

on the function and dysfunction of the cantor

Diana Kodner Sotak

I have some good news and some bad news about the ministry of the cantor. The good news is that there are more and more cantors around the country, and that many are seriously interested in learning about their ministry in order to better serve. The bad news is this: cantors continue to stray from the basic principles needed for effective ministry. We are tricked and seduced by that which is easy (the "quick-fix"), by that which is affirmed by others, and by all that makes us feel good about ourselves.

To expand, it is still easier to do the assembly's liturgy for them—speak for them, sing for them, pray for them. It is also easy to conclude that affirmation equals success. If people like the sound of our voices, better still, if they deem us "prayerful," all is thought to be well. Finally, we tend to decide in favor of what we like to do. Cantors are singers, and singers like to sing for people as much as possible, perhaps at every sung moment in the liturgy.

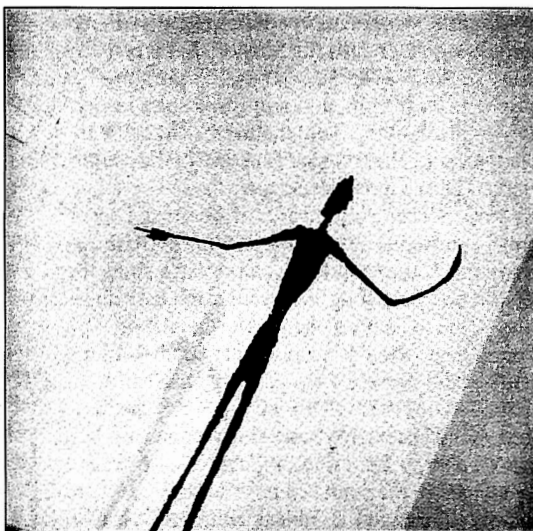
Here are some of the basic principles to which we must return:

1) The ministry of the assembly is the primary liturgical ministry. It is also the primary music ministry. The assembly's song is to be considered before any other musical component. There are designated parts of the liturgy which call for singing by the assembly, sometimes with parts assigned to the cantor or choir.

2) Cantors come from the assembly in order to *serve* the assembly. Cantors are not a substitute for the assembly, nor are they superior to the assembly. While the cantor has special gifts, this does not mean that the cantor's song is inherently "better" than the song of the assembly. Furthermore, it is not up to the cantor or any other individual to determine that the assembly does not want to sing, or that singing by the assembly is not important.

3) The main function of the cantor is to animate and facilitate the assembly's song and prayer. It is not the function of the cantor to entertain.

4) Because of their high profile, cantors need to be good



models of what it means to be assembly, within the context of the liturgy, and within the community. This means being attentive to the liturgy, being a person of prayer, a charitable person, and so on.

5) People are chosen for this ministry by charisms or gifts and not by their own needs, as in "I need an outlet," or "I need somewhere to sing." There are many options for liturgical ministry, and even more options for ministry outside of the liturgy. Those looking for a purely musical diversion might be directed to community choruses and theater groups.

6) Service of the worshipping community must be its own reward. There is no place for self-interest. This does not preclude compensation, but anyone seeking fame and fortune should look elsewhere.

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7) The ministry of the cantor is corporate. Cantors serve together with other liturgical ministers in a way that is not only related but interdependent. Ongoing conflict between liturgical ministers can be destructive to worship, and to the life of the worshipping community.

8) The texts of the liturgy belong to everyone, even the texts sung by the cantor. The well-intentioned alteration of texts by individual cantors may at times result in confusion and anger. Certainly, there are situations where changes can be made with relative ease, but decisions must be made carefully and pastorally with the interests of the *entire* community in mind, and not the wishes of a single individual. Furthermore, the texts which are rendered by the cantor are always served by the music, the vocalization, and the interpretation, and never the reverse. Texts are primary.

Perhaps the greatest single error made by cantors (or by those who train them) is to sing everything into a microphone, over and above the singing of the assembly. In defense of this practice, some of the confusion is derived from liturgical documents. The references to the cantor in the *General Instructions to the Roman Missal* (the principle post-conciliar document regarding the way we celebrate the liturgy) have led to a variety of interpretations. For example, take this excerpt:

There should be a cantor or choirmaster to *direct* and *encourage* the people in singing. If there is no choir, the cantor *leads* the various songs, and the people take their own part. (*GIRM*, No. 64, emphasis added)

The question is not whether the cantor should *lead* and *direct*, but what is the best way to do so? Singing into a microphone over and above the singing of the assembly, and conducting the assembly with chironomic or more traditional conducting gestures may have controlled the assembly's singing to some extent, but too often such control discouraged real participation. It was wrong to approach the assembly as some ready-made choir, or as participants in some sacred sing-a-long. Dominance over the assembly will never lead to the "full, conscious, and active participation" articulated by the Second Vatican Council. We cannot and should not attempt to beat the assembly into submission by vocal bombardment, and yet that is what we so often do when we amplify a single voice and superimpose it on the singing of the assembly.

