My goal in this series of articles is to offer fresh language for describing a new vision of the role of the cantor in the liturgical assembly. I begin in this article with a description of who the cantor is. In the next article I will describe how a cantor functions in the liturgy, and in the third article I will describe how the cantor serves as a transmitter of sacred texts.

To attain the objectives of this series, I need your help: I ask that, for a while, you put aside all that you know about the cantor and the role as it has evolved during the thirty years since the Second Vatican Council. Put aside everything that you have learned at workshops and put aside all the skills that you have acquired. Put aside any model for the cantor that you have embraced: cantor as "psalmist," as "congregational music director," or as "animateur of the assembly."

As you read, you may recognize elements from the past. You may also find some language that disturbs you, or some concepts that you think, upon first hearing, would "never work in my parish." But please continue reading as I invite you to put aside every preconceived notion that you have about the cantor and then to "come and see." Two disciples of John the Baptist received this invitation from Jesus. They heard and saw, were moved to action, to a change of heart, to conversion. In the semantics of today, this change is called a paradigm shift. Stephen Covey, who has thought about and commented on the meaning of such basic changes, says that "paradigm shifts move us from one way of seeing the world to another. And those shifts create powerful change." He describes the effect of one of his own shifts in thinking: "Suddenly I saw things differently, and because I saw differently, I thought differently, I felt differently, I behaved differently." I ask that you "come and see." And as you discover the paradigm shift that is occurring in the role of the cantor, then see, think, feel, and behave differently."

*Ms Mary Ann Mertz teaches in the cantor certification program offered by the Archdiocese of Louisville. She also serves as the principal cantor for Holy Spirit Parish and is the interim director of worship at Holy Trinity Church in Louisville. This is the first in a series of articles on the role of the cantor; the contents of this article are derived from the materials in the Louisville cantor certification program.*

Angel singing and playing a rebec. Painting detail, Vatican Museum.
Who Is the Cantor?

Where do we see the paradigm shift that is affecting cantors? What does it look like? To find the answer, we need to ask: Who is the cantor, and what is the cantor's role?

Who is the cantor? Above all, the cantor is a true and active member of the assembly. This seems so obvious that it may be difficult to recognize that a shift of paradigms is occurring when we say this. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (#14) calls all of the faithful to “full, conscious, and active participation.” This is our “right and duty by reason of baptism.” We are familiar with this text and may have used it to chastise the community when “they” do not sing, but have we ever applied it to ourselves? We participate, of course, but when we describe the assembly in terms of we and they, that has the faint odor of separation. Consider how often we use this language when we evaluate our “success” in worship (e.g., “I got them to sing!”). We are concentrating primarily on us, on our role when we speak this way.

The principle . . . was that every individual had the right to pray and, if chosen, to lead the prayer as a member of the community, that is, from within and not from above as a mediator.

If we can “come out” from behind our Western notion of the autonomous self, we may begin to shift the paradigm to a sense of ourselves as members of the assembly. Such a change in our self-understanding yields powerful results. It allows us to see that we serve as cantors because of the needs of the community. We function in our role because we are baptized. As cantors, we rely on the people who gather. The assembly’s faith nourishes us and enables us to lead the prayer. As members of the assembly, we worship as one among many. We participate, take part, we do not take the whole. Who is the cantor? The cantor is a member of the assembly. This is a foundational principle.

The second great shift of vision occurs if we re-examine the title “cantor.” While the church did not recognize the role of the cantor as a canonical ministry until the mid-fourth century, there seems to be evidence of the earlier use of a volunteer prayer leader, a role that emerged parallel to and possibly preceding the role of the s rhetob (the “messenger of the people” in Jewish worship). The principle behind the prayer leader role in both communities was that every individual had the right to pray and, if chosen, to lead the prayer as a member of the community, that is, from within and not from above as a mediator. The “messenger of the people” in the synagogue was chosen because of a knowledge of the Scriptures and an ability to lead the prayers and benediction by heart. Because of the rhythmic and melodic features of the prayer, there was little distinction between what was spoken and what was sung. In both Jewish and Christian worship, musical ability was secondary; prayer leadership was the more important requirement.

As worship became more complex, volunteer prayer leaders began to be replaced by those who were musically trained. For Christians, the office of cantor was established by the mid-fourth century. The role of cantor as leader of prayer was no longer primary, other attributes began to receive emphasis. A new role for the cantor began to emerge: that of soloist and performer. Throughout the centuries, as music itself became more complex, the role of the cantor diminished and eventually disappeared, being gradually replaced by the choir.

The reform following the Second Vatican Council restored the liturgical function of the cantor but, as we shall see, this decision did not re-establish the “performer” role that had developed in the fourth century. In the reformed liturgy, the cantor is again to be the “messenger of the people,” the leader of prayer, as was the cantor in our early Christian tradition.

What Does a Cantor Do?

