

Sing to the Lord a new song of praise....

(Psalm 149:1)

About a year ago Kent Tritle asked me if I would like to attend a two-day workshop for Catholic cantors. I said yes. The workshop was presented by the National Association of Pastoral Musicians, which is “an organization of musicians and clergy dedicated to fostering the art of musical liturgy”. These workshops are held in several locations across the United States each summer. The one I attended was held at a Dominican retreat house in Albany, NY. The classes covered basic vocal technique, interpretive skills, and ways of thinking about Scripture, liturgy, and the psalms. The leaders of the workshop offered many suggestions and ideas for becoming a more effective cantor. During the workshop I began to think of a cantor not just as a leader of song, but as a leader of prayer. When we sing together, we pray together. This was made clear to me during the workshop and may be the single most important lesson that I gained from this experience.

At the beginning and end of each day the entire group of students and instructors came together in a chapel for a time of prayer. These ten-minute prayer-meetings helped us to focus on the day ahead or to reflect on what we had accomplished during the day before going to bed. This time of prayer included Bible readings and singing of hymns and responsorial psalms. Each meditation was led by a cantor and all of us in the assembly sang at the appropriate times. Much to my surprise it was at these gatherings that I experienced how powerful sung prayer can be. While the lectures and discussions of the cantor’s role in liturgy were wonderful, it was when I was surrounded by people united in song that I felt most uplifted and inspired. Singing together we gave strength and solace to each other. I felt both a sense of peace and a sense of strength during these moments of group singing.

One may ask why I had not experienced this quite so strongly before those prayer meetings in the chapel. After all, I lead the singing here at St. Ignatius almost every Saturday and Sunday throughout the year. One reason may be that the cantor can be distracted by other thoughts when singing in front of a congregation. In fact, here are some thoughts that go through my brain while I’m singing a hymn or a responsorial psalm: Am I behind the beat? Is the microphone too loud? Am I singing under pitch? Is this the fourth verse or the fifth verse? These thoughts are the practical concerns of the job. Sometimes I forget that I am leading a prayer. After my experience at the cantor workshop I now try to remind myself before each mass to help the assembly pray through song. To sing together God’s praise is a wonderfully moving experience. As the cantor at St. Ignatius Loyola I would like to help everyone have this experience at every mass.

There are some parishioners who have said to me, “I can’t sing.” Others have said, “I like to sing, but you don’t want to hear it.” My response is “I think you can sing and I would like to hear you sing”. If you are reluctant to sing during mass, allow me to make a suggestion. When the cantor announces a hymn, pick up the hymnal and read the words of the hymn as others sing. This way we can stay united in the same thoughts. The poetry of each hymn has meaning, often profound, often moving. These words were

specifically chosen by the composer because he or she was so inspired by this poetry, this prayer, that they felt the need to set these words to music. When you feel the time is right for you, then begin to sing. You will be amazed at how uplifting it can be.

An important part of the liturgy is the responsorial psalm. Church documents consider it so important that they tell us to make a distinction between the cantor and the psalmist. In the ideal mass the cantor would lead all the hymns and service music, while the psalmist would lead only the responsorial psalm. Most parishes don't do this, but it does indicate the importance of the responsorial psalm. In one of the seminars I attended at the workshop I asked, "Why do we respond to the first reading with a psalm? Why not use other books from the Old Testament as well?" The instructor said The Book of Psalms is humankind speaking to God, sometimes speaking with praise and thanksgiving, sometimes with anger and despair, but always with a human voice.

Think of the responsorial psalm as your chance to talk to God during mass. During lent we sing *My God, my God, O why have you abandoned me?* Can there be any greater outcry than to sing those words? We use the twenty-third Psalm at funerals and the words *The Lord is my shepherd. There is nothing I shall want* never fail to offer comfort. During the Easter season we sing *This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad.* This refrain is appropriate whether you are having a good day or a bad day.

The psalms were intended to be sung. And the psalm for any given service was specifically chosen to reflect on the reading we just heard. When the cantor raises his or her arms to invite you to sing the refrain of the psalm I encourage you to sing. If you are nervous about singing in public, start by speaking the words softly to yourself. Do this to stay present in the liturgy. Do this for yourself. Use your voice as an expression of your faith. There is great power in singing together as an assembly. When we sing together, we pray together.

Philip Anderson

... I will sing to the Lord, for he is gloriously triumphant.
(Exodus 15: 1)

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