

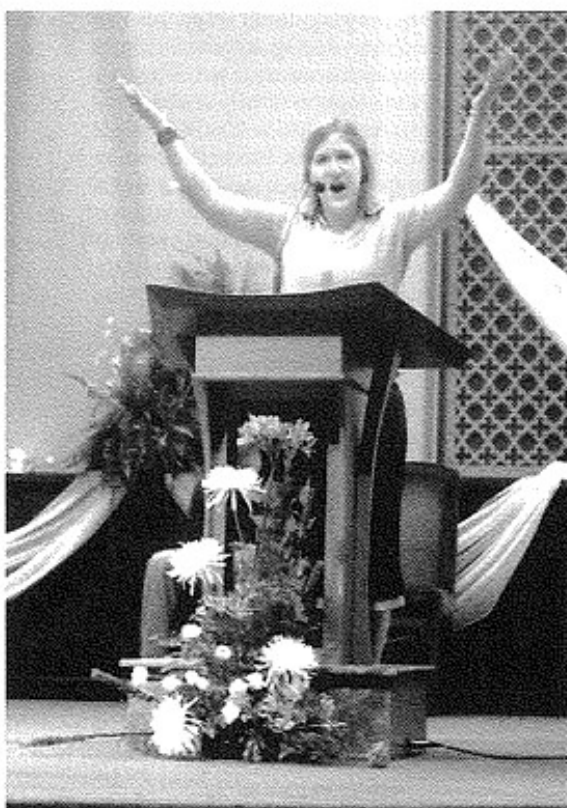
Etiquette for Cantors or Facilitators of Song

BY THOMAS DAY

A statement: "Today, at many or maybe most Roman Catholic liturgies in the United States (Latin Rite), the congregation usually does not hear itself as a singing congregation. Instead, the congregation hears the predominant and sometimes overpowering sound of an amplified soloist behind a microphone."

I have no way of performing an extended scientific study to judge the accuracy of that statement. I do, however, have my own experience and reports from friends and relatives around the country who would agree with the general idea of that statement, which could also be phrased like this: In American Catholic parishes you frequently do not hear the natural, "organic" sound of a singing assembly (the "all"). You hear the artificial sound of an amplified soloist behind a microphone; the congregation, even if it is singing robustly, is inaudible underneath the soloist's amplification.

If you visit a parish where the song soloist seems to commandeer every moment of singing at a liturgy, try to locate the music director, the pastor, or some other knowledgeable person and ask this question: Why is someone behind a microphone going out of his or her way to make sure that the congregation's sung prayer cannot be heard? You will probably receive the same answers I have received: *Bewilderment*: "What are you talking about? That's what congregational sing-



ing is supposed to sound like." *Hostility*: "Mind your own business." *Hostility and Denial*: "What you are listening to is leadership! That soloist provides leadership!" *Resignation*: "What can you do? We depend on those people." *Change the subject*: "We need more contemporary music." "We need more traditional music."

Probably the main reason why the loudly amplified soloist is an established and expected fixture in Catholic worship today is something almost taboo to mention: embarrassment. Many people today (and not just the young), think of loud, amplified music as a symbol of vigor and health; for them, acoustic music (for example, the natural sound of a singing assembly) is an embarrassment and a symbol of weakness. They accept the amplified soloist's voice as a technological method

for pumping up the decibel level and hiding the embarrassment of weak congregational singing.

There is absolutely no real historical precedent for making an amplified soloist the focal point of all congregational singing. For this reason there are no role models or good-conduct examples for these soloists to follow. Without role models to restrain them, some soloists could only be described as "out of control." They powerfully intrude their voices into a liturgy, from beginning to end, and just as powerfully they persuade most people to stop singing. They are fond of songs with dreamy melodies that are perfect for a soloist but not easy for a group of people to sing together. When all of these factors come together—denial that the soloist is monopolizing the singing, the obsession with amplified sound, the lack of precedent—the result can be something that might come across as bad manners: The soloist, quite innocently, does things that seem rude.

