

KATHLEEN HARMON



COLLEGEVILLE
MINISTRY
SERIES

THE MINISTRY OF CANTORS

REVISED EDITION



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THE MINISTRY OF CANTORS

Revised Edition

Kathleen Harmon



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Introduction

Much has developed in our understanding of the role of the cantor since the publication of the first *Ministry of Cantors* in 2004. In particular, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (STL)¹ moved our thinking about the ministry of cantor forward in two significant ways. First, STL distinguished the ministry of psalmist from the ministry of cantor (34–40). This clarification is helping persons who fulfill these roles do both better. Second, STL strengthened our concept of the singing of the responsorial psalm as proclamation. This development is changing how psalmists understand and do their ministry. As a consequence, we need to explore both aspects of the ministry of cantors anew, identifying the specific role each plays in the liturgy, determining what each entails for the music ministers who do them, and assessing what each requires in terms of liturgical and musical formation.

This revised edition of *The Ministry of Cantors* retains applicable content from the first edition and presents new material aimed at helping cantors continue to grow both in their understanding of their ministry and in their doing of it. The volume begins by looking at the role of the psalmist, exploring what it means to sing the responsorial psalm within the Liturgy of the Word, what it means to sing the psalmody within the Liturgy of the Hours (specifically Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer), and what personal qualities are needed to do this ministry. The book then moves to the role of the cantor as song leader,

2 *The Ministry of Cantors*

exploring what this ministry entails and what it requires of the person doing it. The book approaches both cantor roles from the perspective of liturgy as the ritual enactment of the paschal mystery, and suggests how a paschal mystery spirituality must undergird each role.

This book does not present the “how-tos” of vocal technique, warm-up exercises, diction principles, and so forth. Such essentials of good cantoring are available in other excellent resources. *The Ministry of Cantors* focuses instead on what the cantor² is doing beneath vocal technique: surrendering self to the dying and rising of the paschal mystery. The aim of the book is to help cantors delve more deeply into who they are and who they are becoming through their ministry: the Body of Christ pouring self out in voice, breath, and prayer for the life of the world.

1

The Ministry of the Cantor

A professional vocalist and pastoral musician hired by an urban parish in the Midwest to conduct a training program for their cantors became concerned when the cantors demonstrated the manner in which they walked to the ambo to sing the responsorial psalm. The cantors processed around the entire sanctuary space holding the binder containing the psalm elevated for the assembly to see. When she commented that this was inappropriately making the singing of the responsorial psalm as significant as the proclamation of the gospel, they responded that if they did not do this the assembly paid no attention to them when they sang the psalm. Their response mystified her. Until she attended Mass in the parish that Sunday.

Throughout the entire Mass the cantor stood on an elevated platform and gestured to the assembly during every sung element of the rite, from the entrance song, through the Glory to God, to the acclamations during the eucharistic prayer, to the recessional hymn. The organist exercised no leadership in terms of the assembly's singing. More significantly, the presider exercised only tenuous leadership over the eucharistic prayer as the assembly's attention was pulled from presider to cantor and cantor to presider several times in the course of the prayer (as if we were at some kind of liturgical tennis match). The cantor trainer discovered why the cantors were concerned about the

assembly ignoring the responsorial psalm. They *were* ignoring it. It had become just one more time to endure the arm wave of a cantor who was already waving her arms too much.

This anecdote illustrates a widespread confusion that exists about the liturgical role of the cantor. As cantor, are you the *psalmist* who leads the responsorial psalm, or the *song leader* who animates all the singing? Are you both? In a book about the ministry of cantor, clarifying the role is a good place to start. Since your role, be it psalmist or song leader, has to do with music, however, we need to begin by defining the role of music in the liturgy. And since your role is to lead the assembly members in their singing, we also need to define their role in the liturgy as music makers. Once we have clarified these two elements we will be in the right position to identify your role as cantor.

The Role of Music in the Liturgy

The primary role of music in the liturgy is to support the rite. Every musical element is meant to serve the deeper action of the liturgy itself. For example, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) 47 indicates that through the opening song the assembly members join together in heart and mind and open themselves to the mystery of the liturgical season or feast they have gathered to celebrate. Through the gospel acclamation they welcome and greet Christ, who is about to speak to them in the gospel (GIRM 62). Through the eucharistic prayer acclamations they unite themselves with the presider in offering Christ's great prayer of thanksgiving and sacrifice (GIRM 78).

To fully understand the role of music we need to understand the liturgical action that it is supporting. What is this ritual that we call liturgy? Liturgy can be defined in many ways, but the principal framework developed by the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy is that liturgy is the church's ritual participation in the paschal mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection.¹ Through the liturgy we encounter the saving mystery of Christ's death and resurrection and surrender our lives to its transforming power. Through the

liturgy we enact his death and resurrection as present and ongoing. Moreover, we identify this death and resurrection—the paschal mystery—as our mystery, that is, as the very substance of our own life and identity. Surrendering ourselves to its transforming power is the deepest level of the full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy that the constitution calls for (SC 14).

Because liturgy is ritual enactment of our participation in the paschal mystery of Christ, the singing that is integral to the liturgy (SC 112) also enacts the paschal mystery and the pattern that this mystery lays out for our lives. The singing is itself a ritual embodiment of this mystery. For example, when we join in singing the entrance song we relinquish whatever self-involvement might keep us outside of the action of the liturgy and enter into deeper involvement with the Body of Christ. As another example, when we sing the responsorial psalm we meditate on the word of God and how that word is drawing us into encounter with Christ in the gospel. Both examples entail a dying to self and a rising to new life, which the communal singing facilitates. To enter into the singing, then, is to enter into the mystery of our own dying and rising. Singing communicates our choice to allow this mystery to transform us and our way of living. This surrender to the paschal mystery is the deepest action of the liturgy and the core of what we mean when we say that music serves the rite.

The role of music is not to entertain, not to keep us “interested” when the rite seems dry. Rather, its role is to help us surrender to the paschal mystery as it unfolds within the rite. The music is not an end in itself but a means to the renewal of our identity as Body of Christ dying and rising for the salvation of the world. Whenever someone asks us, then, what we sing when we gather for liturgy, our answer falls short if we say only that we are singing this hymn from *Gather*, or this song from *Breaking Bread*, or this setting of the Mass from *One in Faith*, just as it would fall short if we said we were merely eating and drinking ordinary bread and wine. What we are singing in the liturgy, or more accurately what we are doing through our singing, is surrendering ourselves to the call of the liturgy to enter

the dying and rising mystery of Christ. Understanding this as the role of music in the liturgy is the foundation for understanding your ministry as cantor.

The Role of the Assembly

The second foundation for understanding your ministry as cantor is having a clear sense of the role of the assembly in liturgical singing. We can never overestimate the significance of the church's teaching that in the liturgy "complete and definitive public worship is performed by the mystical body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members" (SC 7). The primary enactors of the liturgy are the assembly members, for it is they who are the church gathered to give praise to the Father under the headship of Christ. As the primary enactors, they are, therefore, also the primary music ministers. Singing is a significant way assembly members fulfill their baptismal right and duty to celebrate the liturgy and to enact the paschal mystery. Indeed, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy directs that the assembly participate in the liturgy through the acclamations, the responses, the psalmody, the antiphons, and the songs (SC 30). Such singing is part of "that level of active participation that is to be made by the assembled faithful in every form of the Mass, so that the action of the whole community may be clearly expressed and fostered" (GIRM 35).

It is the singing of the assembly, then, that is the purpose of all the activity of the cantor. This is a key point to keep in mind as we continue our discussion of your role as cantor.

The Role of the Cantor

You know from your experience as cantor that in any given liturgy you generally wear more than one hat. You are the psalmist who leads the responsorial psalm in the Liturgy of the Word or sings the psalmody in the Liturgy of the Hours. But just as often you are also the leader of song who teaches the assembly

a new hymn before the liturgy begins, sings the verses of the Glory to God, and leads the Lamb of God litany. In the past these two roles have generally been seen as one and the same, but GIRM distinguishes between the two by using the term “psalmist” whenever it refers to the singing of the responsorial psalm. GIRM is inviting us to a clarification in thinking that *Sing to the Lord* (STL) makes explicit (34–40).

The distinction between the role of psalmist and the role of song leader is a very important one at this point in the church’s liturgical history. Immediately and for some time after the beginning of the renewal of Vatican II, parishes needed song leaders (just as they needed commentators) to support the people’s participation in a new form of worship. But what at that time was new and unfamiliar has since become well known. Just as assemblies no longer need commentators to tell them when to sit and when to kneel, so do they no longer need song leaders to cue their every musical response. Assemblies are at a different point in their liturgical understanding, and this means it is time for cantors to relinquish some of the extraneous work they have been doing and focus on their primary role.

The first role of the cantor, that of psalmist, is your most important function. It is your most important function because it is required by the rite. Liturgy after liturgy, year after year, you will be needed to fill this role. The role of song leader, on the other hand, is an incidental one. You teach the assembly a new piece of music only when the occasion arises. You facilitate the assembly’s singing of the eucharistic prayer acclamations only when the setting is new or unfamiliar and they need your help. You lead the entrance or communion song or the Glory to God only when a responsorial form of song is being used. In other words, the role of song leader is relative and temporary. The role of psalmist, on the other hand, is integral and permanent.

The shift in thinking to which GIRM and STL are calling you is double-edged. On the one hand, you need to take your role as psalmist very seriously. This means continually growing in your understanding of the responsorial psalm in the Liturgy of the

Word, and in your understanding of what is entailed in preparing to sing this psalm. It means honing your understanding and skills in leading the psalmody for Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer of the church. And it means growing in the personal surrender to the paschal mystery that any liturgical singing of the psalms requires.

On the other hand, you need to bring your role as song leader into better perspective. This is not to say that you are no longer needed in this role. On the contrary, the need to lead such things as the *Kyrie* or the Lamb of God litanies or a verse-refrain setting of the Glory to God remains, and the need to teach the assembly a new song or new set of acclamations will continue to arise. Moreover, responsorial forms requiring a song leader will remain effective choices for moments such as the communion procession or the Litany of the Saints at the Easter Vigil. But you need to relinquish being in charge of every musical element in the liturgy. You need to be an effective song leader when the liturgy requires it and to step aside when the leadership belongs to some other minister, be it the organist or keyboard player, the presider, or the assembly itself.

A new task stands in front of you, that of discerning when to lead the assembly in their music making and when not to. A related task stands beside it, that of developing a fuller understanding of what it means to be psalmist. Dealing with these two tasks will lead you to a clearer understanding of your role in the liturgy and a fuller appropriation of it. Paradoxically, then, your stepping back will become a deeper stepping in.

Increasing your understanding of what it means to be the psalmist, putting your ministry as song leader in perspective, and deepening your surrender to the paschal mystery that shapes and supports both these aspects of your ministry is the aim of this book. What is really expected of you as cantor? What does the assembly really need from you? Nothing less than that you lead them, as psalmist and as song leader, to full, conscious, active participation in liturgical enactment of the paschal mystery.

2

Understanding the Role of the Responsorial Psalm

Your most frequent—and most important—role is as the psalmist singing the responsorial psalm in the Liturgy of the Word. To do this well you need to have a clear understanding of the role the psalm is playing in the Liturgy of the Word. This chapter begins by defining the responsorial psalm as a meditation on the word of God. Then it looks at how the psalm is a response not just to the first reading but to all of the readings as a whole. Next it explores how the psalm acts as a bridge carrying the assembly from the first reading to an encounter with Christ in the gospel. Finally, it examines how the psalm acts as an agent of transformation. All of these roles are interconnected, and understanding them will help you fulfill your ministry as psalmist more effectively.

The Responsorial Psalm as Meditation on the Word of God

GIRM 61 states that the responsorial psalm is very important because it “fosters meditation on the Word of God.” Even when not sung, the psalm should be recited in such a way as to be conducive to such meditation (Introduction to the *Lectio*

for Mass 22). This meditative role is the key to how we are to understand the responsorial psalm.

Meditation is thoughtful reflection on the presence and action of God in our lives. The Liturgy of the Word offers us several moments of silence so that we can reflect on how God is becoming present and active among us through the proclamation of the word (GIRM 56). Without the silence, the proclamation could fall on ears not yet ready to hear. Grace needs time to break down whatever barriers prevent us from receiving God's word. Only then can we truly respond. In a very real sense, then, the Liturgy of the Word is a dialogue of proclamation and response with silence acting as the verb.

The responsorial psalm flows out of and completes the period of silence following the first reading. In the proclamation God speaks to us; in the responsorial psalm we respond back to God. Just as the opening prayer at Mass begins with a moment of silence and continues by gathering all our individual prayers into one (GIRM 54), so the psalm comes out of silence and gathers our private meditations on God's word into a single shared response.

The Responsorial Psalm as Response to the Readings as a Whole

When the Lectionary was revised after Vatican II, the responsorial psalm selected for each Sunday and solemnity was intentionally related to the first reading by similarity of text, content, or mood. The psalm's relationship to the Liturgy of the Word does not end there, however. The framers of the Lectionary chose the gospel readings first, then carefully selected the first readings. Each first reading was chosen because of some correlation with the gospel or the liturgical season to which it was assigned. The reading contained some thematic resemblance to the gospel, or provided some contrast, or presented some Hebrew Testament background, or projected some prophetic foreshadowing, or related to the character of the liturgical season. The

verses of the psalm were then deliberately selected to relate to the first reading. Thus there is a chain of relationship running from the first reading through the psalm to the gospel. This relationship becomes evident when we read the first reading, psalm, and gospel of a given Sunday or solemnity as an integrated set. When we sing the responsorial psalm, then, we are responding to the gospel as well as to the first reading. The psalm is not a response only to the first reading but “*the* response of the people to the word of God they hear in all three readings.”¹

Sing a New Song: The Psalms in the Sunday Lectionary,² an excellent resource for cantors, verifies this relationship. Pursuing Ralph Keifer’s comment that “the Responsorial Psalm constitutes a summation of the word for that day,”³ Scripture scholar Irene Nowell carefully studies each psalm in the Sunday Lectionary in relation to the set of readings to which it is assigned. She shows how the very juxtaposition of a particular psalm with a particular set of readings generates new meanings and connections within the Liturgy of the Word. Moreover, the psalms as poetry move us beyond the hearing of a discursive text to participation in that text as personal experience. The responsorial psalm is the avenue not only to understanding the whole of the Liturgy of the Word but also to appropriating its meaning for our lives. The responsorial psalm, then, is the key that both unlocks the meaning of the Liturgy of the Word and enables us to internalize that meaning.

The Responsorial Psalm as Bridge to the Gospel

According to Jean-Pierre Prévost, former professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at St. Paul University, Ottawa, the responsorial psalm acts as a bridge between the first reading and the gospel. This image accords with the principle in the Lectionary that the end point or climax of the Liturgy of the Word is the gospel reading for which the preceding elements prepare us (Introduction to the *Lectionary for Mass* 13). The image of bridge conveys a paradoxical sense of both change and continuity. The change aspect of the

metaphor implies that we begin the Liturgy of the Word in one place and cross over to another. There is a journey here. Where does it begin? Where does it end? Where are we—spiritually, mentally, emotionally, liturgically—at the start of the Liturgy of the Word? Where are we at its end and how did we get there? The continuity aspect of the figure of speech communicates that the beginning and the ending of this journey, our starting and ending points, are organically connected. They form adjoining shorelines. What we cross over in between varies at different times during the liturgical year. At times it is moving water or a field ripe with grain, and at other times it is a dry gulch or even a frighteningly deep canyon.

