For Musicians: Cantor Ministry

Cantors, Claim Your Art

BY MARYANN CORBETT

I am a cantor. Notice that I do not say that I “cantor sometimes” or that I “serve as a cantor.” I use the verb to be. I started leading the singing at liturgies more than twenty years ago, and while I have taken occasional breaks from it, it has never stopped being a central experience for me. It is part of my self-definition.

That’s why I find it odd to see so little written about cantors and cantoring. Official documents have been produced by bishops’ conferences and canon lawyers, and the occasional article laments the state of church music in general. But in publications for the nonspecialist there is little written evidence that anyone cares about what the cantor does. Congregations care, or at least they distinguish good from bad. They’ll speak up when their cantor has done well, but a word of thanks after Mass offers little guidance about what works and why, nor does it explain how the cantor makes a difference. More distressing still, there is no sign that cantors believe their work makes a difference. I have never seen a piece written by a cantor about the way in which singing for liturgy affects a person’s prayer or relationship to the church community. The absence of that kind of writing suggests a certain lack of enthusiasm among cantors. It’s surprising—and disconcerting—that cantors should lack enthusiasm for something they supposedly do out of love for singing and the church.

Five Beliefs

The absence of such articles and the lack of enthusiasm it suggests make me suspect that something is wrong with the relationship between congregations and their cantors in most American Catholic churches. At bottom, I believe, the problem is that cantor and congregation expect too little of each other. The people in the pews are satisfied if the cantor’s singing is decent and the words are understandable. The cantor is satisfied if the people open their mouths to sing. But a lot more could be going on, so I would like to exhort cantors and congregations to change what they believe about one another. I offer five articles of faith as the basis for a changed set of beliefs to be shared by cantors and congregations.

Believe that a cantor is a ritual person. There’s a strong temptation for cantors to be perfunctory as they walk to the mike, speak some boilerplate words of welcome, and announce the number of the opening hymn. In some places the cantor’s role never goes much beyond announcing hymn numbers or giving stage directions.

But is this the role that the reformers of the liturgy had in mind? If cantors are important enough to be acknowledged as real ministers in liturgical and canon law (about which more later), then they are certainly meant to be more than animated hymnboards. Specifically cantors have the right—even the obligation—to talk about God. They need, therefore, to be comfortable with talking about God and to be able to invite a congregation to sing its prayer in words that are genuine, not canned. They need to be comfortable with large gestures, and they need to be at ease with what Joseph Campbell calls mana, the power and presence that come with a ritual role.

Believe that the cantor has a right to be expressive. In far too many places, cantors do not lead singing; they merely sing words and notes and raise their hands. Consciously or not, they avoid eye contact with members of the congregation. They hold their facial mus-

"Reims Cathedral"
icles in the formal half-smile considered appropriate to organized religion. They are divested of personality.

There are many reasons for cantors to act this way, some of them susceptible of change, some not. Experience and workshops may help with lack of confidence, but not much will help with churches in which the sight lines are so bad that the cantor cannot make eye contact with all parts of the congregation. One thing can make an immediate difference, however: giving cantors permission to be expressive, to perform their ministry.

I have attended liturgical workshops where cantors are told in so many words not to perform. What is meant is that a church is not a stage or a piano bar and that certain modes of expression will bother members of the congregation. What happens when people hear the words “Don’t perform,” however, is that they translate that statement to mean “Don’t show any feeling” or possibly “Don’t show so much presence that you compete with the presider.” The damage done by such advice is compounded when parishes are leery of lay ministers in general or nervous about the presence of women in the sanctuary.

Advising a singer not to perform is a contradiction in terms; a singer is a performing artist whose job is to interpret the music and the words. Not every cantor has the vocal skill truly to interpret a song, but it’s time we squelched the idea that interpretation and expression are not allowed.

Positive reinforcement from presiders can make a great difference, especially if it is specific. I will always remember the presider who complimented me because I was not afraid to sing softly.2

Once a parish gives cantors permission to be expressive, it can begin helping them develop the ability to do so. The greatest aid to expression that I know is memorizing the music. Unless cantors can raise their eyes from the page and look at the people, their ability to communicate the music will be very limited. Some parish-wide decisions bear on the cantor’s ability to memorize music: Memorization is simplified by regular use of a hymnal, and a schedule for cantors helps, or at least generous notice about when each cantor will be singing. Ultimately, though, only the cantor’s commitment will ensure that at least some music is memorized.