Below is a list of "etiquette" guidelines for soloists who would like to improve their contribution to Catholic worship and also avoid anything that could be interpreted as bad manners. These guidelines are, in a sense, radical, because they go against the prevailing practice. At the same time they are unremarkable and certainly not original because they are based on practical experience—the circumstances that help to produce congregational singing that is prayerful. Some parishes may say that they are doing quite nicely with their own thriving musical practices that they could describe as "ethnic," "contemporary," "traditional," or "classical." But even in these cases, thinking about the following guidelines might provide an opportunity for some candid self-assessment.

Dr. Thomas Day, author of Why Catholics Can't Sing: The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste (Crossroad, 1990) and Where Have You Gone, Michelangelo?: The Loss of Soul in Catholic Culture (Crossroad, 1993) is a professor in the Music Department at Salve Regina University, Newport, Rhode Island.

Etiquette Guidelines for Cantors/Facilitators of Song

1. Understand the Nature of the Gathering and Your Place in It. The purpose of sacred music, according to the Second Vatican Council and Pope Pius X, is "the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful."¹ The council also stated that "the people's own religious songs are to be encouraged with care so that . . . in keeping with rubrical norms and requirements, the faithful may raise their voices in song."²

Sometimes that praise of God and that sanctification can take place with the simplest of music sung at a modest level of volume. You are not required to keep the volume of singing loud at all times. Whenever possible, let the sung prayer of the people ring out so that their voice can be heard over your voice, even when that ringing out is not especially loud.

You have two important roles: As a *cantor*, you sing certain specified parts of the liturgy by yourself. As a *facilitator*, you assist the congregation's singing, as needed. Ideally, any type of singing (congregational, choral, solo) should sound like a part of a continuing prayer offered by everyone.

2. Follow Sound Advice. The *microphones* are extremely sensitive. A priest or a lector can speak near a microphone in a quiet voice and be heard throughout the church. A singer near that same microphone could be overpowering and cover over the sound made by hundreds of people singing in the congregation. Microphones can turn liturgical music into Karaoke or a pop-style concert with a featured star performer (you) and a back-up group (instrumental accompaniment and congregation). Keep this in mind at all times.

The *acoustics* in the church present challenges for congregational singing. The organ/instrumental accompaniment is in one place, you (the cantor/facilitator) are in another, and the speakers for the amplification are on the sides of the church and in the back. People in the congregation can become confused and stop singing when they hear amplified music coming at them from different directions, all of it going at different speeds. The *music director/organist* is the song leader who prevents this type of acoustic confusion by setting the tempo (pace) that everyone follows. You, the facilitator, follow the leadership of the music director.

3. Be Gracious and Know When to Leave. Well-wishers will come up to you

after a liturgy and tell you how wonderful you are. Accept their compliments with gracious thanks. At the same time remember two things: First, these well-wishers are in the habit of freely bestowing compliments on everybody. Second, a good team member also listens to constructive criticism and learns from it. You are a member of a music ministry team and you can always learn, always improve.

When the "New Mass" in the vernacular was introduced after Vatican II, parishes had someone in the sanctuary speak the congregation's responses into a microphone during a liturgy. After a while it was unnecessary to have someone behind a microphone loudly saying, "And also with you," "We have lifted them up to the Lord" and so forth. This person eventually became superfluous and disappeared from the sanctuary. If you are doing your job correctly and conscientiously, one day all of your hard work as a booster of the assembly's voice will be rewarded and you too will become superfluous.

The Sound of a Singing Congregation

Congregational singing is most uplifting, devout, and impressive when it sounds as if many people are joining together to offer a single prayer. This happens when people in the congregation—the assembly, everyone—can actually hear themselves as a group making a unified sound. Here are a few ways the facilitator can help to encourage the congregation to hear itself:

- If the congregation is singing an *old-fashioned beloved and familiar song* and if there is a reasonable sound coming from the congregation, get the singing started (if necessary) with the first few notes and then *step away from the microphone* so your voice is not amplified. Become part of the assembly's "sound." Blend in with everyone else. This is a time to let the congregation hear how well it can sound by itself.

