), who each have their own song but also join together in harmonic praise of the Lamb as “they sing a new song” (5:9–10). A huge crowd of angels joins in praising the Lamb (5:11–12). They are joined by the choir of believers and a multitude from every nation singing praise (7:9–11), until all creation sings a hymn to God and to the Lamb (5:13).

In this picture of heavenly worship, the smaller choirs have two roles: They have their own song, but their chief role seems to be bringing other voices into the song and supporting the great hymn of martyrs, believers, and the whole creation. This is the dual role that choirs play today. The bishops’ 2007 document, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (STL), makes this clear: “At times, the choir performs its ministry by singing alone . . . . When the choir is not exercising its particular role, it joins the congregation in song” (STL, 30–31) because the song of the congregation is “the primary song of the Liturgy” (STL, 28).

What sort of training and support does a choir need in order to carry out its dual role? First, choir members need “the requisite musical skills and a commitment to the established schedule of rehearsals and liturgies” so that they may “enrich the celebration by adding musical elements beyond the capabilities of the congregation alone” (STL, 28). Since, like all liturgical ministers, they should “exercise their ministry with evident faith, . . . recognizing that they are servants of the Liturgy and members of the gathered assembly” (STL, 32), they need continuing spiritual formation. Singers and instrumentalists often look to their directors for leadership in satisfying this need, so many directors make prayer in various forms part of the weekly choir rehearsal or the pre-Mass gathering. Directors also help their choir members find ways to develop their

spiritual life on their own or with a spiritual director.

Choir members can also enrich their ministry by an understanding of how their voice expresses the integration of body, mind, and spirit. This can help rid them of false beliefs about what is “right” and “wrong” in singing. When certain outcomes are expected of their singing beyond those over which singers have direct control, those expectations often create unnecessary tensions. The mind and the spirit, after all, drive the body, and an understanding of God’s miracle of the vocal mechanism comes with learning to let it operate as God intended and then working to express that divine intent.

Choir members (and their directors!) also need help in getting out of ruts, expanding the styles of music that they sing, looking for ever richer repertoire to feed their faith and, through them, the faith of the whole assembly. They need to find and sing high quality choral music related to the Sunday Scriptures. At the same time, they need to remember that “the choir must not minimize the musical participation of the faithful” (STL, 28). So, while listening to the singing of the choir may be part of the whole assembly’s active participation in worship (see STL, 12), the choir must always remember that its primary role, like that of the heavenly choirs in the Book of Revelation, is to support and enhance “full and active participation by all the people” as “the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14). One way of performing both of these roles is by exploring the Church’s tradition of chant, in which the melodies arise from the text, whether that text is in Latin or some other language. Chant is elevated vocalization of a sacred text, which requires and fosters unity among the singers, between singers and active listeners in the case of more elaborate chanted texts sung by the choir, and between all those worshipping and God.

Do we need choirs and ensembles in our worship? Well, if heaven does (according to Revelation), then we probably do as well. The dual role of the choir may be described as raising the bar on worship’s musical component by helping the whole assembly to sing and hear music that is generally considered to be good—or even great—while not letting people settle for sung worship that is less than good—or even poor.