What is the passing-over that we undertake? The movement is not a journey through time, that is, from the Hebrew Testament period to that of the gospel, but a journey of transformation. We begin the Liturgy of the Word standing on the threshold of one way of being and we cross over to new self-understanding as Body of Christ. Prévost believes the bridge that carries us to this new way of being is the responsorial psalm.

The Responsorial Psalm as Agent of Transformation

For Hebrew Testament scholar Harry P. Nasuti, the responsorial psalm has sacramental power.⁴ The psalms are agents of transformation. They are “the means by which the rest of Scripture is actualized in the believer. Indeed, they are not so much the human response to what is found in the rest of Scripture as they are the means by which such a response is made possible.”⁵ Praying a psalm brings into being a reality that did not previously exist by changing the inner landscape of the one praying to fit the words of the psalm. This change is the work of God, who through the power of the Spirit transforms the pray-er into the kind of person God wishes her or him to be. Specifically, the responsorial psalm in the Liturgy of the Word enables the assembly members to become the kind of persons God is calling them to be in response to what God is saying to them in this particular proclamation of Scripture on this particular day.

The response we make to God's word through the singing of the psalm is far more, therefore, than the audible activity of singing. Our response is the inaudible transformation of heart and mind God is bringing about within us as we sing the psalm. Our response is here-and-now in this liturgy, and beyond-and-after in the transformation of life that follows when the liturgy is over. Moreover, this transformation is not private, but communal. In singing the psalm we become more fully who we already are, the one Body of Christ surrendering self to the will of God for the salvation of the world.

All of these scholars indicate that the responsorial psalm is more than just response to the first reading. Their insights enable us to take a deeper look at what GIRM 61 is saying about the responsorial psalm. The responsorial psalm has "great liturgical and pastoral importance" because of its sacramental power to transform us into the persons God is calling us to be in the Liturgy of the Word. The "meditation on the word of God" that the psalm fosters is an active engagement in the process of personal transformation. The meditation is not self-enclosed, but leads us to give ourselves over to the paschal mystery unfolding in the Liturgy of the Word. We become more consciously the Body of Christ giving ourselves for the life of the world. For the assembly members the responsorial psalm is the means to their deeper transformation into being the Body of Christ. For you as cantor the psalm is the means by which you lead them there.

3

Preparing Yourself to Sing the Responsorial Psalm

Once you understand the role of the responsorial psalm, it becomes clear that you must prepare the psalm in relation to the readings of the day. Your prayerful reflection on the relationship between the psalm and the texts of the readings becomes even more important than your musical preparation of the psalm setting. Such reflection will always lead you to a paschal mystery encounter with Christ. It will open your heart to becoming the kind of person God is calling you to be in this particular Liturgy of the Word. It will enable you to better lead the assembly where Christ is calling them to go as the Body of Christ.

This chapter offers some samples of this kind of reflection and the insights and challenges it generates for paschal mystery living. It then suggests a process you can use for doing such preparatory reflection on a regular basis.

Sample Reflections

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

We begin by reading the gospel (Mark 6:30-34) slowly and reflectively, asking ourselves, Who is Christ in this gospel reading? How is he acting? Who are we? How are we acting?

In this gospel we find the apostles, whom Jesus has previously sent out two by two to preach, expel demons, and heal the sick, reporting to him all they have done and taught. They are exhausted and Jesus invites them to “come away” to a deserted place for some rest. But the crowd, spying their departure, hastens ahead and beats them to their place of retreat. When Jesus sees the gathering crowd he is overcome with pity for them, who are “like sheep without a shepherd,” and he begins to teach them. How compassionate Jesus is both to the apostles and to the crowd. How immediately he responds to the tiredness of the one group and the neediness of the other. As for who we are in this story, perhaps we are the exhausted apostles desperately needing a break from the demands of ministry. Perhaps we are the crowd chasing after Jesus and the apostles, not even knowing clearly what it is we want. Perhaps we are both.

Next we read the first reading (Jer 23:1-6) slowly and reflectively. Who is God in this reading? How is God acting? Who are we? How are we acting? In this reading God calls to task the leaders of Israel for abandoning the people, driving them away, and causing them to live in fear and trembling. God moves decisively to punish these leaders for their evil deeds and to appoint new leaders who will shepherd the people back to health and prosperity. Finally, God promises a new king who will govern wisely and act with justice.

In this reading God is the judge who swears punishment against the leaders who have failed to care for the people as well as the savior who promises to rectify the situation by sending new shepherds who will govern the people wisely and protect them from danger. And who are we? Are we the irresponsible shepherds who have abandoned those in our care? Are we the suffering people bereft of leadership? Are we perhaps in some way both?

Now we read the responsorial psalm (Ps 23:1-6) slowly and reflectively. How does the psalm text lead us to a deeper encounter with God in the first reading and with Christ in the gospel? The most obvious way the psalm does this is through its use of first- and second-person language. The text does not read, “The

Lord is their shepherd; there is nothing they shall want” but “The LORD is *my* shepherd; *I* shall not want. / . . . he leads *me* . . . / he refreshes *my* soul / . . . *you* are at *my* side / . . . *you* anoint *my* head with oil,” and so on (italics added). Through this linguistic shift the psalm transforms the third-person historical events related in both readings into an immediate first- and second-person encounter with God and with Christ. The responsorial psalm brings the first reading and gospel narratives home. Because of the psalm we cannot escape that these narratives are about us rather than about some strangers living in the distant past.

This very encounter that the psalm sets up between us and God and us and Christ precipitates a paschal mystery enactment. By bringing the third-person narratives of the first reading and gospel into first- and second-person immediacy, the psalm forces us to deal with our relationships with God and with Christ. Will we heed this God who calls our negligent behaviors toward one another into judgment? Will we follow the new paths God opens for us, whether these be paths of conversion from negligence or paths of regrouping as God’s people? Will we allow ourselves to acknowledge our exhaustion and receive Christ’s tender attention? Will we engage in every effort to pursue Christ and to listen to what he has to teach?

Even apart from the psalm’s relationship with the first reading and gospel, the psalm text invites engagement in the paschal mystery in its own right. For we kid ourselves if we blithely maintain that Psalm 23, this most tender of psalms, is always easy to pray. Are there not times in life—times, for example, of intense suffering, or of great and undeserved loss, or of prolonged grief—when we doubt very much that the God called shepherd cares for us? How do we hold to faith during these times? This is a paschal mystery question, for it deals directly with our willingness to surrender ourselves to the arms of God no matter how dark the hour.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

In the gospel reading for this Sunday (Matt 13:1-23) Jesus tells the parable of the Sower and the Seed. We know well from

many years of hearing it that some seed will be eaten up by birds, some will fall among rocks and never root itself, some will be choked off by thorns, and some will land on rich soil and produce abundant harvest. When asked by the disciples what this parable means, Jesus answers that some “*look but do not see and hear but do not listen*” (italics in original translation). Jesus then patiently explains the meaning of the parable to his disciples and calls them blessed for seeing and hearing what God is doing in him for the salvation of the world. But he also passes harsh and unremitting judgment on those who refuse to see and hear. And we are left asking ourselves who we are in this story, those who see and hear and bear abundant fruit, or those who refuse to see and hear and face condemnation. Do we always want to hear what Jesus says? Do we always want to see who he is and accept the challenge to our lives that that seeing brings?

In the first reading (Isa 55:10-11) we find Isaiah comparing God’s word to the rain and snow that come down from heaven. Both inevitably accomplish the purpose for which they are sent. There is power here, and it is the power of God. This reading communicates a great deal about the indomitability of God’s salvific plan for the world, but it says nothing about who we are or what we do in response when the word of God comes to us. It is the gospel reading that forces us to confront ourselves. The gospel reading contradicts the assertion of Isaiah that God’s word achieves its intended purpose in all times and places. In the parable of the Sower and the Seed we hear that God’s word does not always achieve its goal, for human sinfulness can block the power of the word. The two readings stand opposite each other: God’s plan, which is always fulfilled, can nonetheless be blocked by the circumstances of human living and the choices of human hearts.

What bridges the contradiction between these two readings is the confidence of Psalm 65. In it we sing that God has prepared both the grain and the land, “softening it with showers, / blessing its yield.” The effect of the psalm is to turn our attention to the God who waters and plants. We must be honest about the

resistance to God's word that the gospel tells us is ever present within the world and within our own hearts, but we need not lose hope because of it. The key is to focus our attention on the graciousness of God rather than on our own ungraciousness. How wonderful, the psalm says, that God persists in visiting the "land" of our hearts and working it until we yield to receiving what God desires to plant. How wonderful that the word of God is stronger than any resistance we or the world puts up against it. No matter that we are slow to receive the seed, reticent to let it grow, distracted from the task, God will bring what has been planted to abundant harvest. The psalm invites us to join all the world's fields and valleys in singing and shouting for joy over God's undaunted power to bring all of creation to fruition.

Your ministry in singing this psalm is to communicate the assurance that no ground, no matter how poor, is left untilled by God. Whatever the dry clods in the way of our receiving God's word and letting it grow, God will tend to them. We have only to let God do this work. You need to embody this surrender physically and emotionally. Your tone of voice, facial expression, body stance, and gesture need to express that unbroken confidence in God that comes from surrendering oneself to God's word. You need to let yourself blossom before the eyes of the assembly so that they can see in your earthiness the fruitfulness being born there.

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

In the first reading (Ezek 18:25-28) Ezekiel points out that it is not God who chooses the death of the wicked, but the wicked themselves. Those who turn from wickedness save their lives. Yet the chief priests and elders in the gospel (Matt 21:28-32) persist in choosing death by acting like the lazy son who pays lip service to doing his father's bidding but never follows through on his promise of obedience. Here we have the possibility of change juxtaposed with the refusal to be changed. Salvation has been promised and is possible, but it is not easy. God calls us over and over to the work of salvation; we are the ones who say

either yes or no. In the gospel Jesus is the one who confronts us with the choice to be made. He is also the one who shows by personal choice what it means to be a Son who says and does yes. He challenges us to choose which kind of son or daughter of God we wish to be.

Again, the psalm (Ps 25) turns our attention to the goodness of God who “shows sinners the way” and “guides the humble to justice.” The first reading and gospel point out that we have a tenuous hold on righteousness and easily fluctuate between “yes” and “no” to God. But the psalm indicates that God is a forgiving savior who never wavers. God will teach us all we need to know and to live rightly and God will forgive us whenever we fail. We have only to ask, and to be honest (humble) about ourselves. The psalm challenges us to die to a false sense of self-righteousness and rise to an honest self-assessment that counts on God’s guidance and mercy.

In singing this psalm you need to let your body express the humility that arises out of honest self-knowledge and unwavering confidence in God’s guidance and mercy. How does one stand before the assembly with such humility yet poise? The key is for you to use the psalm as a means of personal encounter with God. How does this psalm invite you to relate to God? What “ways” do you need to ask God to teach you? If you make such prayer part of your preparation, you will communicate more than the words of the psalm to the assembly when you sing. You will communicate the transformation God has wrought in you.

A Process for Preparing

The preceding reflections already lay out part of the process. Begin by reading the gospel slowly and prayerfully. As you read ask yourself, Who is Christ in this reading? How is he acting? Who are we (am I) in this reading? How are we (am I) acting? Next read the first reading, asking yourself these questions: Who is God in this reading? How is God acting? Who are we (am I), and how are we (am I) acting? Finally, read the responsorial

psalm and ask yourself questions such as these: In the context of these readings how does this psalm lead us (me) to a paschal mystery encounter with God and with Christ? In this responsorial psalm what response is God asking the community of the church (me) to make to the word God is speaking in the readings and gospel? Who is God asking us (me) to become? What dying to self, emptying of self, might be required? What rising to fuller participation in God's life will result?

Not every responsorial psalm in the Lectionary opens up the paschal mystery encounter as clearly as the three examples used in this chapter. But the encounter is there if you take the time to discover it. Ask God to show you how this psalm is inviting you to enter more deeply into the readings of this particular day on the journey of discipleship that is the liturgical year. Ask God to show you how this psalm is calling you to surrender to the paschal mystery. If you make such surrender the core of your preparation, then the assembly will see and hear in you what you have discovered, what you have struggled with, and what you have answered. They will see and hear the dying and rising of Christ that is going on within you, for you will be singing out of the experience of having been transformed rather than merely out of the techniques of being a competent singer. And when they encounter this transformation, the words of the psalm you sing will move off the printed page and drop deeply into their waiting hearts.

4

Some Issues Related to Singing the Responsorial Psalm

The previous chapter generates some issues related to singing the responsorial psalm. The first issue, raised by the role of the responsorial psalm, is the clear *importance of using the psalm of the day assigned by the Lectionary*. As the Lectionary states, “The psalm as a rule is drawn from the Lectionary because the individual psalm texts are directly connected with the individual readings: the choice of psalm depends therefore on the readings” (Introduction 173–74). GIRM reiterates this principle (see 61). This issue is a very serious one. Using a different text from the one given in the Lectionary short-circuits the power of the Liturgy of the Word to lead us to encounter with Christ in the gospel and to deeper transformation into being his Body. The psalm then runs the risk of becoming merely a nice musical interlude rather than “an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word” (GIRM 61).

The Lectionary does offer options to the psalm of the day in its listing of seasonal responses and psalms (173–74; see GIRM 61), but the intent of these options is to facilitate the singing of the psalm when a given assembly needs help to do so. This need can be related to musical limitations within the assembly itself, to limitations of musical resources, or to limitations in

cantor skills or musical leadership. Whatever the cause, these options should be used only as an interim measure while you go about the long-range goal of addressing whatever is holding the assembly back from their participation in this element of the Liturgy of the Word. The role of the psalm of the day to pull the assembly into *these* readings on *this* day at *this* particular point in the liturgical year is too important to ignore. At stake is the assembly's encounter with the paschal mystery and their transformation into being more perfectly the Body of Christ.

A second issue has to do with *how you sing the responsorial psalm*. Because the role of the psalm is to facilitate meditation on the word of God, your singing of it always has to have an inner meditative core, even when the text is filled with praise and joyful shouts. Such sensibility can result only from your own meditative engagement as cantor with the psalm and the readings. This requires that you spend sufficient time reflecting on these texts during the week before you sing a psalm. This means committing yourself to a discipline of your ministry that goes beyond the mere learning of the music. The payoff is worth it, however: the assembly will hear a difference in your singing that will affect their own response to the transforming work God is doing through the psalm.

