

# Fostering Congregational Song as Cantors, Song Leaders, and Choir Members

BY DANIEL GIRARDOT

**O**n a crisp fall Friday night, a high school football game becomes a fascinating study in full, conscious, and active participation in ritual. The congregational chants, the call and response, and the powerful rhythmic tones of the musical accompaniment call forth a unique involvement. An emotional response from all assembled shakes the stands, sunders the heavens, and calls all who gather for this secular ritual to make a glad song and shout of acclamation! In fact, Balthasar Fischer, the great German liturgical theologian, was fascinated by the processions and ritual chants he witnessed on game day while he was a visiting professor at the University of Notre Dame.<sup>1</sup>

In a small rural church in the western desert foothills of Texas, a community gathers from the outlying regions. Those who prepared all year for First Communion are in their finest outfits. All who are present sing robustly to the one-fingered accompaniment of a Casio keyboard with the automatic chord button selected. Three singers enthusiastically lead familiar and praise-filled songs from a balcony. The powerful expression of the people's song forms a lasting memory that moves the hearts of all who attend. With such limited resources, we wonder, how do these musicians teach that diverse congregation what it truly means to praise God with inspired songs?

A parish gathers in its gymnasium after a devastating fire destroyed the newly built church a month before its scheduled opening. The physically and emotionally exhausted community is in need of a word of hope and consolation. They sing songs that speak of rebuilding, healing, and hope, and suddenly the singing assembly seems to lift the roof off the gym with their song! What compels them to sing "We Shall Rise Again" with such emotion, such power of conviction? The song feels new,

sung in a "foreign land" raw with pain yet filled with solidarity of purpose and need.

These examples of singing at extraordinary occasions call us to reflect on our weekly experience of sung prayer. We must ask how singing can be formational for the people of God. We must explore how it can provide a ritual foundation upon which we can build faith for the moments of joy or pain in life.

## Harness the Power, Unleash the Energy

The special spirit that is caught by a praying community is an ineffable gift that is felt by all when it is present. How is the pastoral musician able to harness this power and unleash the spiritual energy that unifies the people of God into one holy assembly? We are called to lead the assembly in a way that allows all gathered to let go of the private self and become wedded to the unity and blessing of God's song of salvation. How can we *become* what we sing? How do pastoral musicians prepare, form, and equip the people of God to tap into the spiritual well-spring of our sung liturgy? We are called to learn and understand the primacy of the whole assembly's ministry of music and the place of the congregation's song within that ministry. To make our ministry supportive of the congregation's song we try to strike a beautiful balance between active singing and active listening. As music ministers, we need to use a listening heart.

The gathered Body of Christ is called by baptism to be the primary minister of music at liturgy. Leaders are called from the assembly to guide and direct, but the entire assembly has the most important role—and the congregation is the largest part of that liturgical assembly. In other words, there is no audience—no silent spectators—at liturgy.

Saint Paul writes: "Let the peace of Christ, rich as it is, dwell in your hearts . . . and sing to God with songs, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:15-16). To sing like this, we have to move against the tide of our popular culture, especially when we speak of the role of the whole assembly in sung liturgy. The cultural tendency of our consumer society is to come to the liturgy hoping to get something out of it

