

## WHY SING?

by Eliot Kapitan

People sing all the time: in the shower, in the car, and in the house. People sing around the campfire, under the village Christmas tree, and at sporting events. People also listen to what is sung or played: marching bands, symphony orchestras, glee clubs, and barbershop quartettes. The iPod, phonograph, CD player, and radio fill our heads and lives with music of all stripes and styles. It is not uncommon for groups from ten to a hundred to a thousand to sing together by heart and from the heart.

## HOW THE CHURCH PRAYS

The Church also sings and listens to music. It is part of the very nature of liturgy. The opening song of every rite helps to set a tone for praying liturgically. It helps the prayer begin by shaping the separate individuals into a single body of believers.

This may not yet be the practice everywhere, though it should be, but every liturgy of the Roman Rite calls for, proscribes some assembly song.

An assembly sings to praise God. An assembly laments the death of one they love. An assembly sings of sorrow and penitence. An assembly sings of love and grace and faithfulness.

## WHAT THE CHURCH BELIEVES BY PRAYING

Good music, along with good art and good architecture, enriches and fosters the religious memory and tradition more than the spoken word alone. In fact, the Church believes that music “is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art” [*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no. 112].

Each of us may not be able to expound on the intricacies of the theology of redemption and the primacy of the paschal mystery. We can, however, sing the memorial acclamation, “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” We sing it in several different tunes, by heart, and with great faith.

Each of us may not be able to lay out the full theology of grace preceding sin, of life conquering death, of Christ as firstborn, as preexisting Word, as light from light. We can, however, sing of it each Easter Vigil with, “Christ our light. Thanks be to God.” as we process from darkness to light and then listen to that great proclamation, “Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels!”

Each of us may not be able to list all the reasons the Church has for praising God. All of us, however, do break into one of several settings of “Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might.”

An assembly sings of praise, of lament, of penitence, of love and faith because it believes. An assembly sings because it loves God who loved first.

## WHAT THE CHURCH LEARNS BY BELIEVING

Roman Catholic liturgy is not public prayer to which music is added for embellishment and only if convenient or possible. Roman Catholic liturgy is sung liturgy. It summons the faithful to sing together “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” [Colossians, 3:16]. It enables the Church to sing in the dark, to sing by heart. It calls the Church to sing from the heart with gusto and in faith.

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Begin by rereading the chapter on sacred music in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, nos. 112-121. See how that is fleshed out in every ritual book and in nearly every liturgy.

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* reminds us: “Great importance should therefore be attached to the use of singing in the celebration of the Mass...” [no. 40]. Good singing of good music during Sunday Mass teaches us the importance of singing during all liturgy.

The bishops of the United States of America have two short documents that shed more light on this. *Music in Catholic Worship* (revised, 1983) describes the three musical judgments – good music, suitable for liturgy, pastorally appropriate for this assembly. It then details music and ministry for Mass. The companion, *Liturgical Music Today* (1982), provides some general principles, some chants for Eucharist, and pointers on music for the other sacraments and the Liturgy of the Hours. It concludes with issues of the liturgical year, culture, instruments, ministry, and copyright obligations.

*Music in Catholic Worship* ends by stating: “Styles of music, choices of instruments, forms of celebration – all converge in a single purpose: that men and women of faith may proclaim and share that faith in prayer and Christ may grow among us all” [no. 84].

Catholic people at liturgical prayer sing all the time.