Singing Psalms in the New Millennium

By Lourdes Montgomery

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Why, at the dawn of the third millennium of Christian history, should we worry about singing the psalms? Either the psalms, which predate Christian history by as much as a thousand years, have nothing to say to our time, or they hold a kind of validity and truth that transcends their imagery and their original setting in the Jerusalem Temple.

The apostle Paul encouraged the first faithful Christians to sing psalms (Col 3:16), and we have been singing them, one way and another, ever since. Issued just about thirty years ago (February 2, 1971), the church's *General Instruction for the Liturgy of the Hours* (GILH) reminded us of the musical nature of psalmody: "The psalms are not readings or prose prayers, but poems of praise. All the psalms have a musical quality that determines their correct style of delivery" (GILH 103). "Especially the psalms . . . are lyrical in form and do not yield their fuller meaning unless they are sung" (GILH 269). Their rhythm must be clear, and "different psalms may be sung in different ways for a fuller grasp of their spiritual meaning and beauty" depending upon "language used and especially by the kind of celebration" (GILH 121). We have a very long tradition of singing the psalms, since "the Book of Psalms has served as a song book for the people of God for three thousand years" (Lenti, 1999).

Psalms in Early Christian Liturgy

We know that the psalms were used in Jewish liturgy at the time of Christ, though the exact details of that use are somewhat unclear to us today, especially in terms of the use of psalmody in the synagogue--the ordinary experience of corporate worship for most Jews in occupied Palestine as well as in the Diaspora. We know a bit more about the use of psalmody in the Temple. We know, for example, that Psalm 105 was used during morning prayers in the Temple, Psalm 96 in the evening, Psalm 24 on the first day, Psalm 48 on Monday, Psalm 82 on Tuesday, Psalm 94 on Wednesday, Psalm 81 on Thursday, Psalm 93 on the eve of the Sabbath, and Psalms 38 and 91 on the Sabbath itself. Psalms 135 and 136 were used on Passover.

In music as well as other aspects of their developing liturgy, early Christians closely modeled their services on synagogue practice, and the early church adopted many ritual elements from the synagogue. It is thought that many of the prayers used in the first three centuries of Christian worship were taken directly from or adapted from prayers used in the synagogue. One thing that we know about the use of psalmody in synagogues in the early Christian centuries is that psalms were often sung in alternation between a soloist and the congregation. As this practice was used later in Christian worship, it came to be known as *responsorial* psalmody. Though this was possibly the most common method of delivery, there were other ways of singing the psalms in Jewish liturgy. In one type, which we call *antiphonal* psalmody, alternate verses were sung in turn by two choruses. Another type was characterized by *through-composed* settings of Scripture passages: The texts of the psalm verses were recited or sung from beginning to end without repetition or alternation (Grout, 1966).

The major difference in the use of psalmody in Christian and Jewish assemblies was not so much the way the psalms were chanted as the way the texts were interpreted. Increasingly, Christians assigned a *Christological* re-reading to the psalms that moved their meaning far beyond traditional orthodox interpretations. As the *General Instruction* notes: "The Fathers of the Church saw the whole psalter as a prophecy of Christ and the Church"

(GILH 109). For instance, passages from Psalms 22:2 ("My God, why have you abandoned me?") and 31:6 ("Into your hands I commend my spirit") were placed by the Gospel writers on the lips of Jesus on the cross. Christians came to see the passion prefigured in Psalms 22:18 ("They tear holes in my hands and feet, I can count all my bones"), 41:10 ("Thus even my friend, in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has turned against me."), and 69:22 ("for my thirst they gave me vinegar.") Psalm 34:9, in Christian thought, was interpreted as anticipating the eucharist with the words "Taste and see how good the Lord is." From earliest times, the psalms were important to Christian liturgy both as ritual prayer texts and as "proof texts" to substantiate their claims about Jesus Christ.

As stated above, responsorial psalmody came very early into Christian liturgy: A soloist sang verses of the psalm, and the choir or congregation responded with a *refrain* or *acclamation*. Some of the refrains were hymns or poetic compositions, while others consisted of a slightly modified verse from the psalm. The text of the psalm itself was often reduced to just a few verses (Dalmais, 1983). Used much like *antiphons*, refrains were meant to be sung before or after a psalm or even between the stanzas of a psalm. From the time of the first century of the Christian era, most churches used this response form of psalmody (Cabie, 1986). The Church in Syria was important in developing antiphonal psalmody, and this practice spread to the Western Churches. In the western churches, while two choirs would alternate singing of verses or stanzas, an antiphon was used to begin and end the song (Dalmais, 1983 and 1992). This antiphonal style found a strong place in the liturgical practice of the emerging monastic tradition.

