

The Cantor in the Assembly, Part 2

BY MARY ANN MERTZ

Part 1 of this series (December-January issue, pages 15-17) explored the paradigm shift occurring in the role of the cantor in the liturgical assembly. The true cantor is a *leader of prayer* and the *keeper and transmitter of the psalms*. Here I wish to address other questions: the questions of "What does the cantor *do*, and how does the cantor *function* in the assembly?"

To help form an answer, it will be useful to examine our recent past. Before the Second Vatican Council, the choir was predominant and the role of the cantor was effectively nonexistent. After the Council, the role of the choir underwent its own paradigm shift. Choirs were no longer called to function as the "designated singers," *representing* the community. Instead, they were to support and enhance the singing of the whole assembly. This shift caused many choir members to feel uncomfortable and uncertain of their role. In the late '60s and early '70s choirs seemed to diminish in importance; as this was happening, the role of the cantor was restored, and songleaders appeared on the liturgical scene. As leaders of song, many cantors felt that their primary responsibility was to "get the people to sing." When that did not happen immediately, the songleader stepped up to the microphone and began to sing louder. Many believed that the sound of a strong amplified voice would result in a feeling of support on the part of the assembly, and the other members of the assembly would then join the cantor or songleader in the singing. Amplification, however, created an unexpected

complication. While the choir had provided a natural sound, the songleader, using improved sound systems, often became a "disembodied voice." But with the songleader singing through the microphone, at least some sound filled the church building, even if it was only the sound of a single amplified voice. If the people did not respond, at least the liturgy would not stop.

We professed that a songleader's mission was to "get the people to sing." In practice, it seems, we may not have really trusted the assembly to participate, at least, not as well as we would like. So we tried to cover for the assembly by ampli-

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fying the songleader . . . and the "contemporary ensemble" and other leadership groups, unintentionally and nonverbally conveying that singing by the whole community was not *really* necessary. Songleaders sang everything, instead of supporting the singing of the assembly "as far as is needed."¹ The "leader" of the song actually sang for the rest of the assembly, instead of allowing the gathered believers their voice and true responsibility for "full, conscious, and active participation."² Thus in the days following Vatican II, one group of designated singers (the choir) was replaced with another designated singer (the songleader, who was often also called the "cantor").

What's a Cantor to Do?

Today the role of the single visible (usually nonordained) singer is shifting from that songleader to cantor, understood as leader of prayer and keeper and

transmitter of the psalms. This paradigm shift creates new responsibilities and changes in the way the cantor functions in the liturgical assembly. So we have to ask "What is a cantor to *do*?"

First, the community served by cantors must embrace an entirely different way of approaching the work of the cantor. As we have just seen, technology has often helped singers adopt an "entertainment" model for worship, with the cantor's voice rather than the song of the people dominating the worship space. Perhaps a more appropriate image, one more worthy for worship and more truly ministerial, is the "servant" model. The cantor is a servant to the people of God, to the liturgy, and to God. And the condition of servanthood requires a condition of vulnerability. As cantors we are open to God and allow God to work through us. We offer our gifts, not for our own edification and enjoyment, but for human sanctification and God's glorification,³ the goal of every liturgy.

As servants, cantors allow the whole assembly to have and to hear its voice, especially when singing those parts of the liturgy that uniquely belong to the full community. Acclamations and well-known hymns and songs do not require the leadership of the cantor or that the cantor dominate the singing through the microphone. For these elements, the cantor does not have a special role, but sings as a full, conscious, and active member of the assembly. This is in keeping with *Music in Catholic Worship* and its mandate to cantors to support the assembly "as far as is needed."⁴

At other times the cantor is the leader of prayer (just as the presider, deacon, and psalmist function as leaders of the community's prayer). What does the cantor do when functioning in this role? As leader of prayer, the cantor engages in sung dialogue with the assembly.

Liturgical prayer is dialogical, not only because it is important for human beings to interact with each other, but also because dialogue is the way God relates to

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The Sunday
Psalm

Scriptural
Commentary

First Sunday of Advent
Jeremiah 33: 4-16
1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2

November 27, 1994
Psalm 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14
Luke 21:25-36, 34-36

To you, O Lord, I lift my soul.
Your ways, O Lord, make known to me;
teach me your paths.
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my savior,
and for you I wait all the day.
Good and upright is the Lord;
thus he shows sinners the way.
He guides the humble to justice,
he teaches the humble his way.
All the paths of the Lord are kindness and constancy
toward those who keep his covenant and his decrees.
The friendship of the Lord is with those who fear him,
and his covenant, for their instruction.