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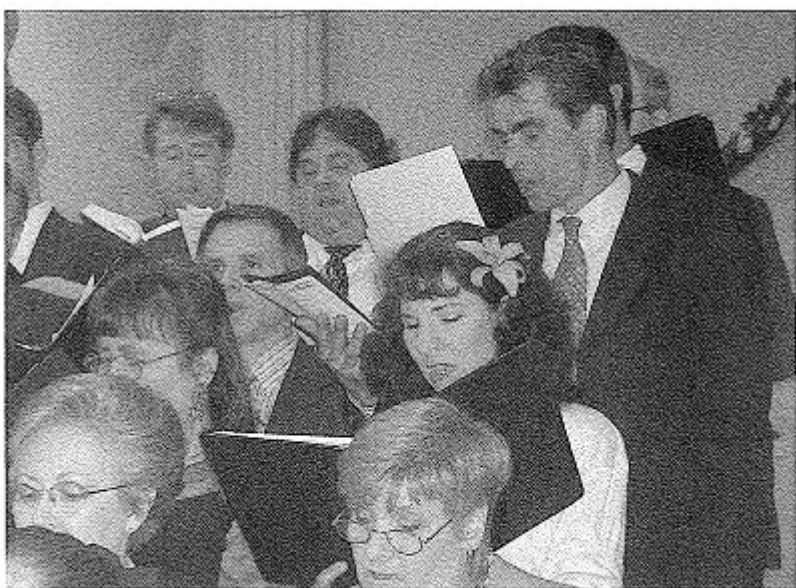
rather than bring something to contribute to it. This tendency is the great obstacle blocking the liturgy from becoming the work of the people. The liturgy is "the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church." (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no. 2). We gather, listen, praise, thank, sing, bless, move, offer, intercede, give, and celebrate the kingdom of God at worship. These rituals of the heart shape and mark the primary moments in our lives, and they establish the foundation on which we build our faith. As the people of God we *must* sing.

If we are to sing the Lord's song, we must first acknowledge the cultural wasteland of communal song that we inhabit. We have moved from a culture that at one time celebrated events by breaking into ritual song to a culture in which singing is public performance. Only the very few are comfortable singing in community. How can we sing the Lord's song when children are sometimes told in school to be silent because they are not able to sing correctly? How do we compete against the cultural expectation that the professional musician is the primary purveyor of music in our society, and someone who spontaneously sings out a refrain from a popular tune is told: "Don't quit your day job"? We hear music everywhere, but it is not our song, not our voice. We are a self-conscious society unable to let the song in our hearts spring free. Basic cultural tradition—and even Friday night football—includes expression of the deep need for shared ritual acclamations and songs that define and empower the voice of the community.

### A Delicate Craft

Embracing and enlivening the song of the community is a delicate task and craft in itself. We have to begin with this premise: The liturgy of the Roman Rite is, by definition, a sung ritual—the norm is sung liturgy. This does not negate the validity of the Roman Rite when it is not sung, but it does confirm that the people of God are touched more deeply by text, action, and the Holy Spirit when they are singing the Mass and the other sacraments and liturgies. As music ministers, we should provide leadership based on our belief that the congregation comes to liturgy to offer its very life to the Lord. The pastoral musician must understand a community's collective song, hymn, psalm, and acclamation repertoire before determining what it needs to sing on a given Sunday. We must know what songs the people love to sing.

In order to engage in the sacred action of liturgy, we must be caught up in it with all our heart, all our soul, and



our entire mind. What engages all of the facets of our being at once? I submit that it has to be the song of praise, the litany of petition and praise, the refrain of spiritual response, and the shout of acclamation. All gathered at the tables of Word and Eucharist—including the priest celebrant, the deacon, the servers, and the liturgical ministers—must participate in the song as members of the gathered church. All join the primary voice of praise, which belongs to the whole people of God. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* affirms that dialogues, acclamations, songs, litanies, and petitions "foster and bring about communion" and clearly express "the action of the entire community" in the liturgy (nos. 34–35). It states, "every care should be taken that singing by the ministers and the people is not absent in celebrations that occur on Sundays and on holy days of obligation" (no. 40). Further, the *General Instruction* calls us to prepare and plan the entire celebration "in such a way that it leads to a conscious, active, and full participation of the faithful both in body and in mind . . ." (no. 18). We are called as pastoral musicians to accompany, support, and lead the "song of all God's people" (*Exsultet*, Easter Vigil).

In our preparation for worship and our leadership of sung prayer, we must see the members of the congregation as people who come to give themselves over to the fourfold action of the liturgy. This action, as Dom Gregory Dix taught, is to "take, bless, break and give" Word and Sacrament.<sup>2</sup> "The other sacred actions and all the activities of the Christian life are bound up with [the Eucharistic liturgy], flow from it, and are ordered to it" (*General Instruction*, no. 16). Respect for the people of God requires us to lead through dignified, beautiful, and efficacious community prayer and song (see the *General Instruction*, no. 22).

