

# Cantor: Leader and Sustainer of Community Song

BY MARY LYNN PLECZKOWSKI

**T**he cantor ministry is one of the most populous music ministries in the church today. Twenty-three percent of NPM members currently list "cantor" as their special interest section on their NPM membership application.<sup>1</sup> This data does not include other members who may serve as cantors but whose primary ministry is as choir director, director of music ministries, the person responsible for leadership in music ministries, or any other form of music ministry. It is important that we educate this large group of dedicated ministers, as the cantor's role is directly related to the Second Vatican Council's primary goal for liturgical reform: "that all the faithful be led to full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations" and that this participation is "their right and duty by reason of their baptism."<sup>2</sup> That's because "it is fitting that there be a cantor or choir director to lead and sustain the people's singing. When in fact there is no choir, it is up to the cantor to lead the different chants with the people taking part."<sup>3</sup>

## A Many-Faceted Ministry

There are many facets to the cantor ministry—musical as well as spiritual. A cantor is much more than the most proficient choir member, a soloist in church, or someone who is brave enough to stand in front of an entire congregation. *Liturgical Music Today* says that a cantor has to be qualified to lead singing and must have the skills "to introduce and teach new music and to encourage the assembly."<sup>4</sup> The current *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* (GIRM) says, however, that the role of the cantor at Mass is usually seen as "fitting" but secondary to the ministries of psalmist, choir, and the whole assembly. It is, in general, a supportive role in which one person takes over the responsibility for leadership envisioned for the choir.<sup>5</sup> *Music in Catholic Worship* also describes the qualifications and responsibilities of a cantor. Some of these include the ability to lead the assembly's singing effectively, proclaim the Word of God, and take the cantor's proper part in responsorial singing.<sup>6</sup>

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Church documents spell out specific responsibilities for a cantor in the liturgy today. In some parishes the cantor will also be called to serve as psalmist, but for the purpose of this article, we will consider the tasks *specific* to the ministry of the cantor.

In 1982, the U.S. bishops observed: "The cantor has come to be recognized as having a crucial role in the development of congregational singing. Besides being qualified to lead singing, he or she must have the skills to introduce and teach new music, and to encourage the assembly."<sup>7</sup> The cantor—usually substituting for the choir or for other liturgical ministers, though sometimes performing a task proper to this ministry—is one of the people who may engage in dialogic and litanic prayer with the congregation. The GIRM identifies several such moments in the Order of Mass: the *Kyrie*, the Gospel Acclamation, the petitions of the prayer of the faithful, and the *Agnus Dei*. In addition, individual parishes may have other points at Mass and in other liturgies where the cantor's ministry is helpful or necessary.

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The most important factor to remember is that the cantor is called to lead and encourage the rest of the assembly and to lead in a manner that is warm and welcoming. The cantor is also called to *animate* the music. Webster defines "animate" as "to give life to" or "to give interest or zest to."<sup>8</sup> This is a wonderful definition; it describes what happens when we combine God's Word with beautiful music and a trained, inspired cantor. Animation is one of the cantor's most important tasks: It requires the ability to communicate and give life to the music and then share that life with our congregations.

A number of elements are critical to animation. They include:

- The ability to memorize music. We must be able to look up from the music and see the congregation if we are going to engage them in singing.
- Appropriate eye contact and facial expression. How can we sing "Let All the Earth Cry Out with Joy to the

Lord" with no expression on our face? We must be "transparent" and let our emotions show on our faces and in our eyes.

- Smiling! Something so simple, yet smiling is so important in showing our congregations that God loves us. Smiling makes people feel comfortable and perhaps more willing to sing. (Please note that the suggestion to smile is for appropriate songs. Leading "My God, My God, Why Have You Abandoned Me?" would not be an appropriate time to smile.)
- A welcoming gesture to invite the whole assembly into the song. A two-armed gesture is preferred. The gesture should be large enough for all in the church to see. The gesture is used to bring the people in, so arms should be lowered once the rest of the assembly begins to sing.
- Correct use of the microphone. The microphone is a critical tool for cantors. Know how powerful your microphone is. Back off the microphone once the rest of the assembly begins to sing.

