

Eye Has Not Seen, Ear Has Not Heard



New Developments
in Our Understanding
of the Responsorial Psalm

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How we define the function of the Responsorial Psalm in the Liturgy of the Word has bearing on our liturgical practice, our liturgical participation, and our liturgical catechesis. Our understanding of the role of the psalm determines how the psalm ought to be rendered musically and where the psalmist ought to stand when singing the psalm. It shapes how assembly members participate through the psalm in the Liturgy of the Word. It guides how pastoral leaders form the assembly in appreciating the psalm and its relationship not only to a particular liturgical celebration but to daily Christian living.

Since the promulgation of the revised Lectionary following the Second Vatican Council, pastoral thinking and pastoral practice concerning the function of the Responsorial Psalm has generally fallen into three categories. One approach defines the psalm as a reading; a second sees the psalm as a meditation; a third identifies the psalm as a ritual response to the proclamation of God's Word. Each approach has its liturgical history, and each draws forth a different mode of liturgical participation from both psalmist and assembly. The mode of liturgical participation is crucial. Precisely what mode of participation is meant to take place in the singing of the Responsorial Psalm? How does the assembly arrive at that level of participation? What role does the psalmist play in leading them there?

This article explores changes in our way of viewing the Responsorial Psalm, concluding with the most radical change of all: the realization that the Responsorial Psalm is proclamation of the transformation God has brought about in us through encounter with the word/Word, a proclamation not limited to the timeframe of the liturgical celebration but encompassing the entirety of our daily Christian living. In the proclamation of the Responsorial Psalm, something more than we have yet seen or heard is happening. What is this "more"? What does this "more" mean for the formation of psalmists? What does this "more" mean for liturgical catechesis of the people? What does this "more" mean for the life and mission of the Church?

FROM CANTOR TO PSALMIST

Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship (STL) is the first official document to distinguish between the minister who sings the Responsorial Psalm (psalmist) and the minister who acts as song leader (cantor). The psalmist is the one who "proclaims the Psalm after the First Reading and leads the gathered assembly in singing the refrain" (STL, 34). The cantor, on the other hand, is the one who leads other sung elements and sings in alternation or dialogue with the assembly when such musical leadership is needed (STL, 37). While the same person may act as both psalmist and cantor at a given liturgy, the roles are very distinct.

STL implies a hierarchical differentiation between the two ministries. The psalmist may carry out his or her role at the ambo (STL, 36), but the cantor is always to sing from another place (STL, 40). The psalmist is to minister visibly from a liturgical focal point, while the cantor is to minister from an ancillary place and to be seen only to the extent that the assembly needs his or her visibility (STL, 39). The singing of the Responsorial Psalm by psalmist and assembly is in itself a ritual action, but

much of what the cantor sings functions as accompaniment to ritual action. STL, 35, elaborates on the skills of the psalmist more fully than the Introduction to the Lectionary (ILM) and the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) but says nothing about skills necessary for the cantor. In sum, STL clarifies the ministry of psalmist and elevates it to a position above that of cantor.

This is a more nuanced articulation of the ministry of the psalmist than previous expressions. It acts as a corrective against overuse of the ministry of cantor. More importantly, it reveals the development occurring in our understanding of the importance of the Responsorial Psalm.

FROM READING TO SUNG PRAYER

Not until the second and third centuries does explicit evidence emerge about the singing of psalms in the liturgy. Even then, however, no references exist to a psalmist or cantor singing the psalms.¹ Instead, a "reader" was deputed to recite the psalm. In the culture of that time and place, "to read" referred to making "a public and rhetorical kind of declamation"² rendered in a simple chant known as cantillation. Because the culture made no distinction between what was sung and what was publicly spoken, there was no differentiation made between singers and speakers, or cantors and readers. The person appointed to cantillate either a reading or a psalm was simply designated the "reader."³

By the fourth and fifth centuries, a more formalized Liturgy of the Word incorporated a psalm sung in responsorial fashion. Augustine refers, for example, to "the psalm we have just heard and to which we have responded in song."⁴ The psalm was cantillated by a reader from the ambo. Eventually, the church in Rome adopted the custom of the reader chanting the psalm from the steps (*gradus*) leading to the ambo, and the psalm came to be called the *gradual*. Sometime during the fourth century, the office of psalmist was separated from that of reader, the psalmist being the specialized reader who chanted the psalms.⁵

