The Psalms Today

BY LUCIEN DEISS, CSSP

The question I would like to consider is the following: "What will the responsorial psalm be like, or what should it be like, in the year 2000, or for that matter in the year 20,000?" It is difficult to imagine, but Christians of the year 20,000 will still most likely be singing the psalms in the company of early Christian communities. Pastoral musicians of the year 20,000 will be in the company of the first pastoral musicians. How will this important liturgical song evolve, how should it evolve on the continents that we know in our own time as Europe, Africa, and the Americas? How should it evolve in the United States? Let us turn to some aspects and functions of the responsorial psalm in an attempt to consider the future from the vantage point of the present.

Ministerial Function

The responsorial psalm may be considered the response of the community to the Word that God has given to that community. Certainly, the essential response inherent in the psalm is one of obedience to and adoration of God's holy will. But the responsorial psalm takes this essentiality and ritualizes it.

The ritualizing of our response of obedience to and adoration of God's holy will has ancient parallels. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God hears the prayer of Hannah and delivers her from her sterility, and she sings a canticle of thanksgiving. In the Christian Scriptures, God accomplishes his ancient promises by giving Jesus to the world, and Mary responds in song, glorifying the Lord her savior.

Our response today continues and parallels the response of the people of Israel who time and again responded to God's marvels by a canticle. Today, the liturgical community responds to the Word of God by the responsorial psalm which clothes and actualizes the Word to which the community responds.

The Responsorial Psalm and the Reform of the Mass

The reform of the celebration of the Word, and especially of the responsorial psalm, is one of the highest points and one of the greatest successes in the reform of the Mass. One could summarize this success in the following way: The celebration of the Word is the celebration of the new covenant; the eucharistic wine, as it is said in the words of the consecration, "is the blood of the new covenant." Thus the responsorial psalm is the canticle of the new covenant.

The responsorial psalm, the canticle of the new covenant, is primarily a Word of God, an answer to the first reading. And just as one may not replace the Gospel by some other selection from some pious canon, or as one may not replace the consecrated eucharistic bread by ordinary bread, so too one cannot replace the responsorial psalm with an ordinary canticle. In each psalm we Christians find not only the hopes and aspirations of the people of Israel, but also the face of Jesus Christ: He is revealed to us as a "man of sorrows" in the psalms of lamentation; he is revealed to us as the Risen One in the kingship psalms. His face is

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the face of the imploring one in the psalms of supplication; in other psalms his face is
the face of one who prays. In the psalms we find all these visages of Christ and
many others, mirrored in the faces of the faithful, suffering, and joyous believers
who first sang these texts. How could we dare to replace this marvelous face
whose features have been drawn by the Holy Spirit with another? How could we
dare replace the voice of these sublime canticles by an ordinary canticle?

The Dignity of the Music and the Musician

The real dignity inhering in the music of the responsorial psalm is to reveal the
face of Jesus Christ. Gregorian melodies are beautiful, whether they be sung and
heard in equatorial Africa or in a northern European cathedral, but the melo-
dies are only clothing, the garments of Jesus Christ. To encounter only the cloth-
ing, the form, is not to encounter the face of Jesus Christ. One must go beyond to a
dereper encounter. In our celebrations Christ is clothed in many garments: There
are adornments of rhythm, adornments of melodies, adornments of harmoniza-
tion. It has been said that too much music has sometimes "overdressed" the text of
the responsorial psalm. As pastoral musicians we must be ever aware of wherein
lies our vocation. We must remember the hunger of the people, how they are say-
ing to us, as it is said in the Gospel: "We want to see Jesus!" (John 12:21). In the
responsoirial psalm the people encounter the face of Jesus. What assists in that
encounter, what clothes it with beauty is to be retained. What obscures that en-
counter, what darkens the understanding of the people is to be abandoned.

The dignity and vocation of the pastoral musician rests in showing Jesus in his
most beautiful garments. But this dignity is most fully expressed when pastoral
musicians employ their skills to reveal the face of Jesus, not to hide him, and to
adorn him with musical splendor. The psalm is a prayer. Through the pastoral
musician this prayer becomes a song, a sung prayer.

Happy is the community that shares in the dignity and vocation of the pasto-
ral musician. Happy is the pastoral musician who shares in the joy of a community's celebration. Happiness is here because both musician and community
know how to discover in each psalm the face of the risen Christ. Happy are they
who pray with the Psalm: "Deep

Future Directions

The path traveled since Vatican II is a path of marvels. A much longer way lies
before us, and even greater marvels remain to be encountered. Blessed are the
pastoral musicians whose music reveals to their communities the marvelous face
of Jesus Christ as they join in moving toward a future yet to be realized. No
reform is perfect. Vatican II spoke about a perennius reformatio, or a continuing re-
form. Each reform can be reformed. Each reform must be improved. And the
American Church has a talent for creating new ways of worshipping. Allow me
to speak candidly, more particularly as a French brother addressing his American
sisters and brothers.

