Where There's a Psalm, There Should be a Psalmist

By Joe Simmons

Recently, a newly appointed pastor of a parish (I'll call him Father Anthony) contacted me to discuss how he might enhance his community's music ministry program. The parish had a modest program with a part-time organist, who had retired earlier that year, and a few dedicated volunteer cantors who were serving faithfully but had little training in music or ministry. Father Anthony reported that the community liked to sing, but he wanted the music to have a deeper meaning in their prayer lives than was possible just by singing songs they happened to like.

Although committed to musical liturgy, Father Anthony had many questions. How much should be sung at Mass in the first place? How can music nurture a parish's spiritual formation? How can the parish make the most of its existing resources? What goals should be communicated to potential music directors?

These questions are not uncommon with pastors with limited resources who want to initiate or enhance an existing music ministry program. Rather than focusing on the prevailing "ideal" of a program with a large choir and instrumentalists, we found greater potential for success in getting down to the basics. I will discuss Father Anthony's primary questions below, to demonstrate how this thought process can lead to an exciting direction despite a parish's limited resources.

How Much Should Be Sung in Any One Liturgy?

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal makes clear that "every care should be taken that singing by the ministers and people is not absent in celebrations that occur on Sundays and holy days of obligation" (GIRM, 40). The amount of singing, however, is guided by the principle of progressive solemnity. This principle, defined in the General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours and further explained in Liturgical Music Today, states that the amount of singing in any given liturgy "takes into account the abilities of the assembly, the relative importance of the individual rites and their constituent parts, and the relative festivity of the liturgical day" (LMT, 13). Hence, daily Mass differs from a Sunday in Ordinary Time, which differs from an Easter Vigil. By making them distinct, the assembly gains a greater appreciation for the special nature of the Church's most solemn feasts.

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Progressive solemnity prioritizes the sung parts of the Mass. Here is one such set of priorities (other texts, such as the 1966 instruction Missicam sacram, offer different models, though all focus first on acclamations and dialogues):

• The Gospel Acclamation and the Eucharistic Acclamations: These are most important because they underscore the two most significant parts of the Mass. The Eucharistic acclamations include the dialogue of the preface, the three acclamations of the Eucharistic Prayer (Holy, memorial acclamation, Amen), and the litany at the breaking of the bread.

• Processional Songs: The Entrance and Communion chants "are very important for creating and sustaining an awareness of community" (Music in Catholic Worship, 60). The General Instruction lists the following four choices for the entrance chant for dioceses in the United States: (1) the antiphon from the Roman Missal or the psalm from the Roman Gradual as set to music there or in another musical setting; (2) the seasonal antiphon and psalm of the Simple Gradual; (3) a song from another collection of psalms and antiphons approved by the conference of bishops or the diocesan bishop, including psalms arranged in responsorial or metrical forms; (4) a suitable liturgical song similarly approved by the conference of bishops or the diocesan bishop (GIRM, 48). The General Instruction offers a similar listing of choices for the Communion chant (GIRM, 87).

• Responsorial Psalm: The responsorial psalm is important because it allows the assembly to digest the Word of God expressed in the first reading. As part of the biblical readings, it should be proclaimed from the ambo. Whenever possible, it should be sung.

• Supplemental songs: This includes a song during
the preparation of gifts, a song of praise after Communion, and a song of sending forth. However, songs are not as important at those moments.

How Can Music Nurture a Parish’s Spiritual Formation?

One way that music can provide a rich spiritual tool is through the singing of psalms. The list above makes clear the primacy of psalms and chants as key elements for the assembly’s liturgical expression after the acclamations. Besides the psalms between the readings in the liturgy of the Word, the Church recommends psalms as the initial choices for the entrance and Communion chants. “The school of prayer,” as Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the psalms, connects us directly to the prayer of Jesus and unites us with our ancestors in faith through sometimes raw and often evocative language that transcends time. This provides an invaluable spiritual formation tool for worshiping communities.

Chanted psalms and antiphons also highlight the use of ritual music, whose purpose is strictly liturgical and dialogic. This type of music gives greater emphasis to the text and can incite a more visceral response.

How Can the Parish Make the Most of Its Existing Musical Resources to Nurture This Spiritual Development?