The church is now and has always been a work in progress. We need to be aware of the community's cul-

tural, ministerial, and spiritual needs. These are all factors that will affect the ways in which they need to sing and feel they can sing. The small parish in west Texas that I described at the beginning of this article, for example, has a very different demographic from the suburban parish that mourned the loss of its new church building. Both have a deep need to sing *their* song. The pastoral musician must understand a community's collective repertoire and the community's "voice" before determining what it needs to or can sing on a given Sunday. Special feast days, devotional worship, ethnic style, and instrumentation are all factors that affect preparation and planning.

## The Tools of Our Craft

In addition to the understanding of our craft that we bring to this ministry, we have at our disposal a set of tools that includes our own vocal skills and the ways we use them—appropriately and inappropriately—to lead congregational singing. We have (or should have) in our tool kit an understanding of and skill at using the various forms of sung prayer (acclamation, dialogue, hymn, song, petition, and so on); a respect for ritual silence, which is just as much prayer as spoken or sung texts; a rich repertoire from which to draw; and the singing of other ministers to support the assembly's shared worship.

**Using Vocal Skills.** How do we use our vocal skills appropriately to lead congregational singing? In leading the hymns, responses, and litanies, song leaders should remember the gift of simplicity. The people may need a simple cue to enter the music for the processional hymns at entrance and preparation (and for the antiphon at Communion, presuming that you use an antiphonal hymn). Like the priest celebrant and other ministers, the role of vocal music ministers is to model good singing to the community. This means that, when they are not singing the verses of a song—or the verses of the responsorial psalm when they are serving as the psalmist—once the response has been introduced, song leaders and cantors step away from the microphone so they can be seen but not heard. The community will fill the void in the absence of a loud, amplified, solo voice. Amplified voices singing the congregation's part actually discourage congregational song. Members of the congregation will not fill in where there is no aural space. This also means that a cantor or song leader will gesture to the congregation only in a way that will help entrances. At the first NPM Master Cantor School in 1985, the late Michael Hay, who was a fantastic cantor, demonstrated the power of the head, face, and eyes in the cantor's ministry. Though Michael had to use two canes and braces to support himself, we never questioned when to enter because of his subtle use of his head, eyes, and upper body. It also suggests that raised and extended hands call more attention to the individual than other gestures that would help the congregation to recognize their entrance.

In other parts of sung worship, such as the litanies of the penitential rite, prayer of the faithful (general interces-

sions), and fraction rite, the cantor plays a greater role than during hymnody or processional song. These dialogues between the cantor or choir and the congregation engage the body, the spirit, the heart, and the voice. Choosing an appropriate season to use these forms of sung prayer (e.g., using a sung penitential rite in Lent) will mark that season and create a tradition in the community.

Consider the penitential rite (now named the Act of Penitence) in detail. The *General Instruction* describes the litanic *Kyrie* as a chant that is "ordinarily done by all, that is, by the people and the choir or cantor having a part in it" (no. 52). The call and response character of these petitions suggests a setting that presents the text sung by the cantor or choir (the "trope") in a simple way and then gives the people a short, easy-to-sing response. The "call" is meant to engage the people and evoke their response. The cantor who sings that "call" with the expectation of a response will step away from the microphone and not sing at all while awaiting and leading (by gesture) the people's response. Immediately the congregation will understand that its part of the ritual will be absent if it does not sing it. Such an approach truly respects its role and gives a compelling impetus to sing. The human need to fill the void will inspire the people to participate more fully.

**Ministers of Silent Prayer.** The *General Instruction* says that the purpose of "sacred silence" "depends on the time it occurs in each part of the celebration. Thus within the Act of Penitence and again after the invitation to pray, all recollect themselves; but at the conclusion of a reading or the homily, all meditate briefly on what they have heard; then after Communion, they praise and pray to God in their hearts" (no. 45). By their example (being silent and still, rather than fiddling with the hymnal or sheet music to get ready to lead singing), music ministers may use



their bodies to assist people in silent prayer. By not rushing into action (e.g., providing sufficient silence before the responsorial psalm or Gospel acclamation or hymn after Communion), cantors and song leaders may also serve as ministers of silent prayer.