Christmas carols, "Holy God We Praise Thy Name," the "Lourdes Hymn," "Come Holy Ghost," "Faith of Our Fathers," "Holy, Holy, Holy" (NICEA), and the chant *Easter Alleluia* and *Our Father* are just a few examples of songs that are beloved, partly because they are so easy to sing. This list could also be extended to include many of the responsorial psalm settings by Owen Alstott.

- The congregation usually does not need any help to sing the familiar music of the Mass from the *Sanctus/Holy, Holy* through the *Agnus Dei/Lamb of God*. The facilitator might be needed to sing an unfamiliar memorial acclamation or to start things off if the choir is not there, but most of the time the amplified voice of a facilitator is absolutely unnecessary during this very important part of the Mass. Keep away from the microphone.

- If the congregation is not responding or is singing an *unfamiliar song*, sing discreetly into the microphone. Also, a song in verse/refrain format usually requires that you sing the verse closer to the microphone.

- If the *choir* is supporting the congregation, blend in with everyone else. Sing as strongly as you wish but without amplification. Here is the problem: When an amplified voice is contrasted against the blended natural sound of the assembly (congregation and choir), the result can create a musical tug-of-war. This can confuse a congregation. Congregations stop singing when they are confused.

- At all costs, avoid anything that gives the impression that your voice is "on top" and everyone else (congregation, choir, and instrumental accompaniment) is there to assist you.

- Congregations generally do not sing at funerals and weddings. Your amplified voice is necessary.

Courteous Gestures

Here are some actions that make a good impression and that the congregation appreciates. It makes a good impression when:

- A cantor (psalmist) sings the responsorial psalm, the *Alleluia*, or similar music with a verse/refrain format and always lowers his or her voice when it is the congregation's turn to sing.
- A cantor (psalmist) sings this same music and makes sure that the microphone never picks up his or her voice at all whenever congregation and choir respond together.

This comes across as a sign of respect. It signals these messages: "I am politely taking turns. I trust your competence."

The congregation appreciates when the facilitator does not sing at the same volume from the beginning to the end of the liturgy but changes the volume to fit the situation. For example, the facilitator:

- discreetly uses the microphone to support an unfamiliar hymn;
- gets completely away from the microphone when enough people in the congregation are making a prayerful sound with a familiar song and when the choir provides ample support;
- and sings plainly into the microphone if the music is a part for a cantor/soloist or if the congregation is not singing (for example, during Communion).

There are occasions when a cantor/facilitator's amplified voice might be audible for anywhere from twelve to twenty minutes of a liturgy. A little variety in volume gives the impression that the congregation is being invited to sing. Keeping the volume of your voice at the same level throughout the liturgy is a signal to the congregation that its participation is not especially wanted.

A Tale of Two Masses

It's Christmas Eve, and I am visiting a large church in a prosperous suburb of New York City. The place is packed wall-to-wall with people. The pipe organ begins "O Come, All Ye Faithful." Before the first verse is finished, I realize that people are giving me and my family strange looks. We are committing a faux pas: We are singing.

Did we not notice that a soloist (a man with a beautifully trained voice) would be taking over for the congregation? Did we not notice that even the organist was following the singer's expressive interpretation of the music? I suppose not, but I did notice that, even if a few hundred people had tried to sing robustly, the soloist's amplification would still have been the loudest thing in the building.

Two words come to mind: bad manners. There is something downright impolite about the music.

Now it's about a year later, and I am at another liturgy in a large parish church. It's crowded; many people are not parishioners. The music consists mostly of plain, old-fashioned hymns and unglamorous

items from the missalette (including Vermulst's durable "Holy, Holy"). There is no choir but, as I learn later, a group of about six visiting seminarians is seated together in the pews. Without realizing it, they act as a musical spark: an ad-hoc choir. The song facilitator—a model of discretion—starts the singing when necessary and then becomes 100% inaudible. The priest starts the singing of the chant Our Father and then lowers his voice to the point where it disappears. The assembly's singing is deeply prayerful; every stone in the building seems to vibrate. I am amazed. I can actually hear the assembly's voice.

Two words come to mind: good manners.

Notes

1. See Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC), 112. English translation in International Commission on English in the Liturgy, *Documents on the Liturgy 1963–1979: Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 112.

2. SC, 118; *Documents on the Liturgy*, 118.