

Insights in Liturgy

The Responsorial Psalm

By MARY LOU ANDRYCHUK

The restoration of the responsorial psalm is one of the most important and most neglected reforms of the new liturgy. While the 1967 Instruction on Music in the Liturgy declares that "it has a special importance among the songs of the Proper," and the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (1969) goes so far as to call it "an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word," the treatment of the responsorial psalm in most of our parishes gives little evidence of any significance.

What is the responsorial psalm? Why is it integral? One liturgical writer emphatically states that after the eucharistic prayer itself, the most important song in the whole eucharistic liturgy is the responsorial psalm. Notable liturgist and scripture scholar, Lucien Deiss, defines the responsorial psalm as the "response through which the community greets the Word of God." The Bible is not simply the record of God's intervention with people in times past, but is a source for our encounter with God through Jesus.

The readings from the Old and New Testaments announce and proclaim God's promise fulfilled in Jesus; the worshipping community responds to this fulfillment

in the responsorial psalm. It is our acceptance and ratification of God-with-us in His Word. Not to respond would be to refuse or ignore God's invitation.

The psalm is essentially a lyrical composition and should therefore be presented in a way which does not destroy its unique character or beauty. Its musical quality serves a ministerial function of increasing the effectiveness of the text. Without music, our response is incomplete.

The responsorial psalm in the liturgy engages us to pray - giving praise and thanks, seeking mercy, begging forgiveness, exuding trust and joy, pondering the mystery of God's presence. The feeling or response evoked will vary with the liturgical season or feast and the particular readings. The musical style will also be important in conveying a specific emotion. At times the music will be brilliant and exuberant, at times gentle and sombre, or quiet and solemn, or peaceful, or distressed, or whatever the context demands. The responsorial psalm should not be considered simply a time for personal meditation. It is primarily a time for community action, a unified response to the presence of God proclaimed in His Word.

The common arguments against singing the responsorial psalm are the lack of musical resources and the congregation's unwillingness to sing. Both are indefensible. Musically, the responsorial psalm can be approached in a variety of ways; even parishes with minimum resources could discover satisfying formats. And once a community has a good experience of sung prayer, worship without song will feel incomplete.

The documents stress the importance of the people participating in the responsorial psalm, and this repeated refrain technique has characterized participation from the beginning. St. Augustine writes: "To the reader (ie. the psalmist) we answered by singing," and St. John Chrysostom exhorted the early Christians: "Let us not sing the refrains out of sheer habit but rather take them anew every time."

If a choir or cantor is present, they lead the psalm singing the verses while the congregation sings; the refrain between stanzas. Hymnals and other participation aids all provide simple melodies that most congregations can learn upon hearing. Verses can then be sung to common chant tones, Gelineau psalms and arrangements by Deiss. There are fine contemporary versions of psalms by the St. Louis Jesuits, as well as a number of settings in traditional hymn tunes.

Even without a choir or cantor, the congregation can still sing the refrain while the verses are recited, with or without musical accompaniment. Surrounding the responsorial psalm with music helps maintain the integrity of the psalm and provides a smooth transition from the spoken verses to the sung response. Where congregations are too timid to attempt even this much quiet accompaniment to the recited psalm would be a first step in giving them a sense of the importance of its musical character. However, this is only a last resort when in dire pastoral straits; the congregation should sing the refrain in every case, regardless of how the rest of the verses are presented.

The lectionary provides over 900 refrains to meet almost every desired response, but also recognizes the possible burden a different refrain each week might pose to some congregations. Common refrains for particular seasons are suggested to ease the musical demands. They also have the advantage of enabling the community to intensify their prayerfulness with a familiar and comfortable response.

... take care to keep in mind the refrains of the psalms you have sung not once, twice, or three times, but often, and you will receive great consolation. See what great treasure the refrains have opened for us! (St. John Chrysostom).

on the other hand has no such problems about the cooking.

He has been making perfect scrambled eggs for years; can construct a fine tossed salad and recently spent an evening helping make an Italian cookie delicacy for an international feast at school.

And not long ago I found him and his friend Brian fresh from kicking a football around the backyard seated in front of the TV. The distinct voice sounded familiar. Julia Child putting together a complicated dish had them both engrossed.

Mardi Gras Dance Feb. 4

Waverly - St. James' Home School Association is sponsoring a Mardi Gras Dance on Saturday, Feb. 4 from 8 p.m. to 1 a.m. at the South Waverly Boro Hall.

Music will be provided by the Starlighters. Costumes are optional, but prizes will be awarded for those that are most original. The admission price includes a buffet; beverages also will be available.

Tickets can be purchased at Waverly News, Waverly, Athens Pharmacy, Athens, Montgomery Ward, Sayre, and at St. James School. Chairpersons for the event are Patrick and Connie Schamel and Lance and Sharon Coleman.

BLUE ARMY VIGIL

The monthly vigil of the Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima will begin at 9 p.m. on Friday, Feb. 3 at Holy Rosary Church. Father William Leone will preside at the opening rites. Father Robert Meng, pastor of the parish, will celebrate the closing Mass at 6 a.m. the following day.



In case the federal government is interested, its plan to remove sexism from the school curriculum seems to be working. At least around here.

Our older daughter, a seventh grader, came home recently bearing a metal map holder, a glazed mug and a carved candlestick, all efforts from her shop class.

Shop is mandatory for one semester for both boys and girls with the other semester left for the required home economics (for both).

Classes are coeducational and obviously work to the advantage of our offspring. When she got bogged down in her metal work and ceramics and still had lathe work to do, a couple of the boys pitched in to help complete the half-finished candlestick.

I don't know how she will react to home ec but I doubt there will be similar enthusiasm. She limits herself to making chocolate cake and chocolate chip cookies, adamantly refusing to tackle anything else in the culinary line for the same reason I have never built a charcoal fire for cookouts. If you've never demonstrated your ability you can't be asked to assume chores on a minute's notice.

Her 10-year-old brother

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