A third issue is *honoring the silence meant to surround the singing of the psalm*. The assembly needs to be given the silent time that GIRM 56 recommends after the first reading. Without this silent time the psalm could arise from hearts not yet ready to sing their response to God's word. It is essential, then, that you wait a moment after the lector has finished the first reading before you walk to the place from where you will sing the psalm. During this wait you need to sit quietly and engage personally in meditation on God's word (just as the presider needs to pray personally during the short silence before the opening collect). It is the presider's role as leader of prayer to indicate when the silence should end and the psalm begin. But if you do not have eye contact with the presider—and this is usually the case—the decision is left up to you or your accompanist. Talk with each

other about this silence, its purpose, its importance, how to enter into it yourselves. Decide together how long this silence is to be. Help each other learn how to let the quality of the assembly's silence tell you when to move to singing the psalm.¹

A fourth issue has to do with *deciding from where the psalm ought to be sung*. GIRM itself is ambiguous on this point. On the one hand, GIRM implies that the singing of the psalm is proclamation (see 309) and should be done from the ambo. On the other hand, GIRM allows for the psalm to be sung from "another suitable place" (61). The very option indicates GIRM views the psalm differently from the way it views the readings that are to be proclaimed from the ambo (58). A strong case can be built for singing the responsorial psalm from a cantor stand other than the ambo. As meditation on the word of God the psalm is more prayer than it is proclamation, and this makes singing it from a place other than the ambo the better choice. In terms of the Liturgy of the Word as a dialogue of proclamation and response, the psalm is part of the response. The lector proclaims God's word to the assembly, and the cantor voices the assembly's response to God. The psalm can more clearly perform this function when it is sung from a place different from the place of proclamation. A different physical place communicates the proclamation-response relationship between word and psalm and keeps the assembly engaged in the dialogue that is occurring.

Sing to the Lord (STL), however, implies a strong case for singing the psalm from the ambo by identifying the psalm as "in effect a reading from Scripture" (155). STL is indicating that the singing of the psalm is proclamation of God's word. Yet STL remains ambiguous about this when it states the psalm is "intended to foster meditation" (155) and is, in fact, "a form of sung prayer" (158). In reality, the psalm is both proclamation and meditation, both divine word of God and human prayer. In the end, the psalm needs to be sung from whatever place best allows it to fulfill its dual function, best allows the psalmist to do her or his ministry well, and best enables the members of the assembly to take the text into their hearts and be transformed by it.

The fifth issue is *what musical setting best enables a psalm to fulfill its function as meditation on the word of God* so that we can surrender ourselves to what God is saying in these particular readings on this particular Sunday of the liturgical year. What musical styles best enable the crossing-over from first reading to gospel and the encounter with Christ that is the psalm's role? There is no single or simple answer to this question. Some of the answer depends on the makeup and culture of your particular assembly. Some depends on the season of the liturgical year or the particular solemnity being celebrated. Generally speaking, however, a psalm tone rather than a through-composed lyrical melody is more capable of facilitating the meditation that is the psalm's purpose. This is so because a psalm tone allows you to ruminate, or chew over, the text before swallowing it. Rather than depending on a lyrical melody to interpret the text for you, you must grapple with the text and rely on your own insights and reflection to help you decide how you will sing it. A psalm tone forces you into bare encounter with the text and leaves you with nothing but this bare encounter to offer the assembly. But what an offering! It will reveal to the assembly how the text became for you a bridge to encounter with Christ in the gospel and how in crossing this bridge you have been transformed.

And this leads to our final point, *the relationship of the responsorial psalm to ritual enactment of the paschal mystery*. The underlying dynamic that is meant to occur during the singing of the responsorial psalm is surrender to the paschal mystery as it is being enacted in the Liturgy of the Word. The Word issues a prophetic challenge that we be true to the ideal that stands before us, that is, that we be in our own lives the dying and rising Body of Christ. The Word confronts us with how far we fall short of that identity and mission, as well as with how continuously God and Christ forgive our failings and faithfully support us to continue growing in our surrender. The Word reminds us of our ideal selves; of our identity as Body of Christ; of our mission to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, and to forgive one another.

What we experience in the Liturgy of the Word is a continuously new encounter with the reality of God's faithfulness, and with the ideal of faithfulness to which we are summoned in response. With Christ we are called to surrender to the paschal mystery. When we sing the responsorial psalm we express that surrender in word and voice. We sacramentalize our assent, that is, we make our surrender audibly, visibly, physically apparent. We recognize that the Ideal standing before us is the Person of the risen Christ, and we say yes to following him wherever he will lead. We say yes to our own death and resurrection.

You as cantor lead the surrender, embodying it in breath and song, and mirroring through your gesture the dialogue that is taking place between Christ and his church. The overriding question you need to ask yourself as cantor, then, is this: Did the manner in which I sang the responsorial psalm help the assembly make this assent?

5

Understanding the Role of Psalmody in the Liturgy of the Hours

Through the Liturgy of the Hours the church prays over and over, in a rhythm of daily, weekly, and yearly time, the entire collection of psalms found in the Hebrew Testament.¹ The church has prayed the psalms from earliest days because they originated in the faith experience of the Jewish people who gave birth to Christ. Moreover, these prayers so full of human emotion represent the cries and rejoicings of all humankind throughout all history (*General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours* [GILH]² 107). Finally, the church sees in the psalms the foreshadowing of the fullness of salvation that came in Christ (GILH 109). Thus Paul VI could teach in *Laudis Canticum*³ that in the liturgical recitation of the psalms the church's voice is the voice of Christ praying to God, it is the universal voice of the one Body of Christ, and it is the voice of all humankind (8).

The Liturgy of the Hours draws the church into the work of salvation through the communal praying of the psalms. Such prayer immerses the church in its identity as Body of Christ and its mission to all of humanity. The communal praying of the psalms in the Divine Office calls the faithful to set aside individual

feelings in favor of the feelings and needs of the community of the church and of the world, and to do so precisely when they find this kind of setting aside most difficult. As GILH 108 states,

Those who pray the psalms in the liturgy of the hours do so not so much in their own name as in the name of the entire Body of Christ. This consideration does away with the problem of a possible discrepancy between personal feelings and the sentiments a psalm is expressing: for example, when a person feels sad and the psalm is one of joy or when a person feels happy and the psalm is one of mourning. Such a problem is readily solved in private prayer, which allows for the choice of a psalm suited to personal feelings. The divine office, however, is not private; the cycle of psalms is public, in the name of the Church, even for those who may be reciting an hour alone. Those who pray the psalms in the name of the Church nevertheless can always find a reason for joy or sadness, for the saying of the Apostle applies in this case also: “Rejoice with the joyful and weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15). In this way human frailty, wounded by self-love, is healed in proportion to the love that makes the heart match the voice that prays the psalms.

The Liturgy of the Hours is “principally a prayer of praise and petition” (GILH 2). In praying the Hours the church fulfills its twofold mission of glorifying God and interceding for the needs of the world. Through the Hours, “the prayer of the Church with Christ and to Christ” (GILH 2), the church gives itself “over to the ministry of love toward God and neighbor, identifying . . . with the action of Christ, who by his life and self-offering sanctified the life of all humanity” (*Laudis Canticum* 8).

The Hours are comprised of several units—Morning Prayer, Daytime Prayer, Evening Prayer, Night Prayer, and Office of Readings—of which Morning and Evening Prayer are the most important because they form the hinges of the day (*Laudis Canticum* 2; also *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 89a). Thus the church unites its voice with that of Christ in praising God and interceding for humanity several times during the day, but above all the

faithful begin and end each day with the praise and petition that shape their daily mission as Body of Christ.

The Role of Psalmody in Morning and Evening Prayer

In the Liturgy of the Word only three or four strophes of a psalm are sung, and these have been chosen because they accord thematically or textually with the readings of the day. The responsorial psalm does not stand as an element in its own right, but functions in relation to the readings. In the Liturgy of the Hours, however, each psalm stands on its own, telling its own story and drawing the assembly into its own meaning. In the Liturgy of the Word the readings, most especially the gospel pericopes, unfold the story of salvation as it emerges throughout the liturgical year. In the Liturgy of the Hours it is the psalms that tell this story, each contributing its own part.

To enable this telling of the story Morning and Evening Prayer use the full texts of the psalms chosen for each day of the four-week cycle. This allows the salvation story embedded in each psalm to be heard and celebrated. And the psalm's cyclic repetition over the four-week cycle of Morning and Evening Prayer allows those reciting it to see how this story is the ongoing story of Christian living. The repetition invites them to surrender to the story, which is none other than God's working in their lives and in the life of the world.

Although the psalmody in Morning and Evening Prayer stands in its own right, it does not, however, stand as an isolated element. The psalms in Morning and Evening Prayer flow to the intercessions that follow. Praise for what God has done leads naturally to petition for what God yet needs to do (GILH 179). This interrelationship of praise and petition carries out the twofold mission of the church to glorify God and to intercede for the needs of all humanity. Framing the day with the psalmody and intercessions of Morning and Evening Prayer reminds the community of the church of their mission and gives them the communal strength to carry it out.

Moreover, the repeated and continuous flow of the four-week cycle of psalmody in Morning and Evening Prayer and its connection with daily intercession captures the rhythm of the whole story of salvation and enables the faithful to see the place in which they currently stand in the perspective of the whole story. Like the crests of a wave that continuously roll into troughs that push up new crests in the wave's relentless journey forward, this "rhythm of salvation" rolls over itself, so to speak, throughout the days of a person's life, the life of the church, and the life of all humankind. The liturgies of Morning and Evening Prayer celebrate the daily rhythm of this rise and fall and couch it in the context of the church's dual mission of praise and petition. The rise and fall of life—the rhythmic flow of redemption already given and the human struggle for salvation not yet achieved—is real. Morning and Evening Prayer make real the rhythm of praise and petition the church faithfully offers in the midst of this flow. The church's prayer reminds us that every day, morning and evening, we have much to pray about and much for which to give praise.

Singing the psalms as part of Morning and Evening Prayer invites us to surrender to the bigger picture: to our communal identity as Body of Christ, and our communal mission to act for the salvation of the world; to Christian life as a rhythm of praise and petition; to the rhythmic working out of salvation in us. Through the regular, liturgical praying of the psalms two broad transformations happen within us. First, the psalmody *pulls us out of* our individual worlds into our communal identity as Body of Christ and members of the whole human family. The psalmody does this because its liturgical recitation turns us from awareness of only our own feelings and needs to awareness of the feelings and needs of the human community. The psalmody reminds us that the story of salvation is bigger than our own individual lives. This stretching of the boundaries of our awareness completes itself in the intercessions to which the psalmody leads. Together the psalms and intercessions immerse us in our identity and mission as Body of Christ acting for the salvation of all humanity.

Second, the psalmody's cyclic repetition *pulls us into* the rhythm of salvation, into its back-and-forth flow throughout the seasons of life, the movements of history, the recurring unfoldings of the liturgical year. This cyclic recitation washes us daily, yearly, in the waves of God's salvific love until, like pieces of seasoned driftwood, we come to bear the compassionate shape of Christ.

6

Preparing Yourself to Sing the Psalms for Morning and Evening Prayer

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy mandated that Morning and Evening Prayer, the two hinge hours of the Daily Office, become common celebrations on Sundays and solemnities (SC 100). GILH 1 indicates that these Hours are to be the “public and common prayer” of everyone in the church. Through this ritual praying of the psalms the faithful make the joys and sorrows of all humankind part of their daily offering of praise and petition to God (GILH 107). As celebrations of Morning and Evening Prayer become more commonplace in dioceses and parishes, your call to serve as cantor for these liturgies will continue to increase.

This chapter does not deal with all the details of Morning and Evening Prayer, but only with the psalms that form an essential and necessary component of the rite. In the Liturgy of the Word only three or four strophes of a psalm are used, and these have been chosen because they accord thematically or textually with the readings of the day. By contrast, in Morning and Evening Prayer the psalms function in their own right. With few exceptions the full text of each psalm is used with the intent of drawing us into its particular meaning within the whole story of salvation.

Your most important preparation as psalmist, then, is to understand how a given psalm tells its part of the story. This means spending time studying the text of a psalm, examining its structure, its imagery, and its internal movements. The steps that follow are meant to be used as a process of theological reflection to help you uncover and appropriate the meaning of a psalm. After briefly defining literary structures and poetic devices typical of the psalms, the chapter offers a model reflection on Psalm 51, the psalm prayed by the church in the celebration of Morning Prayer every Friday.

Understanding the Psalm as a Whole

Begin your study by reading the text of the whole psalm. You need to have a sense of the whole before you can assess any of its constituent parts. Consult a brief commentary such as, for example, that by Dianne Bergant in the New Collegeville Bible Commentary series¹ to gain insight into the historical context and content of the psalm.

Genre

Next, you need to identify the genre to which the psalm belongs. All psalms fall into one of two primary categories: those of lament and those of praise.² They can be further classified into types, such as narrative psalms, descriptive psalms, liturgical psalms, psalms of trust, but for purposes of this process the only distinction we will use is the primary one of lament or praise. Lament and praise have unique spiritual and emotional tones. Grasping these tonal differentiations is essential to communicating the story and the meaning of a psalm.

Some psalms of praise, such as Psalm 8, are hymns that proclaim the glories of God's creation and thank God for the gift of dignity bestowed on human beings who are the crown of that creation. Others, such as Psalm 23, express confidence that God can and will protect the psalmist. The danger of death is real and proximate, yet the one praying feels safe in the knowledge

that God is more powerful than any enemy or evil. Still others, such as Psalm 47, are processional songs accompanied by blasts of trumpets acclaiming God's kingship over all the earth.

By contrast, psalms of lament sing of suffering and loss, destruction and despair, sin and guilt. Psalm 80, for example, sings of Israel's destruction by enemies, asks why God has allowed this to happen, and begs for national restoration. Psalms 42–43 sing of the thirst for God felt by one who must live at a geographical distance from the community of Israel. The psalmist expresses in poignant cries what it is like to feel forgotten by God and to face the taunts of pagan neighbors who belittle his or her faith. Psalm 22 with its cry of abject abandonment by God is perhaps the most painful lament of all the psalms. Here we have the anguish of a person so tortured by enemies that he or she feels no longer human, but merely a worm.

A paradoxical characteristic of psalms of lament, however, is that, with the one exception of Psalm 88, they always conclude by praising God. No matter how deep the suffering, how great the guilt, how profound the sense of divine abandonment, the psalm ultimately praises God who is eternally just and righteous, compassionate and forgiving, redeeming and restorative. At the conclusion of Psalm 22, for example, the psalmist praises God and calls future generations to acclaim and serve the God who has heard the cry for salvation.

Internal Movement

Most psalms express movement from one state of being to another within the heart of the psalmist or of the community as a whole. This movement is a response to the action of God in the life and circumstances of the individual or the community. Specific to psalms of lament, for example, is movement from suffering to the relief of that suffering. After pouring out the burdens of his or her heart, the psalmist experiences a renewed sense of confidence in God's presence and protection. Also specific to psalms of lament is interaction among the different actors in the unfolding story that the psalm is telling. There is often

a three-way confrontation between God, the psalmist, and the “others,” who may be enemies in battle, or liars and evildoers, or the destructive powers of nature. Whatever the movement, the action of God in the life of the individual or the community is always foremost. The changes of attitude, feeling, and behavior on the part of the one(s) praying are always precipitated by the action of God who is ever-faithful, ever-forgiving, ever-protecting.