Because the psalm at this time was considered a reading, Augustine could say in Sermon 165: "We have heard the Epistle, the psalm and the Gospel; all these three readings are in agreement."⁶ The fact that Augustine and many of his episcopal confreres often preached on the psalm further indicates the psalm was thought of as a reading. Yet the psalm was also understood as different from the other readings because it was a poetic, lyrical text that had been sung in its original Hebrew context. The lyricism of the psalm opened up the possibility of inserting a response sung by the people and of developing a more rhythmic and melodic style of chanting.⁷ Over time, more and more elaborate musical settings were created for the psalm, which was sung responsorially. Through centuries of liturgical practice, the psalm was gradually transformed from a cantillated "reading" into a chant.⁸

STL, 155, does a surprising thing, then, when it calls the psalm "in effect a reading." STL gives no explanation for this designation. If the document is drawing on early Church history, it does so without consideration of the cultural differences between how people of that period understood "reading" and how people today understand it. Perhaps STL relies on ILM and the GIRM, which imply the psalm is a reading when identifying



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the ambo as the place reserved for the proclamation of the word,⁹ then designate the ambo as the place from which the psalm is to be sung.¹⁰ If so, STL ignores the contradiction the GIRM sets up when it states the psalm may also be sung “from another suitable place.”

Classifying the psalm as a reading fails to acknowledge the literary nature of the psalms. The psalms are poems expressing the religious experience of the Hebrew community.¹¹ They are a form of poetic prayer expressed in some form of sung recitation. While the psalms can be classified under a number of literary genres (such as royal psalms, wisdom psalms, thanksgiving psalms, historical psalms, etc.), scholars today tend to group them into the two broad categories of hymns (praise) and prayers (laments). Psalms of praise express wonder and awe over God’s power and presence. Psalms of lament express pain and suffering when God seems distant or absent. Both categories of psalmic prayer are confessions of faith. The psalms are a unique genre of Scripture because they are poetic prayer texts sung either in response to God’s saving presence and action or in petition for God’s saving intervention.

FROM SUNG PRAYER TO RITUAL RESPONSE

The most explicit statement about the psalm as ritual response is found in the *Introduction to the Order of Mass*,¹² which states

The Responsorial Psalm follows the first reading and is an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word. After hearing and taking to heart God’s word, all respond with words that are themselves God-given. Words that have expressed the faith of God’s people over the centuries are selected by the Church to express the appropriate response, whether of wonder and praise, repentance and sorrow, hope and trust, or joy and exultation.

Lucien Deiss wrote extensively about the Responsorial Psalm as the people’s response to hearing God’s Word. In his analysis of the structure of the Liturgy of the Word, he saw the Responsorial Psalm as part of the “dialogue between the Word coming from God and the word rising towards God from the community.”¹³ The people respond “to the proclamation of Christ in his Word with the responsorial psalm. . . . This psalm expresses the community’s acceptance of the Word through its praise, thanksgiving, and petition.”¹⁴ His understanding of the psalm as response was not limited, however, to the hearing of a text: “The Responsorial Psalm may be considered as the *response* of the community to the Word that is given to it. Certainly, it is clear that the essential response is obedience to God and adoration of God’s holy will. The Responsorial Psalm ritualizes this response.”¹⁵

Irene Nowell applies scriptural exegesis and text analysis to uncover the relationship between each psalm in the Sunday Lectionary and the set of readings to which it is assigned.¹⁶ For Nowell, the very juxtaposition of a particular psalm with a particular set of readings generates new meanings and connections within the Liturgy of the Word as a whole. Even more, as poetry, the psalms move the assembly beyond hearing a discursive text to participating in that text as personal experience. The Responsorial Psalm is the means, then, by which the assembly comes not only to understand the whole of the Liturgy of the Word but also to respond by appropriating its meaning for their lives.

In *The Ministry of Cantors*¹⁷ I suggest that the psalm acts as a bridge leading from the First Reading to a Paschal Mystery encounter with Christ in the Gospel. Seen in this way, the psalm functions both as an interpretive key to the readings and as a ritual response. As Nowell points out, the juxtaposition of the psalm with the readings of the day opens up meanings and connections within the Liturgy of the Word. Through the singing of the psalm, assembly members enter more fully into the meaning of the Liturgy of the Word and its implications for their lives. Their singing of the psalm is a response to what they are coming to understand through the mediation of this particular Liturgy of the Word about God’s saving action on their behalf and Christ’s continual call to faithful discipleship.