In some cases abuses arise because the cantor *wants* to be heard above the assembly. As the assembly gets louder, so does the cantor. This is particularly evident in those hymns that everyone seems to know and love.

Cantors may abuse the use of the microphone after a barrage of compliments on the beauty of their voices, their ability to entertain, or the inspiration they provide. I have even heard cantors excuse overuse of the microphone with the apologia "I really want to get some more weddings to sing, and people need to hear what I have to offer."

At other times, cantors may try to compensate for what they perceive to be weak or poor singing on the part of the assembly. Of course, as the cantor gets louder, people are likely to get softer. The result is a cantor singing on behalf of the assembly.

For all parts of the liturgy, the cantor should only be at the microphone, or the visual focal point of the assembly, if there is a special role to play. Even the use of the cantor for the acclamations to the eucharistic prayer is to be avoided. At this point in the liturgy we pray to God the Creator through and with Jesus, led by the presider. Another intermediary in the form of the cantor only serves to further remove people from this central prayer of the liturgy. certainly, there are a few successful settings of the eucharistic prayer with special parts for the cantor, but it is superfluous and distracting for the cantor to turn around and gesture for people to sing that which clearly belongs to them.

Let the assembly sing its hymns and acclamations led by the organ or other instruments. If there are no instruments, the cantor may need to lead with the sound of the voice, but once the assembly has entered in, the cantor should melt into the sound of the assembly. The cantor has intonations, psalm verses, litanies, and the like. Let the assembly take ownership of the rest. Even when singing in alternation with the assembly, as in refrain forms, use a visual cue or gesture to indicate the assembly's refrain.

Of course, if the presider insists on singing all of the assembly's song into the microphone, the problem remains the same. Cantors must avoid the temptation to enter into a "duet" with Fr. Microphone, even if he is singing the wrong notes or behind the beat. Two amplified voices are no better than one, and in the long run it may be impossible to remedy the problem once you have patched it up or made it less evident. Furthermore, a cantor cannot compensate for poor instrumental lead-

ership, musical settings that are too difficult for the assembly, or disastrous acoustics.

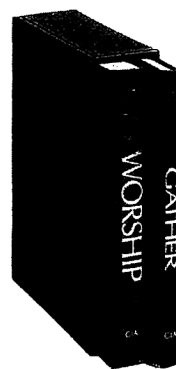
If a cantor sings from the choir loft, or when the organist is at the same time the cantor, the abuse of amplification is almost guaranteed, since there are no other apparent options for animation. Quite simply, these are not alternatives for the ministry. The cantor must be *visible* to the assembly, even if that means singing without instruments (as when the instruments are in a remote rear gallery, or when the cantor is also the organist).

There are also some vocal problems which are common among cantors who rely exclusively on the use of a microphone, singing within a couple of inches of the mike at all times. Frequently, the microphone becomes a crutch, compensating for poor support and lack of vocal resonance or projection. There is a kind of "crooning" in such vocal technique that does not always fit the text being sung or inspire prayer among listeners. If cantors alternate singing as part of the assembly, away from the microphone, with solo singing at the microphone, the development of proper vocalization might be facilitated.

I no longer give cantors the option of how much to sing into the microphone with the assembly. For a strophic hymn, the cantor either takes two giant steps back from the microphone and sings with the assembly, or remains at his or her place within the assembly, and again sings as a member of the assembly. For a refrain which is intoned by the cantor and reiterated by the assembly, the cantor can gesture or give a visual cue to the assembly, and need not sing with them at all. Dispensing with "song-leaders" is partly an act of faith, and partly a willingness to let go. When the assembly realizes that it is their turn to sing—indeed, that they must sing or there will be no song—they are likely to participate. For those assemblies who sing in spite of the dominance of a single voice, they will sing better without such "help," and perhaps for the first time be audible to one another.

Cantors need to do less, better. Once the role of "song-leader" has been removed, cantors may feel a void. We can fill that void by turning (and returning) to the fundamentals of this ministry. Then we will be living examples, persons of prayer, welcoming, inviting and loving servants of what we proclaim, true to the notes, the tones, and the words, revering our ministry, but moreover, revering those we serve. ■

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