Parallelism

Parallelism is a literary device characteristic of Hebrew poetry. In Hebrew poetry sentences are “rhymed” not by the sounds of words, but by parallel meanings set up in the flow of phrases.³ The result is a rhythm determined not by sound, but by sense. Some parallelisms are alike; others are complete opposites. With synonymous parallelism two or three lines repeat one another, as in

Give to the LORD, O families of peoples.
Give to the LORD glory and might.
Give to the LORD
the glory of God’s name. (Ps 96:7-8a)⁴

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May those who love you live in peace.
May peace be within your walls . . .” (Ps 122:6-7a)

With complementary parallelism one line supplements another, as in

What are mortals that you remember them?
And human beings that you care for them? (Ps 8:5)

Nothing right comes from their mouths:
their insides are rotted,
their throats are open tombs,
their tongues are forked. (Ps 5:10)

With antithetic parallelism lines express opposite notions, as in

In the morning grass is bright and flourishes
but at night it fades and dries out. (Ps 90:6)

Who brings home the sterile woman,
now a rejoicing mother of many children? (Ps 113:9)

Such parallelism is pervasive in the psalms. Recognizing it is important to understanding a psalm's meaning as well as its phrasing when you sing it.

Metaphor

The word “metaphor” (from the Greek *metapherein*, meaning “to transfer”) refers to a figure of speech that connects one reality with another in such a way that each is given a new state of being. The metaphor “transfers” their ways of being one to the other. For example, when the psalmist in Psalm 5 says of his enemies that “their throats are open tombs,” throats that open the body to breath and life become doorways to death, and tombs that swallow the dead spew death out. Because metaphors establish new states of being, they are not merely descriptive nor just attempts at pictorial illustration of what the psalmist has experienced or is feeling. Instead they are dynamic expressions of movement into a new way of being. To enter into the metaphor as reader, then, is to change one's way of being.

A Model Reflection: Psalm 51

The reflection here is somewhat lengthy. It is not necessary to do every step with every psalm. When you are preparing to sing a certain psalm, adapt the process to fit your needs.

The Text of Psalm 51

- 1 Be gracious to me, O God,
in your steadfast love.
According to the abundance of your mercy
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Cleanse me completely from my guilt
and purify me from my sin.

- 3 For my transgressions I do recognize,
and my sin stands always before me.
- 4 Against you alone have I sinned,
and what is evil in your eyes I have done.
Thus you may be declared just in your ways,
and pure in your judgments.
- 5 Indeed, I was born guilty,
already a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- 6 Surely in truth you delight,
and deep within my self you will teach me wisdom.
- 7 Cleanse me from my sin with hyssop and I will be pure,
wash me and I shall be brighter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear gladness and joy,
let the bones you broke exult.
- 9 Turn your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquities.
- 10 Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew within me a firm spirit.
- 11 Do not dismiss me from your presence,
and do not take away from me your holy spirit.
- 12 Give me back the joy of your salvation,
and let a willing spirit lie over me.
- 13 I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will turn back to you.
- 14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing your justice.
- 15 O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will tell your praise.
- 16 For you take no pleasure in sacrifice,
and you would not accept an offering were I to give it.
- 17 The perfect sacrifice for God is a broken spirit.
A broken and humble heart, O God,
you will not despise.
- 18 In your kindness bring prosperity to Zion;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

- 19 Then you can delight in sacrifices of justice,
burnt and complete offerings;
then bulls can be offered on your altars.

The Process

1. Slowly read through the entire psalm aloud. Is it a psalm of lament or of praise? What imagery and internal movement draws you to conclude this?

2. In terms of the internal movement within the psalm, what is the nature of the psalmist's pain? What are its roots? What is the nature of the psalmist's relief? Where in the psalm does the changeover from suffering to relief take place?

3. One way to reflect on the confrontation in the psalm-story between God, the psalmist, and "the others" is to underline all the verbs and see what emerges. What are the verbs attributed to God? What is the psalmist asking God to do? What actions pass between God and the psalmist? between the psalmist and God? What are the verbs attributed to the psalmist? What does it mean that most of the psalmist's verbs in the first five verses are in the past tense ("have sinned," "have done," "was born") but throughout the rest of the psalm they are in the future tense ("will be," "will teach," "will sing," "will tell")?

Who or what in this psalm is "the others"? Who or what is the direct object of each verb? God's verbs are directed to the psalmist. The psalmist's verbs are directed first to his or her own sinfulness (vv. 3, 4, 5); then to his or her being cleansed (v. 7); next to the conversion of other sinners (v. 13); and finally to the praise of God (vv. 14-15). What does this progression tell us about the turnover within the heart and awareness of the psalmist? about the relationship between God and us? What causes conversion within us? What results from conversion?

4. Read through the psalm again, this time highlighting examples of parallelism. Almost every verse contains synonymous or complementary parallelism. Not until we come to verses 16-19 do we find an example of antithetic parallelism, and it is in double measure. Verse 16 speaks of the sacrifice God will not accept and verse 17 describes the sacrifice God will accept. In

verse 16 we have sacrifices in which God will “take no pleasure” and in verse 19 we have sacrifices that “delight” God. What is the psalm communicating through this opposition of images? What is being offered to God? What is being withheld? What is God offering? What is God withholding?⁵

5. Highlight the metaphors. Notice, for example, how the implied metaphor of verse 3, “my sin stands always before me,” forms the basis of an extended parallelism as the psalmist plays on the concept of recognition and acceptance. Acknowledging personal sin, the psalmist accepts God’s acknowledgment, and begs God to distinguish sin from self:

my transgressions I do recognize (v. 3)
 my sin stands always before me (v. 3)
 what is evil in your eyes I have done (v. 4)
 Turn your face from my sins (v. 9)
 Do not dismiss me from your presence (v. 11)

What stands before what? Who stands before whom? Where is God standing? Where are we standing?

6. Trace repeated or related words. For example: sin, transgressions, evil, iniquity; self, heart, spirit; delight, gladness, joy, delight; broken. What understandings emerge? For example, the broken, humbled heart that God will accept in verse 17 parallels the broken bones that exulted in verse 8. What marvelous lack of dualism in the Hebrew consciousness: heart-spirit, bones-body are one!

7. Prepare to sing the psalm. Having reflected on the meaning of Psalm 51 by examining some of its poetry and its language, you are now ready to express in your singing the shifts in feeling and meaning that it contains. The following practical steps will finalize your preparation.

Mark the sense lines—the parallelisms—in the psalm. Next, hum the phrases of the psalm tone, directing your breath to the final note of each cadence. Then add the words. Think of both text and melody in terms of their sense lines, rather than in terms of individual words and notes. The goal is to let the sense

lines sing themselves by letting them ride on a line of breath that does not die out before the end of the thought has been reached. Imagine an arrow of breath that you are directing to that target. Such phrasing is essential in all singing, but once you understand that the psalms were composed in sense lines rather than in schemes of rhyming words, you can see that this principle is all the more important in the singing of a psalm.

Identify the primary attitude or feeling each verse embodies. First, make a note in the margin next to each verse or strophe indicating the feeling or emotional color it contains. For example, the first verse of Psalm 51 expresses pleading, but it is a pleading colored by awareness of the graciousness of God. It is not frightened pleading directed toward a harsh deity. Next, underline key words or phrases and decide how these need to be communicated. For example, the “gladness and joy” of verse 8 might be sung with a louder dynamic and slightly faster tempo. The “broken and humble heart” of verse 17, on the other hand, might be sung more slowly and with a softer dynamic.

The Value of Doing This Reflection

Each step of this process of analysis and reflection will yield rich insights into the meaning of Psalm 51, and into the working of the human heart and of the heart of God. Every psalm prayed by the church as part of Morning or Evening Prayer is meant to lead the community into this kind of salvific encounter with God. Your role as psalmist is to facilitate this encounter. Your preparatory work, then, must include some reflecting on the psalm’s meaning so that it can become part of your own lived experience before you sing it. You need not (nor will you have time to) do the entire reflection process outlined above for every psalm you are preparing to sing. Simply pick one step each time you are to sing a given psalm, and do it. The outcome will be worth it, for yourself, for the assembly gathered to pray, for the church, and for the whole world.

7

Some Issues Related to Singing the Psalms for Morning and Evening Prayer

Inspired by God, the psalms nonetheless arise from real human experience and express every possible kind of human emotion. Moreover, they are ancient texts composed in a time and place very different from our own. Some texts, then, are difficult to understand, while others are disturbing to pray. Such texts may present challenges when you have to sing them as part of Morning or Evening Prayer (for that matter, these challenges may confront you in singing some of the responsorial psalms as well). Problems arise, for example, when you have to sing a psalm text that seems disjointed, or one that contains uncomfortably violent language, or one that simply expresses a state of mind at odds with how you are personally feeling at the moment.

Singing Disjointed Texts

One example of a seemingly disjointed text is Psalm 63, often sung for Morning Prayer. Throughout several verses Psalm 63 speaks of longing for God, of being filled with the “milk and rich food” that is God’s love, of singing in the shade of God’s

protection. Then the text makes an abrupt shift to invective against liars and enemies. The psalm comes to a jarring end that vitiates its previous tenderness. The shift is so unsettling, in fact, that the official rite for Morning Prayer omits these final verses.

Not so, however, with the abrupt change in tone in Psalm 95, used as the invitatory or opening psalm in Morning Prayer. The psalm begins with the psalmist inviting the community to enter God's presence with shouts of praise and thanksgiving. The psalm ends with God speaking. In no uncertain terms, God reminds the people of their ancestors who, because of stubbornness and infidelity, were refused admittance into the divine presence. If you act likewise, God warns, you too shall face my anger and my rejection. What begins as a song of joy and acclamation from the people ends as a wrathful warning from God.

Another example is Psalm 141, the typical first psalm for a festive celebration of Evening Prayer. Psalm 141 is a lament. The psalmist begs to be protected by God from consorting with evildoers, but the movement within the psalm is hard to track. This is because some verses are corrupt, that is, the original texts have been lost or miscopied, making attempts at translation a matter of guesswork. The only reason this psalm has been used by the church for centuries as part of Evening Prayer seems to be verse 2: "Let my prayer rise like incense in your presence, the lifting up of my hands like an evening offering."

Perhaps the best way to handle the problem of singing disjointed psalm texts is to place them in the context of the disjointedness of human life itself and the incompleteness we experience daily in relation to salvation. After all, the psalms present us with the truth about human existence rather than some picture of human existence as we would like it to be. And is this not the road to salvation, that we bring our disjointedness, our untrackable stories to God who makes sense and wholeness of them? As Thomas Peter Wahl points out, "Each text of the Bible is true and good, but not necessarily perfect and complete."¹ So neither is the story of our lives, or the life of the church, or the life of the world. When you sing a disjointed psalm text, then,

let yourself come to terms with this condition and hand it over to God. Is this not what salvation is about?

Singing Texts Containing Violent Language

It is very easy to sing Psalm 23 with its imagery of God as caring shepherd, or Psalm 131 with its sense of resting quietly satisfied against the bosom of God. But the psalmist in Psalm 110 describes a wrathful God who destroys kings. The one praying Psalm 3 implores God to shatter the teeth of his or her enemies. Psalm 149 calls the people to praise God with their lips while they deal vengeance against enemies with a two-edged sword in their hands. How do you as cantor deal with such violent and disturbing language in these psalms?

You need to begin by remembering that the psalms express how real people feel in real situations, past and present. In her commentary on the psalms scholar Kathleen Farmer points out that “those who speak from peaceful, prosperous settings in life often have different things to say to God and different ways to say them than do those who are caught in the midst of a crisis that threatens their physical, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”² As much as we would like to, we cannot pretend that the anger, bitterness, vengeance, and violence the psalms sometimes express are fictional or, at least, foreign to us. Rather, the psalms reveal the real conditions of our own all-too-human hearts. They also model for us a manner of praying in which all the movements of our hearts, the tender and loving ones as well as those that are angry and vindictive, are laid out simply before a God who is already well aware of them before even we are. We are revealing nothing to God; we are simply admitting the truth to ourselves and then giving it all over to God.

If we content ourselves with praying only those psalms that express peacefulness, or trust, or joy, or any of the myriad positive emotions we feel when life is good and salvation assured, then we give God only half our hearts. When we pray the hard psalms, then, we give God everything, unedited. And is this not what salvation is about?

Singing Texts at Odds with How You Feel

A perennial difficulty encountered when singing the psalms for Morning or Evening Prayer (or for any of the Hours, for that matter) is praying texts that express feelings radically different from those you are currently feeling. On a day when you are exultant the psalm may call you to lament. On a day when you feel great sadness the psalm may be shouting for joy. Your role as cantor is to express the psalm's sentiments with integrity despite your own emotional state of mind. What can help you do this?

The first help is to remember that whenever you pray the psalms liturgically you are not saying them as private, individualized prayer but as the prayer of the whole church. At issue is not how you are feeling at this particular moment, but how the psalm text is stretching you to become aware of the broader community of the whole church and of the whole world. The story of salvation, of God's compassionate intervention in the human struggle with sin, suffering, despair, and death is a communal one. When any human being struggles, we all struggle. When any human being rejoices, we all rejoice. The liturgical praying of the psalms invites you to set aside individual feelings in favor of the feelings and needs of others and enter into solidarity with them, and to do so precisely when you find this is most difficult (GILH 108).

The second help is to remember that whenever you sing the psalms liturgically, you sing them as Christ. It is not you singing, but Christ in you raising to God all the joys and sufferings of humankind and praying for the salvation of the world (GILH 17). Whatever limitations you feel about entering into the sentiments and meaning of a psalm are more than superseded by the consciousness of Christ present within you. You need only to give yourself over to him. And is this not what salvation is about?

8

A Paschal Mystery Spirituality for One Who Sings the Psalms

Your primary role as cantor is to be a psalmist in the liturgical life of your parish. The role needs to be more than a job you do, however. You can sing the psalms with authenticity only if you let their message and meaning affect your thinking and acting in daily life. In other words, your singing of the psalms needs to shape you in a paschal mystery spirituality of giving yourself over to God so that God may make you more fully one with the person of the risen Christ. This chapter describes a paschal mystery spirituality that arises from the singing of the psalms in Morning and Evening Prayer, then describes a paschal mystery spirituality that arises from the singing of the responsorial psalms in the Liturgy of the Word.

A Spirituality Shaped by Singing the Psalms

Joseph Gelineau once said that one who sings a psalm becomes for God that psalm. His statement implies that a psalm *affects* who we are, bringing us into being in some way. A psalm is not a neutral text but a formative one. What is being formed? How is it being formed? What does it mean to become the psalm? Part of the answer lies in knowing that the psalms are the

story of salvation told in the form of poetic prayers. Another part lies in recognizing that this story and these prayers are ours. A final part lies in letting the story of salvation mold our everyday thinking and living.