FROM RITUAL RESPONSE TO PROCLAMATION

STL, 34, states that the psalmist “proclaims the Psalm.” This is not surprising in view of the fact that STL defines the psalm as a reading. But it is new terminology in relation to the psalm. Classifying the psalm as a proclamation is a shift in language that carries immense implications for how the psalm and the ministry of the psalmist are understood. While it has become increasingly more commonplace to refer to the psalm as proclamation, what has been lacking has been any substantive discussion about the meaning of proclamation. If we are going to call the singing of the psalm a proclamation, then we need to articulate a clear understanding of just exactly what proclamation is.

In a liturgical context, proclamation refers to the public reading of Scripture by a designated minister. We use the term

to indicate that something more than mere reading is taking place. In proclamation of the Word, God is *being made present* in power. In proclamation of the Gospel, the risen Christ is *being made present* in glory. The person proclaiming a reading or a Gospel, then, must do much more than simply read a text. This person must become the medium of the revelation of God's power and Christ's glory. In the voice of the one proclaiming, the assembly must hear what ear has not heard before. In the person of the one proclaiming, the assembly must see what eye has not seen before: that the power of God and the glory of the risen Christ have transformed the very being of the proclaimer.

We can further clarify the meaning of proclamation by applying theoretical concepts drawn from the field of speech-act theory. In her seminal essay, "Homily as Proclamation,"¹⁸ Joyce Ann Zimmerman uses speech-act theory to describe the homily as proclamation. For Zimmerman, proclamation is a language event that endures because it brings about a ritual transformation within the assembly. The proclamation lives on because the assembly members appropriate in their daily living the Good News they have heard. Something occurs in proclamation, then, that is far more than merely speaking and hearing and far more than timebound to the moment.

Zimmerman defines proclamation as a unique type of speech-act. Speech-act theory divides communication utterances into three distinct types. The first type, called "locutionary" communicates content. When one says, for example, "The presider is giving the homily," the truth of the statement rests on verifying the fact of the content—whether the presider is actually giving a homily. The second type of utterance, called "illocutionary," communicates something binding about the speaker. When the assembly members say at the Creed, for example, "I believe in God," the truth of the statement rests on whether they do indeed believe in God and show this by their actions. The third type of utterance, called "perlocutionary," binds the hearer to action. When the deacon or priest says, for example, "Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord," the truth of the statement rests on whether the assembly leaves the space and actually lives what they have celebrated.

In speech-act theory any communication event is one of those three speech acts. According to Zimmerman, however, liturgical proclamation is a unique speech-act because it integrates all three types of utterances into a single dynamic event. The locutionary force of the proclamation—that is, the content—is the person of Christ made present in the word of God proclaimed. The illocutionary force of the proclamation—that is, what binds the speaker to an action—is the proclaimer's personal commitment to the person of Christ and the message proclaimed. The perlocutionary force of the proclamation—that is, how what is proclaimed binds the hearers to action—is the assembly's choosing to put into action what they are hearing. For Zimmerman, the homily is proclamation because it self-involves the person of the homilist and the persons of the assembly in a transformative encounter with the content of the Good News, that is, the person of Christ:

Proclamation takes place when the conviction of the speaker makes present God's love in such a way that the hearers are also moved to love. Proclamation, then, ultimately is that



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which makes present the reality of the Paschal Mystery. It has power to transform because it engages the assembly in a self-involving response. In other words, proclamation by its very nature concerns both speaker and hearers in a dialectic activity that surpasses the ritual moment.¹⁹

Far more is happening in the homily than simply speaking and hearing.

When we apply Zimmerman's insights to the proclamation of the Responsorial Psalm, we see that far more is happening than simply singing and hearing. The singing of the psalm involves the person of the psalmist and the persons of the assembly in the dynamic of becoming the kind of persons God wants them to be, both in the liturgical moment and in ongoing daily living. By singing the psalm, the psalmist and the assembly members reveal that they have, in fact, heard God's word/Word and are choosing to make this word/Word the foundation of their lives. The psalm is the proclamation of the assembly choosing to be transformed by a new self-understanding and a new commitment to discipleship.