## Be Prepared

People think that what a cantor is and does is only what is visible in front of a congregation. But there is much more to being a cantor. Without a firm foundation, even the building with the most beautiful façade will crack and crumble. Being an effective cantor requires preparation. An effective cantor possesses a number of skills that can be attained through diligent practice. In workshops, I tell participants to "practice, practice, practice!" When you think you have practiced enough, practice a little more. Participation in sung worship by all the members of the liturgical assembly is the goal of the cantor's ministry, and it is of primary importance. "This full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else. For it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit."<sup>9</sup>

## If we practice and are prepared, we help our assemblies to pray.

If we practice and are truly prepared, we will do our part to ensure a good worship experience for our communities. If we do not, we may have ruined a chance they have at giving themselves to full, conscious, and active participation. How many times have you gone away from a liturgy commenting on how the music either added to or detracted from your worship experience? Most parishioners only attend one Mass per weekend—unlike many cantors, who regularly participate in two or more! In a recent article in *America*, Dr. J. Michael McMahon wrote: "Members of the assembly always seem to pay greater attention to some of the elements of the liturgical celebration than to others. Conventional wisdom among parish

leaders has long held that Sunday worshipers go home talking mainly about two aspects of the Sunday liturgy—the homily and the music."<sup>10</sup> If we practice and are prepared, we help our assemblies to pray. If we do not and are not, we will not. It is *not* all right for a cantor to be satisfied with how the noon Mass went if he or she was not prepared and made mistakes at the 10:30 AM Mass. The 10:30 Mass is not a dress rehearsal for the noon Mass.

As I mentioned above, a cantor must possess a variety of musical and spiritual skills in order to be effective. Some of the necessary musical skills are:

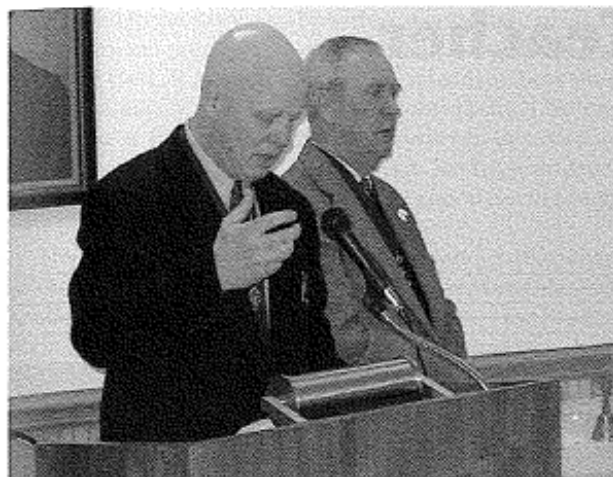
- the ability to read music (understand notes, rests, time signatures, etc.);
- basic skills for vocal production (breathing, projection, diction);
- and the ability and confidence to sing in front of an assembly of people.

In addition, a cantor must be a person of prayer. It is not enough for a cantor to be concerned solely with the notes on the page or vocal production. It is absolutely critical that a cantor have some sort of prayer life—and then be able to share faith with the rest of the assembly. There are many resources available to help cantors better themselves spiritually, beginning with NPM's own publications and resources. At the comprehensive cantor section found at the NPM web site—<http://www.npm.org/Sections/Cantor/cantorresources.htm>—you will find a large resource list of texts and previous *Pastoral Music* articles that focus on cantoring. NPM also publishes *The Liturgical Singer*, a quarterly resource for cantors, songleaders, choirs, and choir directors that covers many elements related to cantoring.<sup>11</sup>

There are many resources available from other publishers as well, and many of them are prepared with the busy pastoral musician in mind. Some offer the texts of the liturgy with reflections to enhance meditation. It takes only minutes a day to read the readings and take some private time in prayer. The more we understand the Word of God, the better we will be able to share its meaning with our congregations. In addition to resources that deepen our knowledge of the weekly readings, other publications help us to understand the elements of the liturgy and have some knowledge of the liturgical documents.