The Psalms as the Story of Salvation

The psalms are a poetic version of the story of salvation, the entire content of the Bible in condensed form. The story of salvation is the recounting of God's ongoing work to bring humanity "to its senses," so to speak, to lead us to see who we truly are and how we are to act. It is the ongoing story of our slipping and sliding away from the truth, and God's acting to nudge us back, sometimes gently, other times with a mighty kick. It is the story of a Love that chooses death so we might live. And it is finally the story of our choosing to love in that same way.

The psalms tell that story in a nutshell. The collection of 150 psalms in the Old Testament divide into five books: Psalms 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, and 107–150 (scholars speculate this division is deliberately patterned after the Pentateuch). The final psalm in each book concludes with some form of the acclamation "Blessed be God!" (variably rendered "Praise the Lord!" or "Alleluia!"). The conclusion of the fifth book is really a series of five psalms (146–150), each of which begins and ends with "Praise the Lord!" The final one, the magnificent 150th, is structured completely around this acclamation: between the beginning and ending shouts we have a crescendo of eleven ovations—ten, plus one more for good measure. What we have in this collection of 150 psalms, then, is a series of five books each ending with "Praise the Lord!," a concluding "chapter" of five psalms each framed by "Praise the Lord!," and a grand finale of ten Alleluias, plus one (the psalmists were on a roll and couldn't stop!). And between Psalm 1 and Psalms 146–150 we live through the entire story of salvation in all its ups and downs: lament, grief, revenge, anger, joy, restoration, thanksgiving, praise, sin, forgiveness, suffering, release, loss, defeat, victory, sorrow, danger, despair, hope. Every possible human experience, human emotion, human

outcry is displayed and all of it moving toward praise of the One who constantly intervenes to redeem us.

What the psalms do is express in terms of human experience the nature of the interaction between us and God. From the human side this is a continual movement between lament and praise, sin and forgiveness, suffering and release. From the divine side it is a story of steadfast love, enduring compassion, and rectifying justice. It is the ongoing story of our wailing to be saved, and our rejoicing when we are, and of our discovery that God is at the bottom of it all.

This brings us to a second point about the nature of the psalms: they are both human cries and divine word. All of Scripture is the word of God, but the psalms are different from other scriptural texts in that they are also human prayers. Though they include historical references, they are not historical records. Though they include a great deal of theology and teaching, they are not theological treatises. Though they speak of the law and the consequences of following or not following it, they are not legal documents. The psalms are prayers, individual and communal. They are human cries that are God's word, and in praying them we become who we are: the people molded by the story begun and completed by God.

The Psalms as Our Story

The more we pray the psalms, the more we discover that they are a communal diary with intimately personal footnotes. As a Benedictine prioress once said, "There's nothing in the psalms that's not in my own journal. The only difference is that in my journal there are names attached."

To pray the psalms with understanding, then, we must be aware of our own story of salvation. For example, there are ways that God has acted in us to change fear into freedom, coldness into warmth, sin into reconciliation. There are ways that God has acted to nudge us from doubt to deeper faith, from defensiveness to openness, from hesitation to willingness to run risks for the kingdom. There are ways that God has transformed our interpersonal conflicts into experiences of compassion, under-

standing, and forgiveness. There are ways that God has moved us from isolation and self-centeredness to a sense of community with others—with the church, with the stranger on the street, with the whole world community.

All of these experiences are movements initiated and supported by the God who acts always on behalf of our redemption. They are the ways that God reaches down into the painful stuff of our lives—the angers and fears, the losses and griefs, the sins and rebellions—and pulls us out to salvation. They are real-life, everyday fulfillments of God's promise of salvation. The more consciously we can name these experiences of God's saving activity, the more sense the psalms will make to us, for we begin to see that they are a chronicle of the action taking place in our lives, and of Who it is that is acting.

Furthermore, we discover that the chronicle is a communal one. Many psalms were written for communal use in Jewish liturgical celebrations. But even the psalms written in first-person singular and prayed alone were never individualized in the Jewish mind. The very capacity to pray them arose from the individual's sense of being a member of God's chosen people. For the Jewish community all of life was worship, and part of worship was acknowledging their relatedness to one another and living accordingly. The psalms arose out of the context of the salvation story of the whole people. We, too, march toward redemption as a community, our stories part and parcel of one another. Praying the psalms leads us to see more and more clearly that every person's suffering, every person's cry of lament, every person's release, every person's shout of praise is our own.

Becoming the Psalms

What does it mean to become a psalm? It means that one who sings the psalms is shaped by the story they tell and lives out of that story. The following points summarize this story and suggest aspects of a spirituality that flows from it.

Salvation is real and ongoing, written into the events of everyday life. One who sings the psalms reflects consciously on how

God is acting in his or her life, and in the life of the world. Such a person recognizes the unfolding of salvation, identifies salvific events and experiences, and tells the story of God's action. Such a person fears no human experience or emotion, positive or negative, knowing that it is the stuff out of which God will bring salvation.

God initiates our salvation and will complete it. God is always faithful. One who sings the psalms sees God's handwriting everywhere. Such a person sees God's movement in all events, even moments of loss and grief, sin and pain, suffering and death, for the psalmist sees the big picture—the end of the story already written into the beginning. The psalmist knows that God's steadfast love, merciful compassion, and powerful justice are greater than any human sin or weakness, any natural disaster, any form of death. The singer of the psalms approaches life with hope.

Salvation is communal. One who sings the psalms sees the interconnectedness of all our stories and strives to share this vision with others. Such a person takes time to listen to the stories of others, knowing that each one is a psalm, a story of divine-human interaction moving from lament and suffering to praise and thanksgiving. This person pays compassionate heed to events in every corner of the globe, knowing that every cry of pain is his or her own cry, every shout of jubilation is his or her own shout. One who sings the psalms excludes no one from God's embrace and is active for justice and peace.

Salvation shows itself in the offering of praise and thanksgiving. One who sings the psalms is able to offer God praise in every event of life, joyful or sad. Such a person gives thanks for all things great and small. The psalmist is confident that salvation is assured and cognizant that it does not depend upon oneself, and for this he or she gives thanks and praise.

Salvation is the personal transformation that comes through giving ourselves over to God. Singing the psalms shapes who we are because in praying them we are reminded over and over of the story of salvation and of the God who writes that story. We are lifted beyond limited self-understanding to a vision of our

importance in the eyes of God who spares no effort on behalf of our salvation. We are stretched beyond self-absorption to a sense of identity with all of struggling humankind. We are immersed in the messy stuff of life and discover that we do indeed move from lament to praise. These directional pulls slowly change the configuration of our beliefs and behaviors and we find ourselves living a paschal mystery spirituality shaped by the psalms.

In fact, when we pray and sing the psalms—whether alone or with others in liturgy—we are praying or singing ourselves into being: being one with each other and God. The psalms help us bridge the human and divine, the individual and communal, lives at worship and lives immersed in everyday tasks. In singing them we become the very embodiment of God’s story of salvation, and the ongoing song in our hearts, like the ancient psalmist’s, becomes “Alleluia!”

A Spirituality Shaped by Singing the Responsorial Psalms

This chapter began by citing the remark of Joseph Gelineau that one who sings a psalm becomes for God that psalm. His comment reminds us that the psalms are formative texts that shape who we are and who we are becoming. The biblical psalm collection as a whole, Psalms 1–150, recapitulate the entire content of the Bible. The psalms are the foreshortened, poetic version (we might whimsically title them “Salvation History: The Musical”) of how humankind encounters over and over again the God who acts constantly to save us from sin, despair, destruction, and death. The key to praying and singing the psalms with understanding is the ability to recognize this divine intervention in our lives. The psalms’ metaphors are ours; we need only to cast them in the light of the concrete names, places, and experiences of our own lives. Or, more accurately, we need only to view our experiences in the light of the psalmic metaphors. What, for example, is the Pit for us (see Pss 30; 143)? Who are the ravaging lions (see Pss 22; 57)? What enemies is God countering on our behalf (see Pss 3; 27; 36)? How, under

the impulse of God's grace, are our lives moving from lament to praise (see Pss 79; 86; 116)?

Becoming a psalm means letting our selves be shaped by this story that the psalms tell, and then living out of that story. The following section explores what this means when you are singing only selected verses of one psalm on a given Sunday of the liturgical year. How does the responsorial psalm in the Liturgy of the Word *affect* your spirituality as cantor? Who do you become, and how does this becoming take place?

The Responsorial Psalm as a Slice of Salvation History

If the Psalms as a whole collection retell the story of salvation, what you encounter in the three or four verses that comprise the responsorial psalm on a given Sunday of the year is only, then, a mere slice of a slice of that story. This leads us to two contradictory assertions: first, that one slice is enough and no second helping is needed; and second, that one slice is never enough but only whets the appetite.

One slice is enough. While in the Liturgy of the Hours each psalm stands as a self-contained text, in the Liturgy of the Word the responsorial psalm stands in relation to the readings of the day. The psalm verses were chosen to help us see the connections between the readings so that we can grasp how they function together in the annual liturgical unfolding of the mystery of salvation. In particular the responsorial psalm acts as a bridge leading us from the first reading (and on solemnities and during festal seasons, also second reading) to a paschal mystery encounter with the risen Christ in the proclamation of the gospel. Generally, the three or four verses given in the Lectionary are sufficient to form that bridge and singing the entirety of the psalm would actually interfere with its function.

One slice is enough because the responsorial psalm is not the core of the Liturgy of the Word, but its adjunct. Here the psalm is not telling the story but helping us enter the broader telling that the readings present. It is the readings that unfold throughout the liturgical year the ongoing story of God's salvific interventions in

our history (particularly as those interventions reach completion in Christ) and the story of our continuing confrontation with the call to fidelity and discipleship. As the year progresses, and as each year follows one upon another, these readings enable us to enter the story that is concretely unfolding in our lives by distilling it for our clarification. Against the backdrop of the cycle of liturgical readings we see more clearly the meaning of the constantly shifting experiences of daily Christian living. We discover the background story, which is the real story. The role of the responsorial psalm on any given day is to help us engage in this underlying story. On some days this engagement is readily achieved, as, for example, on the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B, when the first reading proclaims that “God did not make death” (Wis 1:13), the gospel tells the story of Jesus raising Jairus’s daughter from death (Mark 5:21-43), and the responsorial psalm sings that God has “brought me up from the netherworld” and “changed my mourning into dancing” (Ps 30). On other days the engagement requires deeper reflection on the juxtaposition of this psalm with these readings. For example, consider the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B. Here the first reading has God knowingly sending Ezekiel to speak to those who will spurn him (Ezek 2:2-5) and the gospel has Christ unable to work miracles in his native place because as a prophet he is without honor among his own people (Mark 6:1-6). The responsorial psalm with its refrain, “Our eyes are fixed on the Lord, pleading for his mercy,” appears at first glance to be unrelated to these readings. Only further reflection leads to the insight that in singing these psalm verses we are identifying with Ezekiel and with Christ. We align ourselves with their mission to speak God’s word and in so doing we discover that the story of salvation includes our discipleship, our willingness to face contempt, and our recognition that we can only find the courage to do so if we keep our eyes fixed securely on the Lord.

On the other hand, one slice is never enough. The taste of a few verses makes us hungry for more. Sometimes reflection on the entire text of the psalm enables even greater participation

in the discipleship to which the readings call us. For example, Psalm 34 with its refrain, “Taste and see the goodness of the Lord,” is an obvious choice for the Nineteenth to Twenty-First Sundays in Ordinary Time, Year B, when we are in the midst of proclaiming the Bread of Life discourse from the Gospel according to John. Different verses are sung on different Sundays and on each day the verses selected offer insight into the particular gospel reading. But the entire text of Psalm 34 offers further insight, especially when we uncover the progression of thought created in verses 9-15 where the text moves from proclaiming how good God is to enjoining us to do good. The psalm as a whole reveals that the gospel does not live outside of but within us, that our feasting on the goodness of Christ’s Body and Blood means committing ourselves to being that same goodness for others. And this is the story of salvation.

One slice is never enough also because the psalm stands not only in relation to the readings of the day, but in relation to the whole collection of the psalms. We become hungry to ask what this particular psalm is about. Where, for example, on the continuum of the movement from lament to praise, does this psalm lie? Is this a psalm of thanksgiving or of petition? of despair and loss, or of victory and joy? What is its unique contribution to the unfolding plot of salvation history? The more we understand a given responsorial psalm in the context of the entire Psalter, the more clearly we understand its contribution to this particular Liturgy of the Word.

Becoming the Responsorial Psalm

This discussion leads to some reflections on what it means for you as cantor to become the responsorial psalm.

The responsorial psalm is only a slice of the salvation story. One who sings the responsorial psalms becomes schooled in living the slices of that story in his or her own life. Such a person sees isolated events in the larger context of God’s ongoing work to bring all things to completion and wholeness.

Although only a slice, the responsorial psalm is nourishment enough for one day. One who sings the responsorial psalms be-

comes satisfied with what of the whole story of salvation is revealed for today. Such a person realizes that one does not have to eat the whole pie to appreciate the balance of its ingredients and the mastery of its Baker. In the single slice is the mystery of it all. Such a person is patient with life and with God's timing of things.

The responsorial psalms connect the daily details to the big picture of salvation. One who sings the responsorial psalms Sunday to Sunday and year to year comes to see that one day, one event, one choice is never isolated from all the other days, other events, other choices. Such a person understands that everything is part of the ultimate transformation of lament into praise, which is the plan of God for human salvation. Such a person becomes a bridge for people between the details of human living—the events, feelings, conflicts, struggles, victories, joys of each day—and the broader salvation story of which these details are a part.

Singing the Psalms Becomes a Way of Living

A woman who had been cantoring for years in her parish once had a sudden revelation of how the singing of the responsorial psalms had been slowly shaping her spirituality. A neighbor, looking at the extensive flower bed outside the cantor's front door and then glancing at her own tiny two-foot plot, lamented, "Your flowers grow so beautifully, and mine do nothing." Turning to look at her patch, the cantor saw lovely blossoms of white petunias sprinkled with outbreaks of pink and purple. Shooting up between and amid all of them were the rich greens of variegated weeds. "Oh," she exclaimed, "your patch is fine! If you want more color just move some of this green out." As she began to pull up some of the weeds, her neighbor said, "One thing I've noticed about you—you always see good in everything!"

The cantor realized with sudden insight that her neighbor was telling her far more than she intended. Her neighbor was telling her that *she was a cantor*, one who could see in the mixture of bloom and weed the burgeoning of both lament and praise, one

who could see in this puny but lush patch the Garden created at the beginning and intended for the end. She was telling her that her *very way of living was the song* heard at the crossroads where the paths between lament and praise, between one day's journey and the journey of a lifetime, between the daily struggle of Christian living and the liturgical proclamation of its meaning intersect on the progress homeward to their final flourishing.

9

Understanding Your Role as Song Leader

This chapter looks at those moments in the eucharistic liturgy when you might be called upon to fill your secondary role, that of song leader. At some points the rite calls for a song leader, at some points the form of music requires one, and at some points the assembly dictates the need for one. The chapter also addresses when it is not appropriate for you to act as song leader and explains why. At issue is discerning when you need to lead the assembly in its singing and when you need to let the assembly lead itself.

