

The Cantor at Prayer

By Kathleen DeJardin

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As music ministers, we are truly blessed to be present at some of the most joyful and the most heartbreaking moments of our parish communities' lives. But to be a meaningful part of their celebrations and share fully in their sorrows is also a true test of inner strength. What is it that sustains us through these times? Faith and prayer. To lead our congregations with a true sense of faith, hope and love, we must know how to pray; we must make time to pray. This is essential, as Diana Kodner reminds us, because "if we cannot or will not do this for ourselves, how can we hope to do this for others?"¹ Prayer is the answer.

Kodner also notes: "The commitment to a life of prayer can nurture and sustain us in our ministry, but, moreover, can convert, enlighten and transform us."² We must, indeed, make prayer a part of our life, of our daily routine, of who and what we are. In addition to our usual prayers, we should begin to add intercessory prayers and widen the scope of our intentions. We need to use the Book of Psalms in our prayer life, since this is the "fundamental prayerbook of the Christian people,"³ with its psalms of joy, sorrow, petition, and forgiveness. As we cultivate and deepen our private prayer, our strengthened relationship with God will be clearly evident as we minister to our communities in our role as cantor. Our sense of inner calm, strength, and confidence will shine through and lead the people to their fullest participation possible.

We must also realize that we are praying as we prepare and break open the psalm and the other biblical texts for each Sunday. We pray as we endeavor to realize how the hymns, chants, and songs we will be singing with our congregations illuminate the message of God. How well we prepare our texts - to the point of memorization - will encourage and support their understanding and experience of the message. And the measure of their understanding and acceptance of that message (as of ours) is the way they can relate it to their own lives, carry it home in their hearts, and call upon it when needed.

The Work of Weeks and Months

To accomplish such lofty goals, we can't simply begin to study and pray the texts just a few days before we are to minister. This effort must begin a few *weeks* before we are to share these texts with our assembly. We must know and understand the texts well enough to be able to focus on the natural declamation of the words, with the proper stresses, without sacrificing the direction and flow of the melody. We must know the melody well enough to get it "into our voice," and we have to use our God-given instruments to their fullest potential. To accomplish this, we also need to practice the melody without the text, as we prayed and practiced the text without the melody.

If we are to minister to the best of our ability, we need to give serious consideration to taking voice lessons, if that is at all possible. Are such lessons a form of prayer for the cantor? In a sense, yes. The study of voice is very personal, and changes in the way we use and care for our voice will probably have to be made as a result of what we learn. Changes are never easy, and it is at such a difficult point that we offer those efforts to the Lord and make the situation part of our prayer. Ultimately, voice lessons will complement the confidence we will

have gained from our study of the texts. So pray too for the courage to seek professional guidance as a singer and cantor.

By beginning and ending our preparation for ministry with prayer, we can be confident that we are not creating a "performance atmosphere." In the hours before Mass, while we are reviewing the texts and music one more time, we are praying our private prayer, asking God to allow us to lead our congregation to the best of our ability, in the holy Name and for God's honor and glory.

The "cantor at prayer" should evoke in each of us an image that is a true constant. Let us not stop praying: for strength, good health, wisdom, and knowledge of the Lord and his goodness to us, his children, for we are indeed blessed. Let us pray.

Notes

1. Diana Kodner, *Handbook for Cantors, Revised Edition* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997), 111.
2. Ibid.
3. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Fifth Instruction for the Right Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council* (Sacrosanctum Concilium, art. 36): *Liturgiam authenticam* (March 28, 2001), no. 36.

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