How does the cantor serve in the liturgical assembly? Music in Catholic Worship (#35) tells us that “while there is no place in the liturgy for display of virtuosity for its own sake, artistry is valued and an individual singer can effectively lead the assembly, attractively proclaim the Word of God in the psalm song between the readings, and take his or her part in other responsorial singing.” Later this same paragraph reminds us that the singer “can lead and support the faithful as far as is needed” (emphasis added). Further, it refers to the singer as “cantor.”

But do you remember the days following the Council? As was the case with many of the postconciliar documents, we did not get much beyond the first few words. We read “lead the assembly” and assumed that could only mean “lead the song.” We did not use the word “cantor.” Instead, we called ourselves “songleaders.” Yet, the documents consistently use the term “cantor,” and they charge us with “leading the congregation.” This truly grieves us to our ancient roots. Cantors are leaders of the congregation whose ministry centers on leadership “in common sacred song and in responsorial singing.” To “come and see” this truly requires a shift of paradigms!

As the cantor in the older Jewish and Christian faith was called to lead the prayer of the community, so too is the contemporary cantor in the Roman Catholic Church. James Hansen writes about this in Cantor Basics: “If those who wear the name cantor in our parishes today ever become really serious about their vocation as baptized persons who lead prayer, their study of this craft will take a decided turn . . . The real purpose and vocation of the cantor is in a direct line from the earliest of times. The cantor is a leader of sung prayer . . . And the only way to lead prayer is to pray.”

The leader of the song is the organist or instrumentalist(s). The leader of sung prayer is the cantor. What a paradigm shift! But many of us may resist giving up the designation “songleader” because the role is easier to fill and is so comfortable in its fit. Allowing oneself to get wrapped up in the music and its performance may seem less threatening than leading the assembly in its prayer. Prayer has to do with God, not with music. Practicing prayer and being vulnerable to God and to what God is asking of the “cantor” may be more intense than just learning a new song. The cantor: from leader of song to leader of prayer—a paradigm shift indeed!

What Prayer Does the Cantor Lead?

The prayer of the cantor is the psalms. A cantor holds them in memory and treasures them in the heart. As the psalms are sung in the assembly, God is revealed. Thus the cantor is the keeper and transmitter of the psalms. Walter Brueggemann writes, “Psalms have what power they have for us because we know Pastoral Music • December-January 1995
life to be like that." But do we? Have we spent enough time with the psalms to even know what they contain? Do we appreciate them—their form, structure, variety—or do we consider them archaic? Do we regularly sing them in their entirety or do we contentedly use only the portion given to us on Sunday? Do we realize that the verses given in the Lectionary often do not convey the intent of the psalm as a whole? Do we find in these songs the hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, of those who have gone before us and of those who will come after us? What prayer comes to our mind at the birth of a child or at the deathbed of a parent? Is it the familiar words of Psalm 23 and Psalm 121, or is it some formulaic utterance that we learned in childhood? We know what life is like, but what about its connections to the psalms?

As cantors, we may need to ask ourselves whether we allow the psalms to have any power over us or for us. The church recognizes the power of the psalms. A responsorial psalm is required between the other Scripture readings, and psalms are suggested for use at other times throughout the eucharistic liturgy. They are part of all sacramental celebrations and are the primary prayer form in the liturgy of the hours. Psalms are integral to worship.

We have seen that the role of today's cantor has been grafted once again to its ancient roots. For us, then, as for our ancestors, an understanding of the psalms is crucial for valid ministry. This will require work and reading and study and prayer. This will take spending time with the psalms, allowing God to continue to speak through them. The cantor is the one who knows the psalms and brings them to the assembly as it gathers to pray. It is the cantor's responsibility to know the particular psalm the community needs for its authentic worship at a given time, for any specific occasion, for each liturgical celebration.

If this seems like a monumental task, it may be begun simply with the common psalms provided in the Lectionary. This is a good starting place for the cantor's work. Both the General Instruction of the Roman Missal and the Lectionary for Mass: Introduction remind us of how important it is to use those and other seasonal psalms. Their use gives the assembly an opportunity to experience one psalm repeatedly, until it becomes part of the fabric of the community's prayer. As the cantor sings the text of the psalm over a period of weeks, the people come to know it in their hearts. Only then can psalms exert their power; they exert their power when they become familiar, spontaneous and from the heart, as familiar to us as the prayers we learned as children.

The cantor is the keeper and transmitter of the psalms. What a paradigm shift is involved in moving from "songleader" to "cantor"—the one who enables the assembly to sing the deepest prayer of our Jewish and Christian tradition. Who is the cantor and what is the role? In the assembly, a true cantor is a leader of prayer and the keeper and transmitter of the psalms.

Notes
4. The liturgy documents are many. Certain ones are available from a number of sources and these sources are (perhaps) widely known. However, for specific references to the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, and for subsequent references in this essay to Music in Catholic Worship, and the Lectionary for Mass: Introduction, see the applicable chapters in The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource, 3rd ed., ed. Elizabeth Hoffman (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991).
5. Brother David Steinid-Rast, Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness (New York: Paulist Press, 1984) 56. Cantors may find this book to be a helpful guide in the ways of prayer from the heart. The reflections on participation in communal prayer are particularly interesting.

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