When the Rite Calls for a Song Leader

Singing the Kyrie

As we use it today the *Kyrie* is a vestige of a longer litany of petitions. By the fourth century it had been adopted as the assembly's response to a litany of petitions prayed after the readings and homily. Near the end of the fifth century this litany of petitions was moved to a position within the opening rites. By the eighth century the petitions had disappeared and only the response remained in the format of three *Kyries*, three *Christes* and three more *Kyries*. During the Middle Ages many local

regions added tropes, that is, invocations related to the feast of the day or the liturgical season. The Council of Trent eliminated these tropes, but Vatican Council II reinstated them.

In the current Roman Missal, the *Kyrie* is said or sung either immediately following the penitential act, or as part of the penitential act, depending on which of three options is chosen. When the first or the second option is used, the *Kyrie* follows. With the third option, the *Kyrie* is incorporated into the form. Appendix VI of the Missal provides various sets of invocations for this option.

The *Kyrie* functions not just as a cry for mercy but also as an acclamation praising the Lord (GIRM 52) who saves us from sin and death and leads us to the kingdom. What does this dual role mean for you as song leader? The first issue to be decided is when during the liturgical year you might sing the *Kyrie*. As part of the introductory rites during Ordinary Time and the Christmas and Easter seasons, we sing the Glory to God, a hymn of praise to the Trinity that includes invocations to Christ for mercy. During these liturgical periods, then, singing the *Kyrie* with invocations (the third option for the penitential act) would be redundant. Singing the *Kyrie* during Advent and Lent, however, when the Glory to God is omitted, makes liturgical sense. During Advent, using the third option for the penitential act with set I of the invocations given in the Roman Missal appendix would be particularly appropriate because the text praises Christ in terms of his three comings: in history (“you came to gather the nations into the peace of God’s kingdom”), in sacrament (“you come in word and sacrament to strengthen us in holiness”), and at the end of time (“you will come in glory with salvation for your people”). During Lent, using the first option for the penitential act, the *Confiteor* followed by a simple sung *Kyrie* litany, would be most appropriate.

The second issue concerns the musical setting of the *Kyrie*. What musical style fits the liturgical season? During Advent a setting that is joyful, expressing expectation and hope is appropriate, as is a setting that communicates our longing for the coming of Christ. During Lent a setting that is penitential in tone would be in order. Since the *Kyrie* is a minor rite within the Mass, in either season the

setting needs to be simple and unencumbered with instrumentation. Finally, the setting needs to give the assembly members their part. As GIRM 52 indicates, this litany is meant to be sung by everyone present, with cantor or choir playing a supporting role.

Singing the Gospel Acclamation

The gospel acclamation is the assembly's joyful acknowledgment that Christ is truly present in the proclamation of the gospel (GIRM 60). Using the Book of the Gospels rather than the Lectionary for the gospel proclamation strengthens this understanding (see GIRM 60; 133). In practice, however, our singing of the gospel acclamation is often divorced from its function. GIRM itself directs that the singing of the acclamation accompany not the elevation of the Book of the Gospels, but the personal and private preparations of the presider or deacon who is to proclaim (132; 175). What a difference it would make, however, if our first shout of "Alleluia" coincided with the raising of the Book of the Gospels from its place on the altar, and if our continued singing accompanied the procession of the Book to the place of proclamation. The connection between what we were singing and why would be much more evident.

How might you as song leader help the assembly members connect what they are singing with the ritual action that is taking place? One way might be to gesture not to the assembly but toward the Book of the Gospels once it has been elevated. Use your gesture to communicate what the singing is about. Another way is internal, having to do with your own acknowledgment of the presence of Christ in the gospel proclamation. In leading this acclamation, you need to take up the ministry of John the Baptist, who heralded the coming of Christ. You need to be a person who points away from self toward Another who is far more important.

Singing the Universal Prayer (Prayer of the Faithful)

In the early centuries general intercessions or a prayer of the faithful litany sometimes followed the Liturgy of the Word. Praying for the needs of all humanity was a natural response to having

heard the salvific word of God. The power to lift such prayer was considered a participation in the priesthood of Christ, a right bestowed by baptism. Even today we still dismiss catechumens from the Mass before these prayers are raised because they do not yet hold this right.

Over the course of time these general intercessions disappeared from the Liturgy of the Word until they were restored by the liturgical revisions of Vatican II. Now called the universal prayer in the current Roman Missal, the prayer of the faithful needs to be well written and well led. The statements of intention are to be brief (GIRM 71). They are to be for the needs of the church, for public authorities and the salvation of the world, for the needy burdened with any difficulty, and for the needs of the local community (GIRM 70). They need to be truly general (universal) rather than particular (GIRM 71). Since they bring the Liturgy of the Word to its conclusion, effectively written ones use content and imagery drawn from the readings, most particularly the gospel, and/or from the liturgical feast day or season.

The issue to be decided for you as song leader is whether and/or when the universal prayer might be sung. Two principles need to guide this decision. First, is to do whatever helps the assembly enter into the intended prayer. Whether sung or spoken the intentions must enable a wellspring of communal prayer for the sake of the church, the world, the needy, and the local community. Depending on how the texts are written, singing them might actually get in the way of this praying. On the other hand, knowing that the intentions are going to be sung might guarantee that they be better written and more prayerfully led. The second guiding principle is the principle of progressive solemnity. Sing the universal prayer during the festive seasons of Easter and Christmas and on solemnities such as All Saints and Christ the King. On all other occasions have them prayerfully read.

Singing the Lamb of God

This litany was added to the Roman rite in the seventh century to accompany the fraction rite that took some time as whole

loaves of bread were broken apart and their pieces placed in linen sacks to be carried by acolytes to various ministers for distribution to the people. When the Roman rite began using ready-made hosts of unleavened bread in the eleventh to twelfth centuries, the fraction rite was greatly shortened and this litany was reduced to only three repetitions sung by the choir alone. Eventually it was moved to the kiss of peace and its third response became “grant us peace.” Vatican II restored its place as accompaniment to the fraction rite and its form as a chant of the people, and made provision for it to be lengthened as needed.

We are readily familiar with references to Christ as Lamb of God, both from John the Baptist’s appellation of him as the Lamb who takes away our sins, and from the numerous references in the book of Revelation to him as the Lamb who sits at the throne of God and in whose blood we are purified. We are likewise familiar with the scriptural references to ourselves as the lambs whom Christ shepherds and for whom he cares. But are we equally aware that the New Testament also refers to us as sacrificial lambs? We are not only the lambs whom Christ feeds (John 21:15); we are also lambs sent on a mission fraught with danger and the possibility of death (Luke 10:3).¹ This application of the image of sacrificial lamb to both Christ and us, his disciples, sheds a revealing light on our singing of the Lamb of God litany during the rite of fracturing. What is being fractured? For whom? Not only Christ for us, but us for the world. We are the bread that is broken, the wine that is poured out. No wonder we intercede for mercy and peace from the Lamb who has first given his life for us!

The rite of fracturing and the Lamb of God litany that accompanies it call us to participate in the symbolic gesture of being broken apart and poured out so that all the world may eat and drink. Yet how often do the fraction rite and the Lamb of God begin and end with no more than our cursory attention? To what extent do we consider the Lamb of God nothing but filler music while we wait for Communion to begin?

This litany needs to be sung with deliberation and grace so that through singing it we come to understand what we

are choosing for ourselves in coming to the eucharistic table. Through the singing of this litany we take the final steps of our internal journey toward the choice for which the liturgy has been preparing us from its beginning: to be the Body of Christ given for the life of the world. Once this choice is made, we are ready to joyfully begin our physical procession toward bread and wine, Body and Blood, life and death.

How might you as song leader lead the Lamb of God? One thing you might do is direct your gesture toward what is happening on the altar so as to draw the attention of the assembly to the fraction rite. Another thing is to make the internal choice the fraction rite is calling you to make. As you sing truly ask Christ the Lamb to grant you, and all the church, the mercy and peace you need to surrender yourself to being the Body of Christ broken for the world.

When the Form of the Music Requires a Song Leader

There are a number of pieces of liturgical music written with a song leader in mind. Call-and-response entrance songs, verse-refrain Communion songs, Taizé chants with solo verses sung over a continuously repeated assembly refrain, responsorial settings of the Holy, Holy, Holy are just some examples. Such musical forms are written with a dialogue between assembly and song leader in mind, and their number is rapidly multiplying because of today's increased cross-cultural communication and multicultural celebrations. The song leader need not be the cantor, however, but can be any member of the choir. The choir itself, in fact, oftentimes acts as the song leader. The issue is discerning when you as cantor need to be the song leader. The answer does not depend on any ritual requirements, but on the musical requirements of a given piece and the availability of competent singers. You need to be the song leader when your particular voice is the right one for the piece, or when you are the one who knows the music, or when you are the only one available. Notice that the answer is determined not by the fact that you are cantor, but by the needs of the situation.

When the Assembly Needs a Song Leader

There are actually only two situations when the needs of the assembly *per se* call for your ministry as a song leader. First, the assembly needs you to act as song leader when they have just been introduced to a new song or a new setting of the Mass and they are not yet confident about singing it. You need to offer them your assistance during the time it takes them to master the new music and make it their own.

Second, you need to act as song leader when the assembly lacks a competent organist or keyboard player to lead their singing. This is the case also when the primary instruments accompanying the assembly's singing are guitars. Your voice must become the lead instrument. This need may vary from liturgy to liturgy even in the same parish and on the same Sunday. However, except for the singing of the responsorial psalm for which you function in your primary role as psalmist, it need not be you who acts as song leader. Any competent singer, or the choir or music ensemble as a group, can fill this role. You need to let the assembly's need and not your own need to be front and center guide decisions in this matter.

When You Ought Not to Act as Song Leader

Most of the ritual elements that call for a song leader do not require you as cantor to be that leader. Any competent singer, or the choir as a group, can fill this role. You need to be judicious about when you need to be song leader for these elements and when you don't. Two issues are operating here. One is the very real danger of your becoming too dominant a figure in the liturgy. If you keep your sense of self in perspective, you will find yourself easily sharing song leader roles with others who have the competency. The second issue is safeguarding your more important role, that of psalmist, by, in a sense, reserving yourself for it. This may sound like a contradiction of the prior point just made, but you are not making yourself important in doing this; you are making the responsorial psalm important.

Another point to be made is that it is the responsibility of the organist or keyboardist to lead the assembly's singing of the hymns, songs, and Mass parts; you ought to act as song leader for these, then, only when competent keyboard leadership is absent. It is also the responsibility of the organist or keyboardist to lead the singing of the acclamations during the eucharistic prayer; you ought to act as song leader for these acclamations, then, only when the music is new or unfamiliar to the assembly and they need your assistance, and then as soon as they know it well, to return leadership to the organist/keyboardist. The ticklish issue arises when the organist or keyboardist who is playing does not know how to lead the assembly's singing effectively. This is a challenging skill that requires specific training. When this situation prevails, the solution, however, is not that you as cantor take over more and more musical leadership. The solution is either to help the current musician gain the needed skills or to find another musician who already possesses them.

Even in cases when the assembly does need your assistance, your voice needs to be the secondary rather than the dominant one. When helping the assembly become confident with singing a new piece of music, for example, you need to get yourself out of the way as soon as possible so that they can take ownership of the singing. The less you are in front of the assembly and the less singing you do for them, the better. Paradoxically, your absence at these times will make your presence when filling your primary role—that of psalmist—even more effective.

Less Is More

This chapter seems filled with contradictions. While it identifies song leader roles in the Mass and offers you suggestions for how to fill these roles effectively, it also invites you to minimize your involvement in these roles. Your primary role is that of psalmist. Relinquishing unwarranted and inappropriate emphasis on your role as song leader will allow you to give more time and energy to your role as psalmist.

Much more is involved, however. You will be honoring the assembly members as the principal music makers in the liturgy. Your role will decrease so that theirs may increase (STL 38–39). There will be times when you will be exercising a great deal of visible leadership of the singing because the music chosen for a given celebration or season includes a number of cantor-led forms. Your goal will be to lead this music so effectively that the result is an intensely animated, strongly singing assembly. There will be times when you will be exercising a great deal of visible leadership of this singing because the assembly members are struggling to master new music. Your goal will be to lead so effectively that they outgrow their need for your leadership as quickly as possible. Fundamentally, your role is about giving yourself over to Christ and his Body, the church. Sometimes your presence must increase; other times it must decrease. Sometimes you must be visible, other times invisible. The very doing well of your role, then, will enact the paschal mystery within you.

10

The Cantor Gesture

The word “gesture” comes from the Latin *gestare*, meaning “to bear,” and is linked to the related term “gestation.” Gesture, then, refers to something that grows within until it is ready to be given birth. Gestures come in all sizes and shapes, each an external action communicating an internal orientation. A gesture has as much to do with our internal state of mind as it does with our external manner of behaving, for it is a full-flowering of what has been growing over time within the inner regions of our mind and heart. Even though a gesture originates interiorly we tend to think of it only in terms of its external existence, of its outward form that we see and upon which we place an interpretation. But the gesture has a prior existence within the mind and heart of the sender. It is this prior existence that generates the gesture and informs its message. It is this prior existence that is more significant.

Some gestures are conscious while others are unconscious. We are aware of some of our communicative gestures, and unaware of others. This state of awareness or unawareness is a function to some extent of whether or not we are in touch with the internal attitude, belief, or feeling that gives birth to a gesture. Becoming conscious of our gestures, then, can be a journey of self-discovery.

Gestures also shape us. While the interior attitude or belief determines the external gesture, it is also true that practicing

certain gestures nurtures attitudes and beliefs within us. We teach children, for example, to say “thank you” so that they will learn what it means to be grateful, to be beholden, to receive graciously. We teach them to hold a door open for a person walking behind them so that they will learn to be aware of others and attentive to their needs. Having children practice such gestures is a way of planting seeds in the fields of their hearts so that desired beliefs and attitudes will grow there and appropriate behaviors will follow.

In a very real sense all of our singing during the liturgy is a form of gesture. Through our singing we nurture and give birth to our desire to worship, to praise, to thank, and to petition God, and our willingness to bond with the Body of Christ in the expressing of these attitudes. We sing our choice to be the church and to surrender together to the death-resurrection demands of the paschal mystery. But while singing may be our most obvious musical gesture, it is not the only gesture involved in our music making. Listening to the choir sing a prelude or the presider sing the opening collect is a musical gesture. Opening the hymnbook, sharing it with someone else, replacing it with care in the pew or book rack when the singing is finished—all of these are gestures related to music making. In other words, a whole complex of responses and body movements surrounds our singing, giving it deeper dimension by expressing more fully our inner attitude of willingness to participate in what it means to be the Body of Christ.

The same is true of the cantor’s gesture. Much more is involved than the simple raising of an arm. Many movements communicate the cantor’s inner understanding of the ministry and his or her willingness to enter into it.

Learning the Gesture

In terms of gesture your goal as cantor is twofold. You need to learn how to use an arm gesture that is graceful, communicative, and rhythmically related to the music you are singing.

