The Spirituality of the Cantor

Michael Hay

To you we owe our hymn of praise, O God in Zion.  
— Psalm 65

Why is it that some cantors seem to lead an assembly better than others? While vocal abilities and technique are decidedly important, a lovely voice will remain just that unless it is intimately connected to the text and meaning of the song. A pleasant voice with good pitch and good diction is a basic requirement...
for any cantor, but more is necessary: the desire to hear the assembly's song more than to hear the echo of our own voice; the ability to support the assembly's song when its confidence wanes and the good sense to determine when those times occur; a love for the liturgy, not as some abstract set of rituals or a rigid outline for prayer, but as the worship of the people which is at best messy because it is human, a worship that needs the active involvement of every member of that assembly to be complete, a worship both gentle and inviting, yet terrifying and demanding, a worship that is not so concerned about God as it is concerned with our relationship to God and with each other.

A key relationship in the making of this worship is the intimate connection between the song of the assembly and the spirituality of the cantor. By song of the assembly we mean precisely just that, the assembly doing the song, the actual making of the music. There exists already a certain dialectic in the role of the cantor, a role which swings from leading the song to playing a part in some sort of musical dialogue. How a cantor perceives his or her role is important to the execution of that role and will directly influence the song of the assembly. The cantor's role is essential to a good singing assembly. This is not to imply that the assembly cannot celebrate liturgy without a cantor, but to achieve the goal of a good celebration, the cantor's role is crucial. Once the assembly understands its own role in the making of the celebration, the cantor's role is not so much one of dialogue with the assembly, but a role which completes the assembly's song.

The underpinning of the success of such understanding of the role of the cantor is an understanding of the place of spirituality in the formation of this role. Spirituality has a sense of who we are in relationship to God, ourselves and each other. It is a way of experiencing and existing with God. It is the continuing development of a relationship with God. Developing such a spirituality requires an understanding of the operative ecclesiology. An assembly sees itself as the People of God whose work is to worship and praise God. The assembly recognizes that there are different ministries which will assist and enable them to do their work and they will pray much differently from an assembly which believes itself to be at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder, unwilling or unable to do the work of prayer and praise. They content themselves to let the ministers celebrate the Sacred Mysteries for them. These are two extremes and there are many variants of the extremes. There exist, however, characteristics of both active and passive participants in all worshipping communities.

The liturgy documents of Vatican II have called us to develop a liturgical prayer life which is done by the assembly. This development brings about the ecclesiological model of the People of God who do the work of worship. The assembly which understands itself in this way has no problem with a ministerial hierarchy to assist them in their work of worship. The cantor falls within this hierarchy as well as within the assembly. The cantor is much more a part of the whole, exercising a role which makes no sense exclusive of the assembly. Such a relationship is based on a bond of heart to heart, soul to soul, and voice to voice.

**Sing a new song unto the Lord.**

--- *Psalm 96*

All of creation is wonderful. All that is created is magnificent and awe-inspiring. All of creation is a possible point of contact with the Transcendent, a meeting place for humanity and God. Worship provides an ideal environment for this meeting, all worship being potentially sacramental.

Indeed, all of creation is potentially sacramental, a thought often overlooked because creation is so much with us. But our worship is one place in our lives where we have given ourselves permission to experience God. This activity is assisted through song and the work of those who lead us in song. The cantor does this best through creating an environment of graciousness and hospitality so that the assembly can enter fully into the song of worship thereby coming in contact with the Transcendent. The cantor's role as seen in this light is a sacramental one. Frightening as it may sound, the cantor is called to be a point of contact between creation and God. It is an awesome responsibility and one that the cantor cannot take lightly.

The awesomeness grows when one realizes how profoundly the ministry of the cantor can affect the prayer of another person. Some of us have had the experience of someone approaching us after a liturgy and thanking us for the beautiful music, thanking us for leading them in prayer, and thanking us for moving them to tears. Cantors should not view themselves as manipulators of emotions, but we should all realize how much we can influence and be a part of someone else's prayer.

Realizing the potential of this role, the cantor can be seen as a point of contact between God and the assembly, a role best done in our own recognition of the sacredness of the assembly. This understanding and recognition that God is not only present to that assembly, but present in that assembly must lead us to the same reverence and respect for that assembly that we offer to God. This is an essential point for developing some spirituality for the cantor—God present in the assembly.

To serve the needs of that assembly with the best of our abilities, there are certain vocal technical points that cantors must acquire. There are a number of fine books and articles available. One caveat must be expressed however: One cannot become too tied up in the technique in making the song to the exclusion of the song itself. Song, and thus prayer, will be deeply enhanced by a sound and proper vocal technique, but the song and the prayer risk being destroyed if vocal technique is the sole focus. Technique is the means to achieving song and prayer. Beautiful sound, correct diction, proper intonation are all essential for the cantor's prayer, but they can never become the focus of attention to the exclusion of the assembly. To prevent that from happening, the cantor must image her- or himself from an internal framework, rather than an external one. It is less what we do, than how we let what is inside be expressed in what we do. A beautiful voice attached to a set of waving arms is of little use in making prayer and often becomes a distraction; a song sung from the inside out is the song that will truly move an assembly to prayer and thus understand more clearly its relationship to God.

Being a good cantor requires adequate time and preparation and reflection on the psalms and the songs, time spent on developing presence to and with the assembly, time spent on vocal technique and training, time spent in rehearsal alone and rehearsal with the accompanist. All this time consumption must be understood in the context of musicality, that is, the breaking open of the words and music. The cantor must be able to get to the heart of the song so the prayer in the song can be released, allowing the assembly to come in contact with the prayer. Contact continued on page 43
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(continued from page 9) is made with the Transcendent. Of course, I am not suggesting that prayerfulness alone or even coupled with right desire and intention is enough for someone with no musical ability. The cantor must possess all of these characteristics in addition to acquiring and maintaining a solid vocal technique.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

— Psalm 137

How do we sing the Lord's song week by week with honesty and integrity? How can I sing a song of anguish when I'm feeling great? How do I sing a song of joy when I've just lost a dear friend? Can we only do this when we understand that the song we sing is not necessarily our own personal song, but the song of the entire assembly? Everyone in that assembly is at a different emotional place, and yet everyone is asked to join in the same song as part of that Church which we profess to be. When we join together in the song it is not just our song, but the song of all creation, the song of the mystery of the body which is Christ.

It is this mystery which we are called to live daily. It is only one part of the larger mystery which is God calling us constantly to change and to grow, to be called to conversion as we move with and in the Church towards God.

For the cantor, this mystery is discovered in spirituality and prayer. A proper, healthy, productive spirituality is impossible to develop without an understanding of the relationship of the cantor to the song of the assembly. The cantor is reminded that he or she is part of the whole assembly. The ego must be lost. The self must enter in and the ego carries the cantor, but all of these elements are placed at the service of the cantor as the cantor assists in unlocking the song that is within the assembly.

Cantors sometimes complain that they cannot pray when they serve as cantor. This observation indicates a misunderstanding of liturgical prayer and suggests the intrusion of private piety into the liturgical prayer. The purpose of the liturgy is not to provide time for personal prayer, particularly on the part of the ministers. Their role is to be at the service of the assembly; personal, private prayer is secondary and should never be the goal of liturgical prayer. When we pray liturgically, we pray with the Church. Service and ministry do not separate us from the prayer

As stated earlier, the cantor seeks to break open the prayer that lies within the song of the assembly. When this happens, the song of the assembly will be a song which worships and praises God; which expresses the anguish and frustration, the joy and the sorrows of humanity, which allows us to experience God present to us. The cantor is the key to opening the song.

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