A parish can nurture its spiritual growth with just one minister: the cantor. This fundamental music minister—arguably even more important than the organist—can draw an assembly into the ancient prayer of our ancestors in faith through simple dialogic chant. Whenever a liturgical rite calls for one or more psalms, there should be one or more cantors to lead the assembly in singing them. The psalms were meant to be sung, and a well-trained core of cantors should ideally be able to fulfill their role even without accompaniment. In parishes with limited resources (even in parishes without limited resources) this trained group can provide rich opportunities within and outside Sunday liturgies. While parishes typically provide a cantor for weddings and sometimes funerals, cantors can also help to enrich the prayer life of the community at the following celebrations:

- **Funeral Vigil Services**: The Order of Christian Funerals describes a typical Catholic funeral with three stations: the vigil, the funeral Mass, and the committal or burial. It encourages the participation of a cantor or organist not only at the funeral Mass but also at the vigil service and even the rite of committal (OCF, 33). At the vigil service, singing psalms and perhaps another song with a simple refrain can help family and friends to express their grief and find hope in the mystery of the risen Christ. Before the rite of committal, the cantor can be chanting psalms at the cemetery as people arrive and then lead one responsorially as the song of farewell.

- **Baptisms**: Adult baptisms usually take place at the Easter Vigil, supported by rich singing, strong gestures, and powerful rites, but that is not necessarily the case when baptisms happen at other times and to other groups such as infants. It is common practice for a cantor or organist to be present when infant baptisms take place within a Mass, but it is also beneficial to provide this ministry for baptisms outside of Mass. Praying a psalm together can help to connect participants to the larger parish community. The cantor can also lead other sung prayer during the rite, such as the psalm or hymn that the rite calls for during the reception of the children (Rite of Baptism for Children, 35), the psalm or hymn during the procession to the place for the Word (RBC, 42, 74), the song following the homily and litany (RBC, 46, 83), the psalm during the procession to the font (RBC, 52), and the song during the procession to

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the altar (RBC, 67, 102).

- Pastoral Care of the Sick and Rite of Anointing: Psalms are integral to both the sacrament of anointing and pastoral care of the sick, such as those suggested for visits to the sick and those for commendation of the dying (Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Vaticum, 58, 218, and 221). For thousands of years, psalms have provided suffering people with bold language by which to express their pain and find hope in God’s loving embrace. Encouraging psalmists to participate in this powerful ministry not only draws the community together but allows the minister to grow as a leader of prayer.

- Communal Reconciliation Services: Singing psalms at these events helps the faithful to speak from their hearts and cleanse their spirits.

- Liturgy of the Hours: The psalmist is critical in these celebrations. Many parishes regularly celebrate morning and evening prayer, and a psalmist can lead the assembly in simple responsorial or antiphonal settings.

**How Do I Form a Team of Psalmists?**

While a parish has much to gain from a core group of prayerfully grounded psalmists, implementation of this approach takes recruiting, training, and formation. Since more people can sing than can play instruments, it might even be less challenging to recruit a team of psalmists than to recruit instrumentalists to serve as the base for a music ministry. However, the effectiveness of the singers—as of any other liturgical ministers—depends heavily on appropriate preparation. It is better to maintain a smaller group of well-trained psalmists than a larger number who are not ready to assume that appropriate leadership.

In order to practice their ministry in a way that inspires prayer, psalmists must go beyond simply learning a musical setting. They must be people of prayer with well-developed expressive skills to lead and communicate prayer. Formation should include vocal training where necessary, musical and interpretive skills, spiritual formation, an understanding of the cantor’s role, study in liturgy and the psalms, and coaching.

Admittedly, this is a substantial task but one that is sure to bear fruit. Of course, the director of music ministries is typically responsible for providing cantor training and formation. When this task is added to an already full agenda, however, the challenge can become formidable, and cantor formation can unravel into little more than rehearsing notes. However, in some parishes, one psalmist or cantor with experience and leadership potential might emerge as a possible candidate either to share the responsibility of leading formation or to assume the task outright. This type of collaborative ministry fosters psalmists and cantors who can become spiritually mature, recognized leaders of prayer in the community.

Imagine a parish fully immersed in the psalms as an expression of praise and led by a core group of well-formed music ministers for whom this type of poetic prayer is central. With some effective recruitment and commitment to training and formation, these psalmists can bring to life the prayers of longing and the cries of joy that have shaped the spiritual lives of Jews and Christians throughout the ages. Through spiritual grounding and artistic expression, they can inspire all the members of the assembly to find their own voice in the enduring story of our ancestors.

**Note**

1. Each year during the summer, the National Association of Pastoral Musicians offers weekend intensive Cantor Express Institutes at numerous locations throughout the United States. There are also cantor programs at the annual NPM conventions. Additionally, independent local and national clinicians can help a parish to develop a cantor formation program and provide ongoing support.

**References**


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