MINISTRY OF CANTOR AND SONG LEADER

“Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

(Ephesians 5: 18-20)

MUSIC IN THE LITURGY

“Singing is the sign of the heart’s joy . . . Thus St Augustine says rightly, ‘Singing is for one who loves’, and there is also an ancient proverb: ‘Whoever sings well prays twice over’.”

(General Instruction of the Roman Missal 39)

“Liturgical worship is given a more noble form when the divine offices are celebrated solemnly in song, with the assistance of sacred ministers and the active participation of the people. “

(Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy 113)

“The primary role of music in the Liturgy is to help the members of the gathered assembly to join themselves with the action of Christ and to give voice to the gift of faith.”

(Sing to the Lord 125)

MINISTERS IN THE ASSEMBLY

“The liturgical musicians are first of all disciples, and only then are they ministers. . . . Like other baptized members of the assembly, pastoral musicians need to hear the Gospel, experience conversion, profess faith in Christ, and so proclaim the praise of God. Thus, musicians who serve the Church at prayer are not merely employees or volunteers. They are ministers who share the faith, serve the community, and express the love of God and neighbour through music.”

(Sing to the Lord 49)

SPIRITUALITY OF SERVICE: FOOD FOR THOUGHT

“A spirituality for pastoral musicians and all liturgical ministries involves the emptying out of self-interest and self-esteem – dying to oneself – so that one may offer to the community what belongs to it.”

(Fleming 97)

“Waste no time wondering, ‘Do you think they liked it?’ but ask at all times, ‘Did it help them and all of us to pray?’”

(Fleming 110)

“Although musical and liturgical competence is indispensable, the cantorial ministry is not one of virtuosity or musical showmanship. It is to be a servant, acting on behalf of the assembly and on behalf of the prayer being sung. To elicit prayer or, more exactly, to create conditions that allow
prayer to happen, the cantor enters into a relationship with a people. If the cantor is warm, gracious, and inviting, then the assembly's prayerful response is encouraged.”

(Johnson 41)

“The goal of the music director is not primarily to ensure better singing but rather better prayer through a better execution of the singing.”

(Deiss 50)

“The golden rule for leading the singing is: minimum intervention, maximum effect. D. Julien has cleverly expressed this principle in the following wisdom, which every music director should learn by heart:

When a phrase suffices, don’t give a speech.
When a word suffices, don’t utter a phrase.
When a gesture suffices, don’t utter a word.
When a look suffices, don’t make a gesture.”

(Deiss 50)

“. . . our goal as cantors should be, over time, to render ourselves obsolete. Our role is to lead, but in a leadership which consistently gives the power to the primary choir of the liturgy, the gathered assembly.”

(Breedlove & Turner 48)

THE ROLE

The role of the song leader is to engage the assembly in prayer by animating their singing. More specifically, that of the cantor is to proclaim the word of God in the form of the sung Responsorial Psalm, but often the word “cantor” is used interchangeably with “song leader”.

THE ATTRIBUTES

Song leaders will best serve the community when they are familiar with:

• the cycle of the liturgical year with its feasts and seasons
• the pattern of the readings from scripture
• the structure and dynamic of the Mass
• the nature of the parish community
• the acoustics of the parish church
• the parish’s liturgical music resources
• the items to be sung at that liturgy
• the place of silence in liturgical prayer.

“Music arises out of silence and returns to silence. God is revealed both in the beauty of song and in the power of silence. . . Silence in the Liturgy allows the community to reflect on what it has heard and experienced, and to open its heart to the mystery celebrated. . . The importance of silence in the Liturgy cannot be overemphasized.”

(Sing to the Lord 118)
APPLIED SKILLS

Song leaders will best serve the community by means of:
- their own full, conscious and active participation
- appropriate dress and demeanour
- a position that is visible to all but not dominant
- a posture that is both dignified and authoritative
- glances and gestures that communicate clearly
- a vocal style that invites and supports participation
- the capacity to listen to the assembly as they sing
- effective microphone technique.

BODY LANGUAGE

Simple forms of body language invite the assembly to participate without drawing attention to self:
- a pleasant expression and eye contact
- a clearly visible beckoning gesture usually with upturned palm, especially at the beginning of a verse or refrain
- “stepping the notes” in the form of a “pitch ladder” to indicate the rise and fall of the melody.

“If they do nothing more than stand, facing the people, singing with heart and voice, face and body, they are giving a visual image of how each individual should participate. . . The cantor should have a true voice but not necessarily a trained one – the aim is to get people to join in, and too ‘professional’ a voice may accomplish just the opposite.”
(Parker 82)

CHANTING THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The cantor of the psalm (and usually of the gospel acclamation) has a unique role because the chanting of the psalm is a proclamation of the word of God. This demands that the cantor articulates the text of the psalm – both the response and the verses – clearly and prayerfully, with full respect for the character of the particular psalm.

“These 150 poems are filled with the hopes and joys and sorrows and longings of our brothers and sisters over millennia; they have a great deal to say to us.”
(Breedlove & Turner 55)

SOME BASIC RULES

The song leader/cantor needs to:
- ascertain what is to be sung well in advance
- rehearse both personally and with other music ministers
- arrive in advance with sufficient time to set up before the community assembles
- constantly liaise with the presider and other liturgical ministers, especially other music ministers, the lectors, the communion ministers and the commentator.
A prayer

Gracious God,
you gather your people together in the spirit of your Son,
and give them a new song to sing.
Bless all who seek to lead your people in this song of praise.
May we minister our gifts to them in loving service
that you may be glorified by heartfelt prayer
and the body of Christ built up in joy and peace.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE


