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WHEN YOUR COLLEAGUES IN MINISTRY
LACK LITURGICAL FORMATION

CHRIST'S BODY, CHRIST'S SONG

SEASONAL ESSAY:
FEASTS OF THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

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CHRIST'S BODY, CHRIST'S SONG: Liturgical MUSIC & MUSIC FOR CATHOLIC RITUAL

Liturgical musician Tom Conry often asked, “What would you like to be: a court musician or a prophet?” Everything we do as music ministers conveys a message. Everything. We’re not even aware of most of the messages we convey. At times, we convey that we are either court musicians or that we are prophets. A few examples:

- When we “circle up” as a choir to say a prayer five minutes before celebrating the Eucharist, we convey a message of exclusivity.
- When we take those same five minutes and venture beyond the music area to welcome others into our midst, we convey a message of inclusivity.
- When we have water bottles at our feet to soothe our vocal chords during the liturgy, we convey a message that we are performing for those who do not have water bottles at their feet.
- When those water bottles are absent, we convey the message that we are one with the assembly.

Where the Head Meets the Heart

There are a great many fine, well-intentioned, dedicated, and hardworking church musicians who have years of experience but who also have very little formation in liturgy. It is very easy for music directors, cantors, and choir members to say or think, “I know the order of Mass; I know what I’m doing, and I’ve done this for several years. I don’t need to know anything more.”

In other words, there are many very good and fine people who, through no fault of their own, simply don’t know what they don’t know.

At the very least, all pastoral musicians should know the musical guidelines for liturgy issued by the US bishops in *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*. *Sing to the Lord* reminds us to keep in mind “the three judgments” for choosing music. (See “Can We Please Everyone and Still Be Liturgically Correct?” by David Haas in *GIA Quarterly* 27.3.) However, there is much to learn beyond the three judgements and beyond *Sing to the Lord*.

John O’Malley, SJ, says it is a mistake to “study the documents [of Vatican II] individually, without considering them part of an integral corpus.” He goes on to write:

I cannot name anyone who insists on this principle, but it has been the standard approach to the documents ever since the council ended. . . . Too often, . . . commentators have . . . not gone on to investigate just how a specific text contributed to the dynamics of the council as a whole, that is, to its “spirit.”¹

A Few Specific Ritual Considerations

Over the number of years I’ve interacted with the liturgy and its ministers, I’ve been struck by various concerns and share some of them now for your own reflection.

The responsorial psalm. The responsorial psalm occupies a unique place within the proclamation of the word of God. It is

- the community's response to the first reading
- a dialogue that occurs on two specific levels—the first being the community's vertical dialogue (with God) and the second, a horizontal dialogue (the body of Christ) of the psalmist and the community gathered

Knowing the role of the psalm leads to several considerations.

- The lectors of the first and second readings come from the midst of the assembly. Does the psalmist?
- In a well-developed music ministry program, why not have the psalmist sit with his or her family in the midst of the assembly from the beginning of Mass until there is a point at which he or she may move to the choir unobtrusively? This communicates the importance of the assembly and the understanding that every ministry finds its home in the assembly's midst.
- Does the psalmist carry the music to the ambo in his or her choir folder? The lectors don't carry their individual readings to the ambo. Consider having the psalmist place his or her music on the ambo before Mass so he or she approaches the ambo in the same manner as the other lectors.
- How should the cantor intone the response? In most parishes, the psalmist intones and then repeats the response with the assembly. This is akin to one (the psalmist) inviting another (the assembly) to a conversation by asking a question and then answering it oneself—over and over. Remember, the responsorial psalm is a *dialogue*. The psalmist should intone the response once and not sing it again. The psalmist may invite



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the assembly “with a small gesture if necessary” to respond.²

- What is the posture of the choir during the psalm? I often wonder why a choir would stand during the responsorial psalm when everyone else, including the presider, sits. Is it truly necessary that your choir stand in this moment?
- Are verses cut from the responsorial psalm on a regular basis? We don't cut verses, lines, or words from the first, second, and gospel readings, so why do some so easily cut verses from the responsorial psalm? It's because the psalm is

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often treated and viewed more as a “song than” as an integral part of the proclamation of the word.

The gospel acclamation. The gospel reading is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. Often, the musician will begin the gospel acclamation as the deacon stands and moves to pick up the Book of the Gospels. At stational Masses in Los Angeles (those at which the archbishop or cardinal archbishop emeritus presides), as well as in several other dioceses, the ritual practice has been slightly adjusted from the rubrics in order to place proper focus on the most important aspects at this part of the Mass—the Book of the Gospels and its procession to the ambo. This is not a procession of the deacon but of the Book. It is with the understanding that the Book of the Gospels is a sacramental that the following practice occurs:

1. After the second reading, there is a slight period of silence.
2. The deacon stands and moves to stand in front of the presiding bishop (or priest) to receive a blessing in silence.
3. The deacon moves to the altar in silence, where he bows as a sign of reverence.
4. He picks up the Book of the Gospels. At this point, the music of the gospel acclamation begins.
5. He carries the *closed* Book of the Gospels in procession to the ambo. He may stop along the way at specific moments to show the Book of the Gospels to the assembly. The musician and deacon may time these stops to coincide with either verses or refrains to more powerfully support the ritual action and journey of this sacramental from the altar to the ambo.
6. When the deacon arrives at the ambo, the gospel acclamation ends.
7. After the gospel reading is proclaimed, the gospel acclamation is reprised as the deacon processes the *open* Book of the Gospels back to the presiding bishop to be revered. After the bishop venerates the Book, it is then taken to a suitable place of honor.³