You have a special duty, not only in the reform of the responsorial psalm but
in the general reform of the Church. The American talent for efficiency and or-
ganization, your pioneer spirit, all still have much to contribute to the many reforms
which need our future attention. In the

American spirit there is always the spar-

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kling newness of invention. I think this
invention has much to contribute to the
general reform of the Church, but the
question here is what should be invented
for the responsorial psalm.

We cannot escape the chasm between
word and deed in the way we currently
pray the psalms. In certain psalms we
state that we proclaim this action, this particular gesture. Yet inconsistently we
do not do the very thing that we pro-
claim. For instance on the Third Sunday of Lent, Cycle A, at the pulpit the psalm-
ist invites the congregation: "Come, let
us bow down and worship, kneel to the
Lord our maker (Psalm 95.6)." Nobody
responds to the invitation! The assembly
remains frozen in their seats. Again, A
psalm invites us, "Lift up your hands in
the holy place and bless the Lord" (Psalm
134:2). But no hands are raised in an
attitude of prayer!

These examples raise troubling ques-
tions in respect to the truth of the psalms.
Can we proclaim the clapping of hands
without ever moving our own hands? Is
it contrary to the new covenant to mani-
ifest our joy to Jesus Christ? Can we af-
firm with conviction the value of solemn
processions with the music of tambour-
rines (Psalm 68:25-26) and have no wish
to organize just such a procession, a pro-
cession as festive and joyful as the one of
our proclamation?

Nowhere else but in the psalms are
prayer and song so spiritual and so active.
It is chiefly in the psalms that the body is
depicted as being used in spiritual cele-
bration. In no other place in the Bible do
we find so much action, dancing, pros-
tation, hands lifted, as we do in the
psalms. The whole human body is taken
up in a whirlwind of praise, adoration,
imploration. And all this is accompanied
by flutes, trumpets, harps, lyres, cymb-
als, tambourines, and drums. In words of
fire, Israel cries out her anguish, pros-
trates herself in ashes, sings her ecstasy.

Are we content with reduc-

The Truth of the Psalms

The history of Israel, the elected people
of God, runs from Abraham who was
called to holiness to Jesus who is holiness
incarnated. This history is holy history,
but it is history lived out by sinners, men
and women of sin and of repentance.

The psalms are a part of this history, of
its greatness, its holiness, and they are
also a part of its hesitations, its groping
towards God, and its imperfections. And
Jesus, himself, incarnating himself in time,
took on this history with all its glories
and imperfections as part of his human
identity. Likewise the prayers of the
psalms incarnated in time as the prayers
of the Hebrew Scriptures took on them-
selves heavy imperfections. Thus it is in
these prayers we hear cries for revenge,
expressions of terrifying hatred, lamenta-
tions of almost inexpressible sorrow.
And we come face to face with the truth that many of these psalmic prayers are directly against the Gospel of the Lord. How may we then pray these psalms? What is to be our understanding of them?

In the past, the approach has been to retain the full text of the psalms, but apply various interpretations to their meaning. So, for instance, we pray the “cursing psalms,” but we say that we are cursing only the sin and not the sinner. We must hate the evil and love the evil-doers. These distinctions sometimes work; sometimes they lead to overly sophisticated and tortured interpretations. For me, I love our God of simplicity. Evil is evil and an evil-doer should be converted. Another interpretative approach to some problematic texts, such as Psalm 137-8, is to interpret them allegorically. We pray, then, that evil-doers be “smashed” against the wall (or rock, in some translations) of faith, that evil thoughts be obliterated and not the thinker of those thoughts. Since St. Augustine this explanation of Psalm 137 has been traditional, and it is even present in the Rule of St. Benedict. It was sufficient for tradition, but it is no longer adequate to the truth of the psalm. The first veneration of the Word of God is the acceptance of its literal sense; thus if a psalm speaks of a desire, a prayer for bloody revenge, then that is its content.

These conditions present a difficulty in the liturgical reform of the Psalter. And, thus far, our solutions have been far from consistent. Some approaches to these difficult passages have retained the full text of these prayers, and we find ourselves praying for a bloody revenge on otherwise unspecified evildoers. In other solutions to this problem, the most graphic and specific of these prayers are reduced to parenthetical phrases surrounded by brackets, implying the possibility of omitting the material. Elsewhere, the problem passages are simply omitted.

Here I would like to state a general rule: We are not baptized in order to pray psalms, nor in order to read readings. We are baptized in order to meet the face of Jesus Christ. The faithful are not made for the psalms. The psalms are made for the faithful. This rule is valid everywhere in liturgical actions.

Were I asked today what I would like to improve about the responsorial psalms I would reply in this fashion. In respect of the liturgy today, perhaps we could make a different, or better, choice of psalms. We could choose psalms that would be more helpful in assisting the people of God to see the face of Jesus Christ. We could keep in mind the difference between the Psalter of the Bible, a record of a people groaning its way toward God, and the psalter of our liturgy, a body of psalmic prayer which assists us in encountering the face of the God toward which our history has moved.

