

III. "The Lord upholds my life."

"What is more pleasing than a psalm?
David expresses it well:

'Praise the Lord, for a psalm is good:
let there be praise of our God
with gladness and grace!'

Yes, a psalm is a blessing on the lips of the people,
praise of God,
the assembly's homage, a general acclamation,
a word that speaks for all, the voice of the Church,
a confession of Faith in song."
St. Ambrose of Milan

Responding to the Word through Psalmody

The faithful respond to the Word of God proclaimed in the First Reading by singing the *Responsorial Psalm*. Not only is the *Responsorial Psalm* a response to the Word proclaimed, but even its form is characterized by the structure of *proclamation and response* – a sung response alternating with chanted verses by a cantor or choir.

"By responding to [the First Reading],
the gathered people
honor the word of God
that they have received in faith
and with grateful hearts." (GIRM 59)

A Test Case:

Let us take the 25th Sunday of the Year as an test case. Below you'll find the first reading proclaimed recently (9/21/03) from the Book of Wisdom. Immediately afterwards you'll find a portion of the *Responsorial Psalm* of the day, Psalm 54.

"The wicked say:
Let us beset the just one,
because he is obnoxious to us;
he sets himself against our doings,
reproaches us for transgressions of the law
and charges us with violations of our training.
Let us see whether his words be true;
let us find out what will happen to him.
For if the just one be the son of God,
God will defend him
and deliver him from the hand of his foes.
With revilement and torture
let us put the just one to the test
that we may have proof of his gentleness
and try his patience.
Let us condemn him to a shameful death;
for according to his own words,
God will take care of him."
(Wisdom 2:12, 17-20)

Note how this portion of the psalm provides a suitable response to the Word proclaimed:

R. (6b) **The Lord upholds my life.**
For the haughty have risen up against me,
the ruthless seek my life;
they set not God before their eyes.

R. **The Lord upholds my life.**
Behold, God is my helper;
the Lord sustains my life.
Freely will I offer you sacrifice;
I will praise your name, O LORD, for its goodness.
(Psalm 54:3-4)

The early Church applied this reading from Wisdom to Jesus, the Beloved Suffering Servant. By placing the words of the psalm in his mouth, it also places those same words of trust in God in *our* mouths: we all say together, "The Lord upholds *my* life." In times of suffering and distress the Body of Christ in the world proclaims that it trusts in God alone for help.

"After the first reading comes the responsorial psalm, which is an integral part of the liturgy of the word... *because it encourages meditation on the word of God.* The responsorial psalm should correspond to each reading and should, *as a rule*, be taken from the Lectionary." (GIRM 61)

It is interesting to note that we employ God's Word to *respond* to God's Word. Drawn from the Book of Psalms, as well as some canticles from other books of Scripture, the *Responsorial Psalm* provides the faithful with words tried and tested in the fires of life's joys and sorrows. Observe the broad significance of the *Responsorial Psalm*: its importance is equal to the other readings from the Old and New Testaments.

"[The psalm *recalls*] the saving events of the past,
yet extends into the future,
even to the end of history;
it *communicates* the promises
God has already kept,
and *awaits* the Messiah
who will fulfill them definitively.
Prayed by Christ and fulfilled in him,
the Psalms remain essential
to the prayer of the Church.
(*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2586)

A Clarification:

A common misconception about the *Responsorial Psalm* is that it is either one more reading at Mass (if not sung) or simply a song to follow the first reading. However, the Church has always held it significant as another proclamation of the Word. It is best to sing the psalm, not recite it. Neither songs nor hymns may replace either the psalm of the day or one from the collection of seasonal psalms.

"It is preferable that the responsorial Psalm be sung,
at least as far as the people's response is concerned.

If the Psalm cannot be sung,
then it should be recited in such a way
that it is particularly suited
to fostering meditation on the word of God. "
(GIRM 61)

The revised *General Instruction* calls for the *Responsorial Psalm* to be sung from the Ambo (the lectern from which Scripture is proclaimed). [Recall how the GIRM describes the ambo as the Altar of the Word.] *At least* the response ("The Lord upholds my life") should be sung and the verses proclaimed by the reader. Still, simply reciting the psalm should always be considered the least desirable option.

The Gospel Acclamation – Singing *Alleluia*!

The second musical piece of the Liturgy of the Word is the Gospel Acclamation (usually the *Alleluia*). This acclamation immediately precedes the proclamation of the Gospel, which is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. Notice that the *Alleluia* is *not* a response to the Second Reading. The appropriate response to that reading is silence. The *Alleluia*, rather, announces the Gospel.

"After the reading
that immediately precedes the Gospel,
the *Alleluia* or another chant indicated by the rubrics
is sung,
as required by the liturgical season.
*An acclamation of this kind constitutes a rite or act in
itself. By it the assembly of the faithful welcomes
and greets the Lord
who is about to speak to them in the Gospel,*
and professes its faith by singing.
All stand and sing the *Alleluia*,
led by the choir or a cantor." (GIRM 62)

The acclamation helps us to reverence the Gospel using our most festive of acclamations. It also helps us to know that what is happening next is the most important part of the Liturgy of the Word. This acclamation is so important that the *General Instruction* is very specific - *it must always be sung - never recited.* (GIRM 62c)

Shaped by the Seasons of the Year

Every Sunday, the Church celebrates the gift of our redemption in Christ's death and resurrection, and so we sing, *Alleluia*! However, as we read above, the liturgical seasons form and shape our use of this acclamation. We fast, as it were, from this song of joy beginning with Ash Wednesday all the way until the Easter Vigil when the Church takes it up again with jubilation. The return of the *Alleluia* at the Easter Vigil is so momentous, that we are asked to sing *several verses* instead of just one.

Other musical options in the Liturgy of the Word

The Profession of Faith (the Creed) and the General Intercessions are also available to be set to music. The Profession of Faith was included in many musical settings of the Tridentine Mass. Few have been composed since Vatican II, perhaps from the desire not to overwhelm the next part of Mass.

This is the third in a series of eleven or so articles
on the celebration of the Mass.
Article #4 is entitled, *The Gospel of the Lord.*

The Profession of Faith

The Profession of Faith, as the GIRM states below, helps us acknowledge and profess the great deeds of God in salvation history – in creation, redemption, and in continued fidelity to the Church. These are the mysteries we recall in the Eucharist as the Church remembers our faithful God who continues to act in human history.

"By reciting the rule of faith
in a formula approved for liturgical use,
the people *call to mind and confess*
the great mysteries of the faith before they begin to
celebrate these mysteries in the Eucharist." (GIRM 67)

The Prayer of the Faithful

Many parishes sing at least the people's response ("Lord, hear our prayer") to the petitions during one or other of the liturgical seasons of the year. It is very important to note that this is the prayer of the *faithful*, not of the priest or reader. These ministers can facilitate the community's exercise of their baptismal priesthood in the practice of their role by a judicious use of silence within the petitions.

"In the general intercessions or prayer of the faithful,
the people *respond* in some way to the word of God
which they have *welcomed* in faith and,
exercising an office of their baptismal priesthood,
offer prayers to God for the salvation of all."
(GIRM 69)

For discussion/reflection:

- What new insights did I receive from this article?
- Is it easy for me to enter into the singing of the psalm on Sundays? How might I enter into that singing more fully and actively?
- How does the *Alleluia* help me prepare to hear Christ addressing me in the Gospel?
- Do the General Intercessions function as the prayer of the faithful? Do I experience this prayer as an exercise of my baptismal priesthood? How might that happen?