And you need to learn that this gesture is not an isolated action punctuating the psalm at certain intervals, but an organic part of the entire manner in which you are participating in the liturgy. Your very appearance, for example, is part of your gesture. How you are dressed, how you carry your music, how you walk to the cantor's stand all communicate something to the assembly. A good way to explore the complex of gestures related to your ministry is to gather with other cantors in your church space and practice different ways of walking, sitting down, standing up, carrying music, as well as ways of using hand and arm gestures when actually singing the psalm. As a guide, duplicate the worksheet given at the end of this chapter and move through a sequential practice of what is outlined there.¹ Hands-on practice of these gestures is indispensable, and critiquing one another will be invaluable.

Entering the Church

Enter the church in your customary way and become aware of how you do so. Are you walking calmly, or in a rush? quietly, or noisily? hunched over, or upright and tall? When you enter the church as the psalmist, you need to be conscious of your dignity as daughter or son of God, as member of the Body of Christ, as minister of the liturgical prayer of the church. You need to be aware that the ministry you are about to fulfill is Christ's, and that his Spirit has planted the capability to do it in your heart and body.

Become aware, then, what you are thinking about as you enter the church and walk to your seat. Are you thinking about this day's liturgy, about the ministry in which you are about to engage, about the prayer of this day's psalm? Or are you worrying about how you will sound, or about when to walk to the ambo or cantor's podium, or about how your hair looks? One helpful way to focus your thoughts on the liturgy of the day is to keep singing through the psalm refrain in your mind, using it as a mantra for prayer and as a melody for rehearsing your role in the day's liturgy.

As you arrive at your seat examine how you sit down: noisily, or quietly? gracefully, or clumsily? Proper sitting posture balances the body on the sitz bones, the pointy tips at the bottom of the pelvic bones that support the spine in an upright orientation. Correct alignment of pelvis and spine affects appearance and communicates an “attitude” of dignity, confidence, and self-possession. An effective way to maintain this sense of self-possession while waiting for the liturgy to begin is to sit uprightly and read through the text of the psalm as a prayer, allowing it to take possession of your spirit.

Approaching the Place from Where the Psalm Is Sung

Next, practice rising from your seat and walking to the place where the responsorial psalm will be sung. How does one rise gracefully? It is important to maintain the upright sitting position described above, keeping your feet flat on the floor so that when you rise you can do so by using your legs rather than your arms and shoulders. When you remain properly aligned while seated, you can rise easily by shifting one foot slightly behind the other and then tilting forward slightly from the hips and straightening the legs; there is no need to use your arms and shoulders to “push off” from the armrests or seat of the chair. In fact, the arms and shoulders are not needed at all. The result is both an appearance of gracefulness and a sense of being in touch with your center of gravity. Practice rising in this manner several times until you become comfortable with it. Once you have mastered this way of rising you will be elated at the sense of connectedness it establishes with your center of gravity. You will feel more in control of what you are doing, and this confidence will carry over into your singing of the psalm.

Practice walking to the place from where the psalm will be sung, applying the same principles used when you walked into the church, but adding specific details about how you carry your music. Ideally, the music is already at the cantor stand, but when circumstances do not allow this, the music should be placed in a book or binder rather than carried as loose papers. It should

be carried up in an inconspicuous manner, not, for example, open in front of your body as you riffle for the correct page, or clutched to your chest as a protection against self-consciousness. Nor should it be carried ostentatiously. It is not the Book of the Gospels but simply a music aid and while you want to treat it with respect, you don't, on the other hand, want to do anything that might make more of it than it is.

What ought you to be thinking about as you approach the podium? The most appropriate—and helpful—thing is to keep your focus on Christ, and to ask him for the grace to surrender to the action of the Liturgy of the Word so that you might lead the assembly to him in the singing of the psalm.

Leading the Psalm

Once you arrive at the place where you will sing the psalm, let the stance you adopt continue to express your attitude of self-possession and Christ-centeredness. Practice standing with correct physical alignment, comfortable but not rigid, with knees loose rather than locked. Decide where to place your hands, trying different positions and evaluating with the other cantors how each appears and what different positions communicate to the assembly. For example, while holding your hands in a folded position in front of your abdomen may help you feel more secure, it may also communicate that the psalm is a private experience, a prayer you “hold” within yourself, rather than share with the assembly. By contrast, placing your hands on the podium creates a stance that is both open and grounded. Don't “hug” the podium but allow some space between it and your body. The visual picture you will then create is one of openness, of willingness to share this psalm with the assembly. Moreover, the physical connection with the stand will give you a feeling of being grounded, which will build your confidence. Finally, don't be surprised if the other psalmists who are listening to and evaluating you report hearing a change in the quality of your singing when you adopt such a stance. Standing in this way helps generate a more open, more resonant, more supported sound.

The question of where to direct your eyes when singing needs to be answered by evaluating the text of the psalm itself. When the text is addressed to God, as, for example, “Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; / teach me your paths” (Ps 25:4), looking at the assembly communicates the wrong message. You are not singing to the assembly; you are singing to God on their behalf. You are praying in their name and allowing them to watch you do so. You do not want to keep your eyes glued on the page, but neither do you want to focus on the assembly. The problem is deciding where to look when the Person to whom you are speaking cannot be seen. You will need to experiment with different approaches and ask for evaluation from the other cantors.

A similar principle applies when you are singing a text about God, as in the verse, “The LORD God keeps faith forever, / secures justice for the oppressed” (Ps 146:6). You are not speaking to God but you are not actually speaking to the assembly, either. Rather, you are leading them in a meditation on the mystery of God and God’s ways. As in the case of a text addressed to God, you need to look up from your music but without establishing eye contact with the assembly. Again, you’ll need to experiment with ways of doing this and ask for feedback from the other cantors.

When the text is addressed to the assembly members, as in, “Come, let us sing joyfully to the LORD; / let us acclaim the Rock of our salvation” (Ps 95:1), you need to give them eye contact when you sing it. This needs to be done judiciously, however, lest you inadvertently slip into an entertainment mode not in keeping with the prayer function of your role as cantor. Again, experiment with different approaches and have the other cantors help you evaluate their appropriateness and effectiveness.

Always make eye contact with the assembly whenever it is time for them to sing their part. Connect this eye contact with your arm gesture as part of your invitation to sing. Learning to do a graceful, communicative arm gesture takes time, and is perhaps one of the most difficult skills for a new cantor to master. The gesture takes musical sensitivity as well as attentiveness to the

needs of the assembly. Begin by thoroughly learning the text and the melody you are to sing. Memorize as much of the text as possible so that you will not have to keep your eyes glued to the music. Then try each of the following methods to determine the kind of arm gesture you need to use. Some methods work better for some cantors than others, and some fit certain psalm settings better.

1) Sing the refrain through several times. Each time you come to its conclusion initiate a gesture that fits the refrain's tempo and mood. Let the gesture rise out of the music by thinking of it as a continuation of the music rather than as something added on and separate. Practice making eye contact with the assembly each time you raise your arm(s).

2) Sing the refrain through several times. Between each repetition take an audible breath in the tempo of the refrain. Sometimes this "breath-beat" will be the duration of the basic beat of the refrain, for example, a quarter note. At other times, particularly when the refrain begins with a pick-up beat, the "breath-beat" will be the duration of the rest that immediately precedes the pick-up. Practice making eye contact and raising your arm(s) as you take this breath.

3) Imagine yourself sitting in the pews and begin singing the refrain when you think the assembly is likely to do so. What is the natural rhythm between your singing of the refrain as cantor and their repeating of it? Is it a short, pick-up beat? Or is it the length of a full beat? The answer to this question will tell you how long your gesture, and its accompanying breath, need to be. Once you have established the correct rhythm for the assembly's first singing of the refrain, repeat this process for their subsequent singing of it after each verse.

With all of these approaches you need to connect the gesture to the assembly to your intake of breath. Your gesture cues the assembly's intake of breath just before they begin to sing. When done correctly the assembly members will take a communal breath and enter together on their first note. Perhaps more than any other factor this unified breath assists the assembly members

to move from individual private prayer to the communal prayer of the liturgy, for it creates a felt experience of being the one Body of Christ.

Furthermore, your gesture before each refrain is not a musical cue but an expression of the prayer of the psalm. As you discover that prayer and breath are intimately connected and that a gesture tied to the breath is expressive of the prayer, your gesture will become freer, less self-conscious, and more fluid. It will also vary from refrain to refrain and psalm to psalm as the praying changes.

Learning how to synchronize your gesture with your breath and with the breath of the assembly takes time and practice. It also means making time to practice with your accompanist, who must learn to breathe with you and to incorporate this shared breath into his or her playing.

The final element to be addressed in relation to your actual singing of the psalm is where you are directing your thoughts as you sing. Leading the responsorial psalm requires having your attention on many elements at once: the text and melody of the psalm, the needs of the assembly, and the timing of the gesture. Yet focusing only, or even primarily, on these technical details will impede your praying of the psalm. Conversely, turning your attention to the praying of the psalm often channels the technical aspects of cantoring into a smooth, integrated operation. The key is whether your attention is focused on yourself (i.e., how well am I doing? how do I look?) or on God to whom (or about whom) you are singing. Focusing on God and on what you are singing to (or about) God generates the kind of self-forgetfulness that is at the heart of effective cantoring.

Returning to Your Seat

Lastly, practice leaving the place from where you sing the psalm, walking back to your seat, and sitting down. Continue all the skills practiced above: upright body alignment; calm pace; graceful sitting down. Keep your attention focused on the Liturgy of the Word. There are two readings yet to come, and the

psalm bears an integral relationship to them. Your role at this point is to continue listening. While such a listening mode requires inner discipline, it is also very liberating. It will free you from the natural temptation to spend the next several moments ruminating over how well, or not so well, you have just done as cantor. Staying physically calm (not fiddling, for example, with putting your music away) and holding your body in an attentive position (with eyes and ears directed toward the lector) are gestures through which you continue to carry out your ministry as cantor.

The Totality of What Your Gesture Encompasses

Your gesture is not limited to the use of your hand(s) and arm(s) during the actual singing of the psalm, but encompasses all of your behaviors from the time you enter church to the time you leave. Multiple movements are involved and these need to be discussed, understood, and practiced. Rarely will only one practice suffice. You need to continually evaluate your level of understanding and skill and take whatever steps you need to learn more. Above all, remember that the most important level of learning is the inner, spiritual one. Your gesture must originate from within. If this interior origin is missing, your movements and gestures will appear contrived and awkward. Your most important work is to integrate the techniques of good singing with the inner spirituality of liturgical prayer.

The ministry of psalmist is really one “grand gesture,” one all-encompassing communication of liturgical understanding and spirituality. This chapter has explored how this grand gesture is surrounded by a complex of supporting gestures, all of which nurture and communicate your faith and your surrender to the paschal mystery of Christ dying and rising within you. Your singing is a flowering of this faith and your accompanying gestures are its organic climate. They are the soil and the rain that shape the quality of your liturgical music making by feeding its wellspring and nurturing its growth.

Growing in the ministry of psalmist requires practicing these accompanying gestures. You need to practice them not only in liturgical celebration but also in daily Christian living. For while the ordinary affairs of work and family life may not find you singing a psalm, they will find you walking, sitting, standing, holding, handing, and taking with the dignity of one who is a daughter or son of God and member of the Body of Christ. Your every body movement can carry the inner mind-set of one who has been baptized. Such movements are gestures deeply rooted in your ministry as psalmist, and they are part of your preparation for every liturgical celebration.

THE CANTOR GESTURE

The cantor gesture *originates from within* and carries through the *entire process* of leading the responsorial psalm.

- 1) This gesture begins when you enter the church
(how do you walk?
how do you seat yourself?
where do you focus your attention, your thoughts?),
- 2) continues as you approach the place for singing the psalm
(how do you rise from your seat?
how do you walk?
how do you carry your music?
where do you focus your attention, your thoughts?),
- 3) carries through as you lead the psalm
(how do you stand?
where do you place your hands?
where do you direct your eyes?
how do you use your arm(s) and hand(s)?
how do you connect your gesture to your breath?
where do you focus your attention, your thoughts?),
- 4) and completes itself when you return to your seat
(how do you leave the ambo/cantor stand?
how do you walk?
how do you seat yourself?
where do you focus your attention, your thoughts?).

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11

Discerning the Call to Be a Cantor

The gift to be a cantor is very specific and is not as widespread as, say, the gift to be a good lector. It goes without saying that an obvious requirement for cantoring is a good singing voice. But as a liturgical ministry the role requires additional gifts and qualities. Discerning whether you have this gift, and growing in the gift if it has been given, is essential to effectively fulfilling this ministry. The qualities described in the following paragraphs apply primarily to the cantor as psalmist, but much of what is said applies equally well to the cantor as song leader.

The Quality of Personal Presence

A person with this quality pays attention to others, listens well, and communicates easily. Such personal presence is grounded in an inner silence that instills a contemplative capacity to hear the voice of God and the cries of the world and to respond. In essence a person with the gift to be a cantor is both self-possessed and other-centered.

The Ability to Be Poised before a Group

A person with the gift to be a cantor has the ability to take command of a group. We are not referring here to performance

ego (although that must be present—it is what drives any individual to do something solo in front of a group) but to a sureness of self that enables one to lead others in public surrender to the paschal mystery being enacted in the liturgical celebration.

Not every singer has the kind of poise needed to surrender to God in public. One discerning cantor, for example, recognized after a year of trying that she did not possess the necessary *chutzpah* to cantor well. Although very poised in other areas of her life, she simply froze when she had to stand alone in front of the assembly and sing. Hers was not the gift to be cantor, and recognizing this, she chose to contribute her musical gifts to the choir.

The Ability to Proclaim the Psalm

A person called to be a cantor possesses the ability “to proclaim the text of the Psalm with clarity, conviction, and sensitivity to the text, the musical setting, and those who are listening” (STL 35). This person is able to sing the text with clear diction and accurate pitch. Moreover, this person means what he or she is singing. This cantor sings from the conviction that the psalms are the inspired word of God. He or she sings from the conviction that it is Christ, not self, who sings the psalm in the name of the assembly. He or she sings from the conviction that God is working through the psalm to transform the assembly members into the kind of persons God wishes them to be. Moreover, he or she is willing to become that kind of person with them.

A person called to be a cantor is sensitive to the text of the psalm. This person knows the literary genre of the psalm (i.e., a lament, a hymn of praise, a song of ascents, a royal psalm, etc.). He or she understands the content and imagery in the text, and the colors of the words being used. On a deeper level he or she grasps the relationship of this psalm text with the readings of the day. This person has a sense, gained through prayer and reflection, of where God is leading the assembly through this psalm in this Liturgy of the Word on this Sunday in the liturgical year.

A person called to be cantor is sensitive to the musical setting of a psalm because he or she understands how the music

is interacting with and supporting the text. This person knows how to use the innate phrasing and dynamics of the musical setting, whether it be a psalm tone or a melodic composition, to communicate the meaning of the words.

A person with the gift to be a cantor is sensitive to those listening. This person directs attention outward toward the assembly, rather than inward toward how he or she is singing or how he or she is being affected privately by the words of the psalm. This person is comfortable looking up from the page at the assembly members, comfortable gesturing to them in a confident manner, and sensitive to the communal liturgical encounter with God the psalm is mediating. This person is able to place the needs of the assembly above self-involvement and personal gratification.