The eucharistic acclamations. Usually, the eucharistic acclamations are treated more as three songs within a prayer spoken by the priest than as integral parts of the prayer. The Holy immediately follows the preface of

the eucharistic prayer and the memorial acclamation and Great Amen are woven into the very fabric of the prayer. What we can do:

- Be mindful of the eucharistic prayer’s arc and the place of each of the acclamations. The greatest and grandest acclamation is the Great Amen at the end of the eucharistic prayer so be mindful not to let the Holy, memorial acclamation, or, for that matter, the Lord’s Prayer and Agnus Dei that immediately follow eclipse the Great Amen in volume, passion, and intensity.
- Play the introduction of the Holy as it is written.
- For the memorial acclamation and Great Amen, consider omitting the instrumental introductions (intrusions). In effect, we musicians are unintentionally communicating in most settings to the invitation of the memorial acclamation: “[Let us proclaim] The mystery of faith—but listen first to this four-measure introduction and then proclaim it.” Begin acclaiming immediately after the presider implores you to acclaim “the mystery of faith.”
- The Great Amen needs a similar approach as with the memorial acclamation. What we usually communicate: “Through him, and with him, and in him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, for ever and ever . . . (four-measure introduction—wait for it, wait for it . . .) Amen!” How about if we answer with a Great Amen immediately, as soon as possible? What I’m proposing is to teach your assembly tonal memory. It can be done; I’ve done it and continue to do it with assemblies in parishes, at the university, in conference settings, and at the cathedral.

Choice of eucharistic acclamations for Lent and Easter. Whatever setting of the eucharistic acclamations you’ve chosen for the Easter season, consider using that same setting for the Lenten season that precedes it. Yes, the same mass setting, only with an adjustment that will illustrate and magnify the promise of Lent and that will also magnify the glory of Easter when the time of completion and fulfillment comes to us. During Lent play a pitch, perhaps on a handbell, to begin the Holy, memorial acclamation, and Amen. Just one pitch, and then sing these acclamations a cappella. At the Easter Vigil when you sing these same acclamations with organ, brass, percussion—full instrumentation—your

assembly will know of the fullness and abundance to which they have been delivered, that they have arrived in the paschal mystery. This is much more effective in illustrating and communicating the journey from death to life and darkness to light than employing one mass setting during Lent only to switch to another on Easter.

The Lamb of God. The Lamb of God is intended to be sung as a litany—three or more tropes—throughout the course of the breaking of the eucharistic bread and pouring of the consecrated wine. In other words,

I'M OFTEN ASKED ABOUT APPLAUSE AT THE END OF MASS—WHETHER IT'S DESIRABLE AND FOR WHOM WE'RE APPLAUDING.

the three tropes we usually sing as provided in the Roman Missal outline this litanic form—two ending with “have mercy on us” and the third ending with “grant us peace”—are the minimum provided because three or more tropes are what constitute a litany. Two tropes a litany does not make. It is critically important that we sing enough tropes to fit the ritual action. We need to make certain that the last words of “grant us peace” coincide as closely as possible with the last ritual actions of the fractioning. You might think it doesn't matter. However, it does matter. It must matter that we don't simply finish this music and turn the page to the Communion hymn or antiphon and wait in silence while the presider finishes the business of breaking the body and blood of Christ.

Ite misse est. Consider singing the first two verses of “Joy to the World” as the closing hymn on the Solemnity of Christ the King. End the second verse on the IV or vi chord. Closely analyze the text of “Joy to the World.” Truly, this hymn's text has as much or more to

say to us about the kingship of Christ as it does about the incarnation of our God. You will draw many questions and reactions on Christ the King to which you might answer, “Come back at Christmas for the rest of the song and story.” You might also invite others to ponder and reflect more deeply upon the hymn's text and why they think this hymn can or should be reserved for Christmas.

Applause at the end of Mass. I'm often asked about applause at the end of Mass—whether it's desirable and for whom we're applauding. I believe we've missed the question entirely when entertaining this question. The Mass concluded several minutes before the moment of the applause. It ended with the Sign of the Cross and the words of the final dismissal. How about if we all leave, including the choir, singing the strains of the closing hymn? How about if we follow the liturgical procession out of the church singing “Joy to the World” to take these words and this song into our week? Into our homes? Into our daily lives? How about if the instrumentalists continue playing the closing hymn until the church building itself is empty as if to communicate the message that the song never ends and that we must take what was just celebrated out into the world? How about if we do this instead of ending the song, putting our hymnals back neatly in the pews, applauding, and leaving it all behind in the church on that given Sunday?

We are called to lead our assemblies musically in a way that affirms and comforts, but also challenges. We are called to be provocative.

So what do we want to be: court musicians or prophets? I choose the latter. ■

Notes

1. John O'Malley, “Ten Sure-Fire Ways to Mix Up the Teachings of Vatican II.” *America, The National Catholic Review*. (February 13, 2013).
2. *Sing to the Lord*, no. 38.
3. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, nos. 21, 132–133, 175; *Lectionary for Mass*, no. 17; *Ceremonial of Bishops*, no. 140.