Psalm 25, an alphabetic psalm where each couplet begins with the next letter of the alphabet, is a prayer for guidance and forgiveness. The text speaks of a God who is a forgiving God, a God who "guides the humble to justice," a God who is good and upright, kind and constant. And this is why the whole assembly can join in the refrain constant. "To you, O Lord, I lift my soul."
This psalm well captures the spirit of Advent, which is a time of waiting, preparation, and waiting "for you, I wait all the day."

FOR THE JOURNEY

During Advent the church waits not only for the approaching feast of Christmas but also, and more importantly, for the coming of Christ at the end of time.
Waiting is also an important part of preparing choral prayer.

There is waiting on the part of both singers and director. Waiting till the music arrives from the publisher, waiting till the music learned (being patient, for example, while the tenors learn their part), waiting till the particular liturgical occasion

when the music is sung. And so we wait.
As singers and directors we are always looking toward tomorrow—we are always in a

state of expectation. Yet we, like the whole church, wait together, director and singers supporting one another through patience and our prayer.

WHAT IS AN ANTIPHON?

It seems that a large number of our traditional church compositions are called "antiphons." Just what is an antiphon?

The term is, admittedly, rather broad. It refers to a composition sung in connection with a psalm or canticle.

- The antiphon's text is from Scripture (at times part of the psalm itself) or elsewhere;
- The melody is often simple and syllabic.

The composition supplies a framework for the psalm, often highlighting a particular thought found in one of the psalm verses. In the Middle Ages the word antiphon was used for certain compositions in honor of the Blessed Virgin, e.g., the *Salve Regina*, the *Rogatus*, etc.

PRAYER FOR THE WEEK

All-powerful God,
with joy and anticipation
we await the coming of Christ your Son.
Refresh our minds and hearts
so that with constant hope
we may always sing
the songs of your kingdom.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

"But all of you as individuals should become a choir so that, sounding together in harmony, singing the song of God in unison, you may with one voice sing praise to the Father through Jesus Christ, that he may hear you." Ignatius of Antioch (d.c. 107).

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the people. Kathleen Hughes describes this dynamic as the first principle in a theology of prayer.⁵ She says that when liturgical prayer uses the pronouns "you" and "we," the community becomes involved in the story. We not only hear how God has acted in the past, but we become part of the story. We acknowledge that God is in covenant with us, here and now. God speaks to us and works through us. We are engaged in a dialogue. Hughes says that "The substance of Christian prayer is the community's faith experiences . . . The heart of Christian prayer is the covenant relationship between God and humankind."⁶ And in this covenant relationship, dialogue takes its place in the back-and-forthness between God and the people. Therefore liturgy is most authentic when it is dialogical.

Leader of Prayer

This important concept can help us understand the first function of the cantor. As a leader of prayer the cantor engages in *dialogue* with the rest of the assembly. James Hansen writes that back-and-forthness between the cantor and the people is "also found in the action between presider and people, choir and people, people and people, and God and people."⁷ When members of the assembly engage in dialogue, they mirror the relationship between God and the people.

The cantor knows when to function in the liturgy by observing the parts that require dialogue between the cantor and the people. Dialogue is particularly important during the responsorial psalm, the intercessory prayers, and the fraction rite litany (Lamb of God). It is especially

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effective during the processions (gathering and communion, if a psalm, litany, or responsorial form is used). The cantor may also function during other litanies (e.g., the penitential rite, the litany of the saints) and with music employing a litanic style or written in open form. Dialogue implies back-and-forthness. The cantor "gives something out" and the people respond. This dynamic, when

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members, the weekend was led by Lynn Trapp of the Liturgical Organists Consortium. The two-day event featured a continuous survey of choral music, which prompted participants to study and reflect on a variety of topics. The event included a hymn festival with Lynn Trapp at the Visser-Rowland tracker organ. For more information on the Consortium, contact Peter's Way International, Ltd., 270 Main Street, Port Washington, NY 11050-2753. Phone (outside NY and Canada): (800) 225-7662; in NY: (516) 997-6505.

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Participants in the 1994 Wyoming Liturgical Music Festival, Cathedral of St. Mary, Cheyenne.

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Lutheran Summer Music

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year's camp is Augustana College, Sioux Falls, SD. For additional information, including information on financial aid, contact John Lunde, Director of Admissions and Financial Aid, at (402) 474-7177.

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Dennis J. Hughes is the new editor at *Reformed Liturgy & Music*, the journal of the Presbyterian Association of Musicians.