Believe that the cantor’s preparation encompasses more than the music. To interpret a piece of music one must first have an interpretation, that is, one must know what the words and music mean in the context of the whole liturgy, even of the whole season. A cantor needs to ask questions like these: “Exactly how does the psalm fit with the readings? Especially, how does it relate to the first reading?” A hopeful psalm after a consolation should be understood and sung differently from a hopeful psalm after a reading that threatens the world with God’s justice. To answer such questions, a cantor needs to learn as much as possible about the shape of the liturgy and the thematic connections among the hymns and prayers. The average cantor would be helped by a stint as a reader or a liturgy planner, or both.

The average cantor reading that previous paragraph might laugh out loud. We rarely go to so much trouble. But might that not be the reason for our disaffection? The Mass is not all it could

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To be a cantor is far more than to stand up and sing alone.

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be because most of the time we don’t trouble ourselves even to read the readings ahead of time. We need to do better, not only for the sake of the congregation, but to enrich our own prayer.

Believe in public ways that cantors are important. Another part of the problem is the way cantors are treated

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by canon law. Canonically the person who stands up to sing in front of a congregation “functions” as a cantor; this role is not described as a ministry, even if that person sings every week. There is provision in the canons for permanent installation of some lay people in certain ministries. Lectors and acolytes may be installed “on a stable basis”—if they are men. Other lay “persons” (i.e., women and children) can function as lectors “by temporary deputation.” All the other lay liturgical ministers and women in general are lumped together in the second-class status of “functioning,” not ministering: “Likewise all lay persons can fulfill the functions of commentator or cantor or other functions, in accord with the norm of law.”

Installing only certain ministers and only men, would be impossibly divisive in many parishes, and so the idea of installation is largely ignored. Such imbalance in the canons between the sexes and among various lay ministries deprives parishes of an important statement of the place of cantors in parish life.

Some parishes do try to connect cantoring with prayer by service of commissioning, and that is all to the good. In my experience, however, that service is usually small, held just for the lay ministers, and relegated to a weekend or a Saturday workshop for musicians. To really work as a way to impress on cantors and congregations that cantors and other lay ministers have a serious role to play, the commissioning ought to be done in front of the congregation on Sunday, preferably at a Mass that is musically splendid. Finding an apt feast would be helpful—could we possibly resurrect the celebration of St. Cecilia’s Day?

 Believe that the congregation has something to share with the cantor. Like the presider and the readers, the cantor has the privilege of facing the congregation and learning what it has to say. I don’t mean comments positive or negative, after Mass; I mean eyes, faces, bodies communicating during the act of singing or listening. The things they communicate will convince me forever that singing makes a difference to our experience of community in the church. This conviction, like many other things about faith, is best conveyed with a story.

The most memorable liturgy of my life was an Easter Vigil during which I had been asked to sing the Exsultet. Simply being asked to sing that prayer would have been memorable; I wonder how many lay women get the chance. The act of singing it would have been memorable—standing in the light of the candles and letting my voice loose in words that fly straight to the heart of what I believe. But the strongest memory for me is of the faces of the congregation: the faces of my friends, their eyes fixed on me, their heads nodding yes, yes in the candlelight. They were answering in joy my request to them, a request that sums up everything a cantor is and does.

My dearest friends, standing with me in this holy light, join with me in asking God for mercy, that he may give his unworthy minister grace to sing his Easter praises.  

I wish every cantor could have such memories. Mine, I confess, are sources of the energy that helps me live through last-minute calls to substitute, poor preparation, blank-faced congregations, and all the other banes of a cantor’s life. My memories are old-fashioned “actual graces,” and it is only by grace that I can even begin to act on the counsels of perfection I have written about here.

This is the grace all cantors need; this is the grace that will stop us being wooden nomenities with our eyes glued to the page. If we are ever to believe in the real power of the cantor’s role, we must feel that power—at least once. We must have the experience of being truly moved by liturgical song and of seeing that the congregation is moved as well.

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2. The memory is even dearer to me because the presider was Michael Jonas.
3. Editor’s Note. The title “responsorial psalm” refers primarily to the way the psalm is sung—solo stanza and congregational response. It should not be understood as a “response” to the first reading, though it is often linked with the other biblical texts of the day by similar themes or images.
5. Canon 230.2.
6. Excerpted from the English translation of the Rite of Holy Week © 1970 International Committee on English in the Liturgy, Inc. (ICEL). All rights reserved.