Assimilation by the Western Churches of the liturgical tradition that emerged from the East continued from the fourth to the sixth century (Grout, 1966). There were occasions during the first centuries of Christian liturgical practice when the psalms might have served only as readings from the Hebrew Bible. When they were used in this fashion, it is possible they were chanted on a simple tone like other Scripture proclamations. However, it eventually became standard for the psalm to follow the first reading at Mass and to be sung by a reader or deacon from the ambo. For a time, in Rome, the psalm was presented from the steps leading up to the ambo (*gradus*), and this part of the mass came to be known as the "gradual." The post of cantor, or chief solo singer, was officially established in revisions of liturgy and music between the fifth and seventh centuries (Grout, 1966). At a later period, the psalm was sometimes sung with ornate melodies by professional singers, a practice that left the people little choice but to listen passively and meditatively, leading some commentators to refer to this form of psalmody as a "meditation song" (Cabie, 1986).

The Psalms in Chant

Early liturgical music included simple chanting tones and more elaborate musical compositions referred to as plainsong or plainchant. The chant that became the major form of music in Roman Rite liturgy is normally called "Gregorian" chant because later tradition claimed that Gregory the Great, who was pope from 590 to 604, was responsible for a substantial body of chant repertory himself. In fact, much of what we know of this chant today emerged in the northern European lands controlled by Frankish rulers. The Franks moved into what is now northern France in the third century. Pippin III, from the time he was crowned in king in 751, and his son Charlemagne, until the time he died in 814, were almost fanatic in their frenzied hunger for chant books and other ritual books from Rome, because they wanted to unify their empire religiously as well as politically.

The Frankish emperors employed Roman cantors to teach their Frankish singers the Roman liturgy. In this Roman liturgy, different styles of chant were assigned to different functions in the Mass. The Roman form of Mass that traveled north to the Franks (between the years 750 and 850) had a solemn introit, or "going-in" song, which consisted of the verses of a psalm with a refrain or antiphon and was sung by a trained choir. This text was part of the "proper" of the Mass, that is, it varied day to day (Crocker, 1960). The introit, originally an entire psalm with an antiphon, was later reduced to just a single verse with antiphon. Antiphons used in the divine office, especially on festive occasions, were often sung only at the beginning and end of the psalm in Carolingian times; at other times they were repeated after each verse like a refrain. Antiphons were simple and

short but had extraordinary artistry and elegance. Psalms also provided accompaniment to the processions of the Mass at offertory and communion. Though antiphons were originally composed as parts of psalms, music for communion and offertory was later reduced only to the antiphons, which, like the introit, were "proper" to the day. Psalm settings for the Mass were generally more ornate than those for the divine office (Grout, 1966).

The main musical "event" at Mass after about the tenth century was the gradual. The short two-verse excerpt from a psalm was sung by the choir and cantor between the first reading (usually an epistle, rarely a text from the Hebrew Bible) and the Gospel. The gradual text varied according to the feast and the season, like the other "proper" parts. Richard Crocker notes: "The full range of the expressive values of Gregorian chant is found . . . between the epistle and the Gospel of the Mass." Gregorian graduals were composed of two sections, each, usually, built on a verse of a psalm. The response was sung by full choir, the verse by the cantor. Though the source for the text of the response (which was similar to an antiphon) might be the psalm itself, it could also be another source elsewhere in Scripture or a newly composed text. "Standing at the summit of that art, the graduals realize the loftiest aspirations" of the chant repertory between 700 and 1150 (Crocker, 1960).

Because they were drawn from Latin translations of the Hebrew Bible, the "chanted" psalms remained faithful to the text, which meant that they were not metrical. Rather, particularly in the case of whole psalms, as in the liturgy of the hours, they were sung to a simple melodic formula or *tone*. Not only did the chanted psalms not have a recurring rhythmic pattern, but the lines of text did not have uniform numbers of syllables. Each syllable, in turn, may have been assigned only one note (*syllabic* style), several notes (*neumatic* style) or, especially in the more elaborate forms of introit or gradual, each syllable may have been assigned many notes (*melismatic* style). During the time of the Reformation in Europe, there was a concerted move on the part of Luther, Calvin, and others to create metrical psalm translations. What they desired was a repeating metrical structure with regular stanzas which allowed each verse to be sung to the same melody by the congregation (Lenti, 1999).