In "The Sacramental Function of the Psalms in Contemporary Scholarship and Liturgical Practice,"²⁰ Harry P. Nasuti discusses the sacramental power of the psalms to transform those who pray them. The psalms bring about the reality they express. On one level, the psalms describe what already exists in the world by reflecting or clarifying the state within or surrounding the one who is praying. On another more significant level, the psalms also reshape the world of the person to conform to the words of the psalm. The psalms transform the inner landscape of the one praying and do so through the very act of being prayed.

As a prescribed text, the Responsorial Psalm does not necessarily express what those gathered for a particular liturgy feel like praying at that particular moment. Instead, the psalm offers them what they are called upon to pray at that moment as response to a particular word God has spoken. Through the praying of the psalm, the assembly members become persons

conformed to the words and world of the psalm. The Responsorial Psalm actualizes the word of God in the gathered believers, transforming them into “the type of persons that God wants them to be.”²¹ The psalms 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.”²² Through the singing of the Responsorial Psalm, we assent to how God’s word heard in this particular liturgy is reshaping our identity. The psalm enables us to participate in the Liturgy of the Word as a transformative experience through which we become more fully who God calls us to be: baptized members of the Body of Christ. Moreover, this response begun in the liturgy is then completed in the conscious choices we make concerning the kinds of persons we opt to be in daily Christian living. It is this transformation of self that is proclaimed in the singing of the psalm. And a key agent of this response, in both liturgy and life, is the psalm itself.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PSALMIST AND ASSEMBLY

As we stand on the cusp of a new development in our understanding of the role of the Responsorial Psalm, we find ourselves on the edge of a new understanding of the ministry of the psalmist. Preparing to sing the psalm requires much more of the psalmist than learning music and words. For the psalm to be proclamation, the psalmist must take to heart and put into practice what it is that God is calling the Church to become through this particular Liturgy of the Word. The psalmist must reflect on the relationship between the psalm and the readings of the day to discern what kind of response God is calling forth from the community of the Church on this particular day. Finally, the psalmist must assent to God’s saving action. The ministry of the psalmist is to proclaim before the assembly that what has not yet been heard and not yet been seen is being made present this very moment in the person of the psalmist.

We also find ourselves on the edge of a new understanding of the ministry of the assembly. Assembly members need to grasp that the Responsorial Psalm is proclamation of their response to God’s saving activity in the proclamation of the word. They need to grasp that their response extends beyond the ritual moment to every moment of daily living. They need to grasp that their response, in liturgy and in life, makes God’s word “true” by making them truly who God wishes them to be: Christ’s Body continuing his redeeming work in the world. The world will hear what has not yet been heard and see what has not yet been seen in the very being and actions of the community of those who believe. May our proclamation be true! ♦

Notes

1. Edward Foley, *Foundations of Christian Music: The Music of Pre-Constantinian Christianity* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 95.
2. Joseph Gelineau, sj, *Voices and Instruments in Christian Worship*, trans. Clifford Howell, sj, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1964), 77.
3. Foley, *Foundations*, 95.

4. Augustine, *Enarr. in ps. 119*; cited in Robert Cabié, *The Church at Prayer—Vol II: The Eucharist*, new ed., trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1986), 63.
5. Gelineau, *Voices and Instruments*, 78.
6. Augustine, Sermon 165, PL 38, 902 (cited in Gelineau, *Voices and Instruments*, 79).
7. Gelineau, *ibid.*, 79.
8. Jason J. McFarland, *Announcing the Feast: The Entrance Song in the Mass of the Roman Rite* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 21.
9. ILM, 16 and 33; GIRM, 58 and 309.
10. ILM, 22; GIRM, 61.
11. Material here is extrapolated from Timothy A Lenchak, svd, “Psalms” in *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Carroll Stuhlmüller (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996) 80–04.
12. *Introduction to the Order of Mass: A Pastoral Resource of the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003), 86.
13. Lucien Deiss, *Celebration of the Word* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 8.
14. Lucien Deiss, *Visions of Liturgy and Music for a New Century* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 102–103.
15. Deiss, *Celebration*, 43; italics in original.
16. Irene Nowell, *Sing a New Song: The Psalms in the Sunday Lectionary* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), *passim*.
17. Kathleen Harmon, *The Ministry of Cantors* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 8–12.
18. Joyce Ann Zimmerman, CPPS, “Homily as Proclamation,” *Liturgical Ministry* 1 (Winter 1992), 10–16.
19. *Ibid.*, 12.
20. 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 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), 78–89.
21. *Ibid.*, 86.
22. *Ibid.*, 81.

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