We should be so well prepared that we are examples of the active listening that is an integral part of Catholic worship. Father Eugene Walsh used to summarize the movement of the liturgy as three steps: We gather, we listen, and we respond.<sup>3</sup> How do we develop a listening experience as a community? The lector, the homilist, the psalmist, the priest celebrant, and the choir all offer the community a multivalent experience of God's revelation to us. The efficacious reception of that revelation is the work of the Holy Spirit, but that work depends on the way in which the revelation is delivered, the appropriateness to the topic, the depth of its inspiration, and the preparation of the ministers. When an instrumentalist, choir, or soloist presents a meditation or reflection, it must be at one of the proper moments of reflection in the liturgy and must underscore the message of the season and the liturgical feast. It is a powerful experience for a congregation to hear the Good News from well-prepared lectors, deacons, priests, and psalmists and listen to a homily that breaks open the Word and brings it to bear on the lives of individuals and the community, then to reflect on the Word through a well-chosen piece of music during the procession with gifts. The prelude, the procession with gifts and the preparation of the altar, and the time for a thanksgiving hymn or other song after Communion are moments when music ministers can "break open" the Word through a well-chosen hymn or through sung or instrumental meditation. The music minister has a responsibility to present the music and choose repertoire that focuses not on itself but on the message of the Gospel and the call to service.

**Repertoire.** We are truly blessed to have such rich vernacular repertoires from which to draw. In the past forty years, Roman Catholics have seen an explosion of liturgical music similar to the one that accompanied the European Reformation in the sixteenth century. These liturgical resources, often a potpourri of the new and old, have attempted to give voice to the reformed Catholic liturgy. How do we choose, among such riches, appropriate music to evoke the singing voice of the praying community?

We need to know what both old and new repertoire may do for a congregation. If we seek in familiar and traditional liturgical music a voice that provides continuity and ritual grounding, we aid the liturgical assembly in its need to connect with the ancient echoes of our spiritual roots. If we find in new and creative liturgical music a voice that allows the people of God to respond to the "signs of the times," we connect the community to its own experience of living the faith today. At times, the new and the old may clash with one another; at other times, they may complement each other. Finding the right balance is the key to being an effective pastoral musician.

## Checking Your Tool Kit

*In this article, Mr. Girardot identifies four tools that should be in any pastoral musician's tool kit for promoting congregational singing: an understanding of and skill at using the various forms of sung prayer (acclamation, dialogue, hymn, song, petition, and so on); a respect for ritual silence, which is just as much prayer as spoken or sung texts; a rich repertoire from which to draw; and the singing of other ministers to support the assembly's shared worship.*

*Take a look at your tool kit and see what you find.*

**1. Skill at Various Forms of Sung Prayer.** Do you understand how the various forms of sung prayer function at liturgy? Do you know what each one requires of a pastoral musician who is using voice to lead and support the congregation? Do you know how best to use body language to bring people into the song? Do you know when to use the microphone, when to step away from the microphone but keep on singing, and when to be quiet?

**2. Ritual Silence.** Do you know how the various silences function in the liturgy as times for reflection and personal prayer? Do you use those times appropriately in your own participation in worship? Do you, as a public leader of prayer, witness to the importance of such times by posture and physical stillness?

**3. Repertoire.** Even if you are not in charge of selecting the music that the congregation will sing, do you listen to the singing to find out which selections resonate with the congregation and which do not? Do you look at faces when people are singing, to find out from their expressions whether or not they are entering the song and letting the song speak for them? Do you pay attention to feedback? If you choose the repertoire, are you careful to be like the "scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven [who] is like the master of a household who brings out of the treasure what is new and what is old" (Matt. 13:52)?

**4. One among Many.** We're not in this alone, nor does the power of sung liturgy depend entirely on us. But until we realize that leadership in music ministry is a shared leadership, we may be taking on too great a burden. Successful music leadership includes the vocal ministries (cantor, psalmist, choir, songleader) as well as the visible and audible leadership of the bishop, priest, and deacon and the active, visible, and audible participation of other liturgical ministers: lector, minister of Communion, server, usher. Does your pastor agree with this statement? Do the other ministers in your parish? Have you communicated this understanding to the other vocal music ministers as well as the whole community? What kind of training have you provided to help the other ministers sing?