The Liturgy of the Hours

The psalms provide the essential content of the Divine Office or the *Liturgy of the Hours*, first organized as a communal prayer in the fourth century. Psalmody--or, at least, certain verses of psalms, may long have been part of daily prayer for individuals and for communities, but psalmody soon became the central feature of the church's daily prayer. As developed especially in early monastic communities, the entire Psalter was recited within a certain period of time; in other words, there was to be a "continuous reading" of the psalms. As dictated in the rule of St. Benedict, for example, the complete Psalter was recited in the space of one week. Similar patterns continued through the middle ages and into modern times for those bound to pray the Divine Office. It was not until the Second Vatican Council that the routine distribution of the psalms was widened beyond a week. The name of this daily prayer was changed from "*officium*" (a duty) to *liturgia*, specifically, to the "liturgy of the hours." In the current pattern, the great majority of the one hundred and fifty psalms are distributed over a four week period (Dalmais, 1983). The prayer of the hours should not "be considered either by origin or by nature the exclusive possession of clerics and monks but the property of the whole Christian community" (GILH 270).

In *Liturgical Music Today*, the bishops instruct us that psalms should be sung in the liturgy of hours either "responsorially, antiphonally, or straight through." The antiphons (or refrains) of today's responsorial psalms "help to bring out the literary genre of the psalm; they highlight some theme; they suggest an individual tone in a psalm: antiphons are of great value in helping toward an understanding of the typological meaning or the meaning appropriate to the feast" (GILH 113). In certain cases, one antiphon may be substituted for another: "If a melody is not available for the given antiphon, another antiphon should be taken from those in the repertoire" (GILH 274).

In today's *Liturgy of the Hours*, several psalms are reserved especially for the four Sundays of the cycle precisely because they express the paschal mystery of Christ--an echo of the early church's Christological

interpretation of the psalms. So Psalm 92:2 is read as glorifying the kingly dignity of the Lord with the words "your throne is prepared." Psalm 117:24 declares: "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." Psalm 110 sings of the priesthood and victory of Christ (see Mt 22:44). Through an interpretive verse and the psalm-prayer that follows it, Psalm 114 links the "wonderful works of God" at the Red Sea and the Jordan to Christians who have been saved by the water of baptism. Psalm 1:3 is presented as prefiguring the tree of the cross ("Like a tree that yields its fruit in season"). Psalm 2 was important in apostolic catechesis (see Acts 4:25-27), and Psalm 3:6 is interpreted as heralding the resurrection ("The Lord preserved me to rise again"). In a similar fashion, Psalms 51 and 22 give Fridays a penitential character (GILH 129).

The liturgy of the hours "is seen as open to constantly new forms of life and growth." It is hoped that "new ways and expressions of public worship may be found for our own age, adapted in a variety of ways to different circumstances . . . appropriate measures are to be taken to prepare melodies for use in the vernacular singing" (GILH 273-74).

Beginning a Psalm Program for Parish Liturgy

The Second Vatican Council sought to promote active participation by encouraging congregational singing of the psalm associated with the lectionary cycle (Lenti, 24:2, p.14). We are directed in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* article 67 to treat the role of the psalmist, or cantor of the psalm, as distinct from that of the reader or lector. An effective psalmist will evoke the congregation's participation in the responses. In our contemporary mass the first reading, usually a passage from the Hebrew Bible, is chosen to correspond with the Gospel reading of the day. In its turn, the responsorial psalm is chosen to complement the First Testament reading (Cabie, 1986) as well as major themes or images of the day or the season. Placed between the first and second readings in the Mass, the responsorial psalm is an integral part of the liturgy of the word. Since the psalm text itself is connected to the readings, the psalm should generally be taken from the set of texts assigned for that day in the *Lectionary for Mass*. There are also "common" psalms for each season in the church year which have been chosen for optional use in place of the text in the *Lectionary*. A parish that is just introducing psalm singing at Mass or is beginning a program of formation on the role of psalmody might make use of these common psalms for a number of pastoral reasons. Since these psalms need not be changed week to week, for instance, a congregation could initially learn to sing a small number of psalms as they begin to build their psalm repertory. To reinforce and help people become more familiar with a new repertory of psalm settings, these common psalms might also be used to accompany the processions of the Mass at entrance, offertory, and communion. What follows is a brief explanation of the seasonal cycle of the church year and suggested common psalms.