The Structure of the Psalms

We regularly speak of the “responsorial psalm,” but, in fact, we ordinarily are not given an entire psalm to pray. We have a part, a cut of a particular psalm. This “cutting up” is not a major hindrance to praying the psalms when the original psalm does not have a literary structure, for example, the interminable litany of Psalm 119, which praises the Law in 176 verses. But it must be admitted that the “cutting” is not always felicitous; it is more often a mutilation.

For instance, we may think that we know the splendid Psalm 118 because we remember the beautiful antiphon: “This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad.” These words have sunk into our consciousness; they are wholly familiar. But do we remember, even should we know it, that the psalmist tells the long and lively story of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem? The pilgrims, standing outside the Temple, praise the Lord and ask: “Open the gates of justice, let me praise God within them” (Psalm 118:19). The priest then delivers the authorization to enter: “This is the Lord’s own gate, only the just will enter” (v. 20). And then the priest blesses the pilgrims: “Blest is the one who comes, who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the Lord’s house” (v. 26). Next the pilgrims organize their procession around the altar, adorning “the altar with branches” (v. 27), and they take up once again the final acclamation which, as in all psalmic hymns, proclaims: “Give thanks, the Lord is good, God’s love is for ever!” (v. 29).

Is it not possible to dream of a community that would take the time to pray these prayers in their entirety? Is it not possible to dream of a community liberal in its time and its prayers? Each psalm recounts a history of infinite dimensions, because it is caught up in the history of the prayers of Jesus. “He prays for us, he prays in us, he is prayed by us,” explains St. Augustine. May we not ask, “Would Jesus thus shorten the psalms? Would we dare to shorten his prayers?”

Is it not possible to dream of a community which would possess a psalter, or at least a liturgical psalter, as they possess a hymnal, and of a community which would take the time to celebrate leisurely and fully the Father in heaven? And is it not possible to dream of a community which would take the risk of producing a psalter?

Again, were I asked how I would like to improve the celebration of the responsorial psalm, I would reply in this fashion: I would improve it by celebrating it in its entirety as the Holy Spirit inspired it and not by celebrating it with excerpts as the Lectionary does.

Singing the Psalms

Many remarks can be made about psalm singing. Here I will offer only a few suggestions. An ordinary psalm tone fits all ordinary psalms. This is by chance, but it is a blessing for singing all the psalms which do not have a special “color.” But an ordinary psalm tone may also kill much of the beauty of some psalms which have a special structure and belong to a special genre. In other words, you cannot mourn a psalm which is a hymn of praise, and you cannot exult a psalm which is a lamentation.

The psalm tone should be adapted to the voice of the psalmist. The best psalm tone is one which is convenient not only for the psalm but also for the psalmist. In other words, invent your own psalmody for your own psalm singing.

It is possible just to proclaim many psalms. Singing is not necessary. This is especially true of the historical psalms and the sapiential, or wisdom, psalms. The congregation could also pray the responsorial psalm in unison, or in dialogue with the psalmist. Some psalms by their structure suggest this dialogue form. This is especially the case with Psalm 121, a psalm of ascents. The pilgrims ascend to Jerusalem, going up Mount Zion. In a dialogue one group asks: “If I look to the mountains, will they come to my aid?” And the second group, taking the last word of the question, answers: “My help..."
is the Lord, who made earth and the heavens."

Again, if I should be asked: Which are the best psalm tones? I would reply in this fashion: The best psalm tones are those which best fit the voice of the psalmist and the genre of the psalm. Do not kill the prayer of the psalms by singing all of them the same way and in the same psalmody.

Build a Biblical Church

The psalms have a history. The oldest texts in the Psalter were composed in the period of the judges, and the collection of texts continued for a thousand years. The Psalter has been the prayerbook of the Christian community, especially after the first century of the Common Era. And the Psalter should also be, in some way, the prayer book of the post-Vatican II community. This book should not be printed first on paper; its first printing should be in the memory and in the hearts of the Christian faithful.

To the American Church I would say

To the American Church I would say that you have the opportunity and the genius, if you wish it, to build a biblical Church, a Church of prayer, a Church that knows the Psalter by heart.

that you have the opportunity and the genius, if you wish it, to build a biblical Church, a Church of prayer, a Church that knows the Psalter by heart, a Church that prays it, that sings it with the best new psalmodes, that dances it with the most beautiful and prayerful dances. I believe that you have this accomplishment in your power. Do not be discouraged, do not be disappointed if the evolution and the improvement goes slowly, sometimes too slowly. Musicians, artists, ministers, dancers, liturgists, the community of the faithful, we must all use our talents and enthusiasm for the good of the future of the universal Church.

Note

1. All quotations from the psalms in this article use the English translation prepared by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, The Psalter (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994).

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