We must also understand what songs the people love to sing, use those songs appropriately, and find new music that will build on that solid repertoire. When selecting new hymns, songs, or acclamations, consider using only music that you and the parish leadership deem worthy of a parish commitment for the next ten years. Once people are familiar with—and are using—dialogic song forms, explore new forms of antiphonal, call and response, or litanic singing. Find new and creative ways to use instruments or interludes to add accompaniments that follow the rhythm of the liturgy.

**Singing by All the Ministers.** It is a cliché, certainly, but it is true: If Father sings, the parish will sing. The priest celebrant who sings and models sung prayer engenders a love of congregational singing in the parish. Encourage priest celebrants to sing (see Father Anthony Ruff's article in this issue for some solid ideas) and understand the needs and expectations of the priest celebrants about their role as music ministers and primary animators of the people's song. Explore ways to teach all liturgical ministers to model full, active liturgical singing as a part of their work of praising God and making a joyful noise at liturgy: Lectors, altar servers, ministers of hospitality, and ministers of Communion are also important role models in sung worship. Make singing a part of liturgical ministry training sessions.

To balance the various ministries in ways that will enable the prayerful song of the whole assembly and evoke the song of the congregation, we are called to find sensitive ways to coordinate all participants. No one ministry should dominate or usurp the voice of the congregation.

### Living Our Ritual Expectations

The liturgy of the Roman Rite is, by definition, a sung ritual. The liturgy of the Roman Rite is, by definition, the act of the whole assembly (see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1157 and 1158). By respecting the nature of the liturgy and the roles we each play as ministers of that liturgy, by realizing that we must take into account the people's cultural and parish's collective memory, we can prepare sung worship that will incorporate the songs of the community and the music that will touch the core of its experience and evoke the mystery of faith that we sing and celebrate. We are called to prepare and lead sung liturgy that underscores the power of Word and Sacrament in the lives of the community, strikes a chord in its soul, and evokes the singing voice of the congregation gathered for worship.

### Notes

1. Professor Balthasar Fischer of Trier died on June 27, 2001, at the age of eighty-nine. A pioneer and giant of the liturgical movement, he held the first chair of liturgy in Germany, was a co-founder of the German Liturgical Institute at Trier (1947),



and served as a *peritus* at Vatican II. As a member of the *Consilium*, he was involved in drawing up the rites of infant baptism (1969) and adult initiation (1972), and he chaired the working parties that produced the *Directory for Masses with Children* (1973) and the three Eucharistic Prayers for Masses with Children (1974). For additional information, see [www.naal-liturgy.org/memorial.htm](http://www.naal-liturgy.org/memorial.htm).

2. Dom Gregory Dix (1901–1952), a remarkable Anglican Benedictine, was arguably the most influential liturgist of the twentieth century. Though he died from cancer at a young age, his groundbreaking 1945 work *The Shape of the Liturgy* set the terms of discussion about Western liturgy and has never been out of print since it was first published. His reconstruction of pre-Nicene liturgies became a kind of prototype for the involvement of the laity in liturgy. He was a remarkable priest, monk, and scholar who helped to restore the shape of the liturgy. For additional information, see [www.liturgy.ca/archive/Ascension97.pdf](http://www.liturgy.ca/archive/Ascension97.pdf).

3. Rev. Eugene A. Walsh (1911–1989), a member of the Society of St. Sulpice, had a formative effect on the seminarians he taught at St. Charles Seminary, Catonsville, Maryland; St. Mary's Seminary, Baltimore; and the Theological College of The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC. His wider influence on liturgical renewal and reform came through his participation on the board of directors of The Liturgical Conference before the Second Vatican Council and, after the Council, through parish retreats, liturgical days, and weekend study programs in parishes of every size and shape. He promoted a communicative style of celebration that emphasized the centrality of meaning and the need for priest celebrants and other liturgical ministers to help the rest of the assembly understand what is taking place. For additional information, see <http://genewalsh.com>.