The four-week season of **Advent** is a time of preparation for and expectation of the feast of the Incarnation and the Christmas Season. Though the history of Advent in Rome does not begin until the sixth century, the roots of this season reach back to Gaul and Spain at the end of the fourth century. In anticipation of the coming of the Messiah, the voices of Isaiah and John the Baptist tell us to "Prepare the way of the Lord" (Mt 3:3, John 1:19-23 and Is 40:3). Common psalms for Advent include Psalms 25--"I will wait for You" (vs 1)--and Ps 85--"I will listen for the Word of God . . . Near indeed is salvation" (vss 9-10). Reflecting on this latter psalm, St. Augustine says "God could give no greater gift to [humanity] than . . . the Word through whom he created all things . . ." (GILH 7).

Christmas makes its first appearance as a proper feast day in the fourth century. First mentioned in Rome in about the year 354 and probably dating from as early as 330, its origin as a midwinter festival has several explanations. One is that it was set at this time to counterbalance a pagan feast on the winter solstice; another is that its placement had something to do with arguments over the nature of Christ. Yet a third explanation is that the feast of the Annunciation on March 25 actually governed the dating of the Nativity nine months later, since

there was an early Christian legend that Jesus died on the anniversary of his incarnation in Mary's womb. Christmas marks the first of a series of feasts that make up the Christmas Season and celebrate various aspects of the incarnation. The series also includes Holy Family Sunday; the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (January 1); and Epiphany (traditionally, January 6). The common psalm for the Christmas season is Psalm 98.

The season of **Lent**, a time of final preparation for catechumens preparing for initiation at Easter and, by extension, of penitential renewal by the rest of the Christian community, precedes Easter. This forty-day time of prayer, fasting, and acts of charity, recalling Jesus' own forty-day fast in the desert as well as Israel's forty years of wandering before they entered the Promised Land, was first mentioned in Egypt at the end of the third century. By the fourth century, a three-week catechumenal preparation for Easter appeared in Rome as well. Sometime between 354 and 384 the duration of this fasting period became exactly forty days, lasting from the first Sunday of Lent until the fortieth day after. However, since fasting was not allowed on Sundays, in the beginning of the sixth century the first day of the fast was moved to the Wednesday before the first Sunday--an arrangement that allowed for forty days (more or less) of actual fasting. Today, Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. Common psalms for Lent include two of the penitential psalms, Psalms 51 ("Have mercy on me, God") and 130 ("Out of the depths I call to you"). Psalm 91 is also a common Lenten psalm. Verses 11-12 of this psalm are spoken by Satan as he tempts Jesus after his forty day fast in the desert: "For God commands the angels to guard you in all your ways. With their hands they shall support you, lest you strike your foot against a stone" (see Lk 4:10-11and Mt 4:6).

The **Christian Pascha,** known in English as **Easter,** has been celebrated since the second century. Accounts of this special liturgy from early in the third century tell of a fast and all-night prayer vigil followed by the eucharist and, finally, a feast. Gradually, the festival became a Triduum--a three-day liturgy that begins on the evening of Holy Thursday and lasts until solemn evening prayer on Easter Sunday. (The three days follow Jewish practice by counting from sunset to sunset, which is why evening prayer at the end of the third day concludes the Triduum liturgy.) The celebration that follows Easter as the Easter Season goes on for fifty days--an octave of Sundays and a "week of weeks," ending on Pentecost Sunday (Dalmais, 1983). The common psalm for Holy Week, in preparation for the Easter Triduum, is Psalm 22, and the common psalms for the Easter season are Psalms 118 and 66.

Thirty-four Sundays of the church year constitute **Ordinary Time**. Seasonal psalms in Ordinary Time include Psalms 19, 27, 34, 63, 95, 100, 103, 122, and 145. Refer to the Lectionary for specific psalms used during special holy days. "The psalm when sung may be either the psalm assigned in the Lectionary or the gradual from the *Graduale Romanum* or the responsorial psalm or the psalm with *Alleluia* as the response from *The Simple Gradual* in the form they have in those books" (GIRM 36).

According to St. Augustine (serm. 85, 1) God "sits in heaven but does not cease to speak on earth." We hear his voice in the liturgy of the word in which, as in the eucharist, "the Word [becomes] flesh." As contemporary liturgical musicians, we are challenged to clothe the psalms in a "musical quality and style" that will deliver their "full meaning and beauty" completely with a reverence and dignity consistent to our three-thousand-year tradition.

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