Self-Direction

A person called to be a cantor is self-directed about learning what the ministry entails. Such a person comes faithfully to practice sessions with the music director or accompanist, and continues practicing the music on his or her own time. Such a person invests time and energy in reflecting on the text of the psalm, on its meaning within the Liturgy of the Word to which it is assigned, and on the way it shapes daily Christian living.

A self-directed cantor does not require an inordinate amount of assistance from the accompanist when singing a psalm or leading the assembly during the actual liturgy. Admittedly, even the most seasoned cantors will need an attentive accompanist to jump to the rescue on occasion when they get distracted, miss a beat, or forget to turn a page. But a person with the gift to be a cantor does not fall prey to inaccurate rhythms, melodic mistakes, or missed entrances as a regular occurrence because he or she values serving the liturgy and the assembly too greatly to let this happen.

Openness to Critique and Coaching

We can hardly say enough about this characteristic because openness to being led and taught generally parallels openness to

God. Such openness reveals a fundamental trust in God and in self that is the wellspring of the ability to enter into the divine-human relationship expressed in the psalms.

No learning can take place without a willingness to be evaluated and challenged. While poised and confident, a good cantor is also malleable and open. The fact is, however, cantor training, like every learning experience, generates resistance. Many factors cause this, for example, lack of understanding of what is being asked for, lack of confidence in the ability to master the skill being presented, or lack of confidence in the one doing the coaching. The resistance is normal but it is also temporary; eventually the cantor moves beyond the resistance and does the learning. But when arrogance (i.e., “there is nothing I need to learn”) or a need for self-protection so intense it precludes critique (i.e., “don’t rock my boat, I’ll sink”) is at play, this move never happens. When the music director is working harder than the cantor to make the learning happen, then the gift to be cantor is missing. A person with the gift works as hard if not harder than the music director does (and both enjoy the results!).

Desire to Keep Learning

The world-renowned concert pianist Emanuel Ax has often stated that he practices the piano every day in the hope he will learn how to play it really well. Even with a psalm already sung numerous times, a person with the gift to be a cantor recognizes that each singing is a new moment, a new encounter with God, and a new opportunity to grow spiritually, liturgically, and vocally. Such a cantor never sloughs off preparation but pursues it diligently as a means of deepening his or her relationship with God and of honing his or her craft. For a person truly called to the ministry of cantor, the self-discipline of continual learning, practicing, and prayerful preparation is a joy rather than a burden.

So Who Is Called to Be a Cantor?

At stake in all liturgical celebrations is the call to surrender to the paschal mystery as it unfolds through its ritual enactment. During the course of the rite each liturgical ministry functions as specific moments and in specific ways to help this surrender happen. All of us have experienced the power of a good presider or a competent lector or an attentive eucharistic minister.

A person who possesses the gift to be a cantor has this kind of power. He or she is graced to lead the assembly through the singing of the responsorial psalm to deeper surrender to the action of God in the Liturgy of the Word. He or she is graced to lead the gathered community through the singing of the other musical elements of the Mass to deeper immersion in the rite.

The grace given is more than a lovely voice. This person has also been given the capacity to surrender to God in a public and transparent way. Without this gift all the cantor has is a beautiful voice and the assembly stops there. When this gift is present, however, the assembly moves beyond the voice—paradoxically by moving through it—to all they can become in Christ.

12

The Cantor and the Paschal Mystery

This chapter brings us full circle to the basic stance of this book: your most important preparation as cantor is to surrender yourself to the paschal mystery. We are now in a position to identify some concrete ways your very doing of the ministry of cantor enacts the paschal mystery in the liturgy itself, in your preparation to do your ministry, and in your daily living.

Enacting the Paschal Mystery within the Liturgy Itself

The paschal mystery refers to the mystery of Christ as well as to our participation in that mystery through baptism. We often summarize this mystery by using the paradigm of dying and rising but it is important to remember that the dying and rising are not discrete, chronological, tit-for-tat events. Rather, the dying and rising of the paschal mystery is the underlying and ongoing rhythm in which we live, and move, and have our being as members of the Body of Christ.

We enact the paschal mystery both in our liturgical celebrations and in our daily Christian living. What we encounter in real form in daily living we enact in ritual form in liturgy. One implication of this for you as cantor is that your ministry is more

than simply doing a job. As with every liturgical ministry, your ministry is a participation in the dying and rising mystery that the liturgy is enacting. As cantor you are doing more than leading the assembly's singing. More importantly, you are leading their surrender through the music to the paschal mystery they are celebrating. This means that in everything you sing—the responsorial psalm, the Lamb of God, the verses of the Glory to God, and so on—your own surrender to the paschal mystery must be evident. Without this inner surrender, your voice, no matter how beautiful, is nothing but sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.

As cantor you enact the paschal mystery during the actual celebration of the liturgy in a myriad of ways. When you arrive at church ahead of time in order to do whatever final preparation is needed, having had to rush breakfast, or interrupt a leisurely reading of the Sunday paper, or leave home without the rest of the family, you are choosing to die to self. When, having arrived at church, you postpone the socializing you would like to do in order to focus your attention on the final preparations your ministry requires (such as getting your music in order, setting up what you need at the cantor's podium, and rehearsing with the musician), you are choosing to empty self.

When during the proclamation of the first reading, despite last-minute jitters, you listen to the word of God rather than furtively look over the music of the psalm, you are choosing to give self over. When as you walk to the place from where you will sing the psalm you keep your heart and mind focused on Christ and ask his blessing on the ministry you are about to do, instead of worrying about what people might be thinking about how you are dressed or how you are walking, you are choosing to surrender self. When in singing the psalm you surrender yourself to the encounter with God the psalm facilitates, giving up whatever natural self-consciousness you might feel about praying in public, you are choosing to give self. When, having finished the psalm and returned to your seat, you continue to listen attentively to the proclamation of the readings, resisting

the temptation to replay in your mind what, and how well, you have just sung, you are choosing to empty self.

When as song leader you let yourself be guided by the demands of the rite or the needs of the assembly rather than your own need to have power or to perform, you are choosing to let go of self. When in leading the assembly to learn a new hymn, or master a new set of acclamations, or respond confidently and full-heartedly to a responsorial-style piece of music, you do so warmly and graciously, but always with an eye on relinquishing the front-and-center position as soon as possible, and always backing away from the microphone when it is the assembly's turn to sing, you are choosing to surrender self.

Through each of these paschal mystery choices you lead the assembly to full, conscious, and active participation in the mystery of their own dying and rising. Because of these choices, you shine with the light of one who has been raised to fuller life in Christ. You stand in front of the assembly as a living sign of what they, too, are becoming as they, too, choose such surrender.

Paradoxically, one of the most telling indications that you as cantor are choosing to die and rise with Christ will be the presence of silence within the assembly. It is always tempting to measure your success only in terms of volume level, but even the most full-bodied singing of an assembly that has been led to surrender to Christ will contain a dimension of silence that can be heard beneath the notes. This silence is the manifestation of their prayerful presence to Christ and to one another as Body of Christ. This silence is the inaudible sound of their surrender to the paschal mystery that shapes their lives. An assembly that has entered this level of silence will not wish to break it with applause. Nor will they feel the need to compliment you on the beauty or power of your voice, for you will have simply become transparent. You will have been the doorway to a clearer vision of what it means for them to surrender self to Christ. And is not such transparency the goal of all liturgical ministry? You must decrease so that Christ may increase. There is a dying to self here. But, oh, what a rising, and not only for this assembly but for the whole world!

Enacting the Paschal Mystery through Your Preparation

Preparing to sing a psalm as part of a liturgical celebration requires not only that you learn the music but that you also grapple with the meaning of the text and its application to your life and the life of the church. You need to spend time reflecting on the responsorial psalm in the context of the readings of the day. You need to spend time reflecting on the literary structure, internal movements, and poetic imagery of the psalmody for Morning or Evening Prayer. Spending such time requires making choices and, if you are normal, other things will always distract you. Some will have legitimate claims on your attention, but others will simply be temptations to avoid doing what is in fact a difficult spiritual task. To give up the distractions means to choose deeper involvement with your identity and mission as cantor and as member of the Body of Christ, and this always entails a dying to self. Each time you make the choice, however, you will experience resurrection through the deeper encounter with God to which the psalm will lead you, and you will offer the assembly not just your lovely voice or your competent singing, but your living witness to the new life dying to self always brings.

Enacting the Paschal Mystery in Your Daily Living

Finally, the transforming encounter with God to which the psalms will lead you will have an impact on your manner of living. Your very taking of time to reflect on the meaning and message of the psalms will school you in the habit of taking time to listen to the words and stories of the human beings in your life, at home, at work, in the parish and neighborhood, and in the world at large. You will be practiced both in seeing the connections between lament and praise, suffering and joy, death and resurrection, and in the patience it takes to arrive at such insight. You will be comfortable speaking every kind of feeling to God and comfortable with whatever you hear other human beings say in their prayer. Nothing in life will surprise you and nothing will shatter your confidence in God's ultimate gift of

redemption. You will be a person who receives life as it is, who takes the time to contemplate its meaning, and who sees all that happens from the perspective of God's viewpoint and desire.

Through Death to Life

Plumbing the implications of the paschal mystery is a life-long endeavor. Each time you take a deeper look at what you are doing as cantor you will discover new ways this ministry is inviting you to walk the paschal mystery journey with Christ.

This paschal mystery journey is a lifelong one. Its steps are encountered in the demands of everyday living and in the concentrated ritual focus of the liturgy. If you are to encounter the paschal mystery to its depths, and in that encounter discover your deepest identity as Body of Christ, then you must consciously choose—over and over—to surrender to death so that God might give you fuller life. Built into every liturgical ministry is a natural engagement in this mystery. You have only to discover it, and then to let it do its work. The process of discovery is itself a paschal mystery process of dying to self and rising to new life in Christ. For you as cantor this dying and rising is mediated through the very doing of your ministry, within the rite itself, in your preparation to do your ministry well, and in your daily living as one who is a cantor. How marvelous the workings of God that you needn't look any further than your chosen liturgical ministry and your daily life to find the way of salvation—for yourself, for the church at prayer, and for the world.

And this brings us to a paschal mystery paradox within the liturgical spirituality of the psalmist: you need to be very visible to the assembly and, at the same time, to remain anonymous as an individual. This ministry is not about self-promotion, but about self-surrender. It is not about revealing the timbre and beauty of your own voice, but about becoming the voice of Christ leading his people. To be simultaneously visible and anonymous embodies the dying-rising tension within the paschal mystery,

and only by giving yourself over to both aspects of this tension can you become who you are meant to be as a music minister.

The noted choral arranger and composer Alice Parker has often said that three circles operate in any good singing: the singer allows himself or herself to be compelled by the music, those hearing feel compelled to listen, and those listening feel compelled to join in the song. A competent cantor has this effect on the assembly. But notice the completing force in Parker's schema is not the person of the singer but the song being sung. A cantor needs to get self out of the way so that the song being sung can compel the assembly to surrender to the transformative action of the liturgy. When a cantor leads the way through his or her own personal giving over of self, the assembly members hear not just the words, not just the melody, but the deep-down sound of this surrender. And this is the "song" the assembly feels compelled to join, the "canticle of the victory over sin and death," the "Paschal hymn [that] does not cease when a liturgical celebration ends" (STL 7–8). To be able to facilitate this is quite a call, and quite a gift. It will require emptying yourself, pouring yourself out, dying to yourself. But what a resurrection awaits!

Notes

Introduction

1. *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2007).

2. Following the first edition of *The Ministry of Cantors*, this present volume uses the term “cantor” to refer to both the psalmist and the song leader, treating cantor as a category of music ministry with two subdivisions, that of psalmist and that of song leader.

Chapter 1

1. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* [SC]) 6: “[T]he church has never failed to come together to celebrate the paschal mystery . . . celebrating the Eucharist in which ‘the victory and triumph of [Christ’s] death are again made present’” (Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations; The Basic Sixteen Documents* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014]). Altogether SC refers to the paschal mystery eight times.

Chapter 2

1. Peter Purdue, “The New Lectionary,” *Doctrine and Life* 19 (1969): 666–79.

2. Irene Nowell, *Sing a New Song: The Psalms in the Sunday Lectionary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993).

3. Ralph Keifer, *To Hear and Proclaim: Introduction, Lectionary for Mass with Commentary for Musicians and Priests* (Washington: Pastoral Press, 1983), 81.

4. Harry P. Nasuti, “The Sacramental Function of the Psalms in Contemporary Scholarship and Liturgical Practice,” in *Psalms and Practice*:

Worship, Virtue, and Authority, ed. Stephen Breck Reid, 78–89 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001).

5. *Ibid.*, 81.

Chapter 4

1. For more on the importance of silence in the liturgy, see Kathleen Harmon, “Liturgical Music and the Role of Silence,” in *The Ministry of Music* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 83–91.

Chapter 5

1. Psalms 58, 83, and 109 are omitted because of their particularly violent content.

2. *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours*, Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (ICEL, 1974).

3. Paul VI, *Laudis Canticum*, apostolic constitution on the promulgation of the revised Liturgy of the Hours, 1971.

Chapter 6

1. Dianne Bergant, *Psalms 1–72*, vol. 22, and *Psalms 73–150*, vol. 23, New Collegeville Bible Commentary series (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013).

2. Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content and Message*, trans. Ralph D. Gehrke (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980), 23–25.

3. *Ibid.*, 21–23.

4. Psalm translations used in this chapter © Institute for Liturgical Ministry, Dayton, OH.

5. Many scholars do not think vv. 18–19 were originally part of Psalm 51 but were added when Israel began using the psalm for liturgical purposes. This fact notwithstanding, we might reflect on the images of the “broken and humble heart” and the “sacrifices of justice.” When is it that “bulls” can be an acceptable offering on God’s altars? Perhaps the meaning is not so much in terms of what God will accept but rather in terms of what we choose to offer. When with broken and humble hearts we allow justice to rule all our actions, what is it that we will put on the altar as our offering to God?

Chapter 7

1. Thomas Peter Wahl, *The Lord’s Song in a Foreign Land: The Psalms as Prayer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 106.

2. Kathleen Farmer, in *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. William R. Farmer, 824 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998).

Chapter 9

1. It is Joyce Ann Zimmerman who makes this connection in “Lamb of God,” in *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Carroll Stuhlmueller, 532 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

Chapter 10

1. For use in cantor training sessions, permission is granted to reprint the worksheet on page 74.

Recommended Readings

- Bergant, Dianne. *Psalms 1–72*. Vol. 22. New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013.
- Bergant, Dianne. *Psalms 73–150*. Vol. 23. New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013.
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- Brueggemann, Walter. *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*. 2nd ed. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007.
- Conable, Barbara. *The Structures and Movement of Breathing*. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2000.
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- Stuhlmüller, Carroll. *The Spirituality of the Psalms*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002.
- Zimmerman, Joyce Ann. *Morning and Evening: A Parish Celebration*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996.