## Cantor in the Community

A cantor does his or her best work when worshipping as a member of a community. *Liturgical Music Today* says that "some members of a community . . . are recognized for the special gifts they exhibit in leading musical praise. These are the pastoral musicians."<sup>12</sup> This document also says that "the musician belongs first of all to the assembly; he or she is a worshiper above all."<sup>13</sup> While it may be necessary for some people to serve as cantor in more than one parish on a weekend, dedication to and a continual presence in our communities are preferable. When one minis-



Cantor Guy Beaven leads the opening hymn at a Mass celebrated by the Montgomery County (Maryland) Knights of Columbus Council #2323, while Grand Knight John Durbin sings beside him.

ters as a cantor in the same community week after week, a relationship is present and developing—and we are thus better able to worship together. Several weeks ago, in my parish, we sang John Foley's setting of Psalm 34, "The Cry of the Poor." Consider this verse from that song:

Let the lowly hear and be glad;  
the Lord listens to their pleas;  
and to hearts broken, God is near,  
who will hear the cry of the poor.<sup>14</sup>

As I looked out over the congregation while I was leading that psalm, I saw a woman whose husband had a quadruple bypass the week before, a family whose grown daughter was recently divorced and moved back home with her two small children, a young woman who was having problems at her job, and a mother of three who had just recently had a skin biopsy. Psalm 34 cried out to me as we sang those words; I prayed for those families that God would give them strength. I was able to do this because of the relationships we had formed and the time we had spent together as members of the same worshiping community.

### A Cantor Is Not . . .

We have looked at many elements of the cantor's ministry and have examined this ministry from a number of viewpoints. We have learned that the cantor "is first a disciple and then a minister."<sup>15</sup> We now need to discuss what a cantor is *not*. A cantor is not a soloist, not a diva (or a divo), and not self-centered. A cantor does not make demands of the music director and does not request a particular piece of music or a particular Mass. Let us look at these words adapted from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

A cantor is patient; a cantor is kind.  
He or she is not jealous, is not pompous,  
Is not inflated, is not rude.

A cantor does not seek his or her own interests,  
is not quick tempered, does not brood over wrong-  
doing,  
but rejoices with the truth.

A cantor bears all things, believes all things,  
hopes all things, endures all things.<sup>16</sup>

### On a Mission

Being able to serve as a cantor is a gift from God. Those of us who have been called to be musical disciples and ministers have a mission. We must pray, study, and learn so that we can do our best with this special gift. Once we do that, then we must share our gift with our assemblies. They will be grateful for our diligence. In the words of Pope Paul VI: "This beautiful sacred music . . . helps to raise souls to God and to glorify the Lord—by means of your ardent lives, be witnesses to him who told us to be 'the light of the world'."<sup>17</sup> So stand tall, be confident, smile, and let your light shine for all to see. For indeed, we are the "light of the Word."

### Notes

1. Of the 8,816 active members in the NPM membership data base at the National Office in November 2004, 2,100 people had asked to be included in the Cantor Section of the association.
2. Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (hereafter CSL), no. 14.
3. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, third typical edition with U.S. adaptations (hereafter GIRM), no. 104.
4. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on the Liturgy, *Liturgical Music Today* (hereafter LMT) (Washington, DC: USCCB Publications, 1982), no. 68.
5. GIRM, no. 103.
6. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on the Liturgy, *Music in Catholic Worship*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: USCCB Publications, 1983), no. 35.
7. LMT, no. 68.
8. *Webster's II Desk Dictionary* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1988).
9. CSL, no. 14.
10. J. Michael McMahon, "Music Ministry," in *America*, April 12, 2004.
11. For subscription information about *The Liturgical Singer*, call (240) 247-3000; website: [www.npm.org](http://www.npm.org).
12. LMT, no. 63.
13. LMT, no. 64.
14. Text © 1978, 1991, John B. Foley, SJ, and OCP Publications.
15. LMT, no. 64.
16. This adaptation of 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 was presented by this author at the 2003 NPM National Convention in Cincinnati, during the workshop "The Cantor as Pastoral Musician."
17. Address by Pope Paul VI, *L'Osservatore Romano*, weekly edition in English (24 April 1969), 1.