

Common Psalms

Even before reading the excellent interview between Paul Inwood and Fr Gelineau about Psalmody, I had been thinking seriously about gradually building up a repertoire of psalms which the whole assembly could sing together. Perhaps a logical starting point would be settings of the Common Psalm texts, which you so helpfully suggest in your week-by-week planner.

Would it make any sense to explore a way of gradually building up a repertoire over the 3-year cycle? To begin with, we could learn and grow 'intimate' with a single psalm for a liturgical season. Over time, we would have learned all the Common Psalms by heart and could then make better use of the suggested Common Psalm texts in the planner — or is this negating the careful design of the arrangement of readings and psalms in the Lectionary?

Yours sincerely,

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There are three points to consider here:

1. The importance of the proclamation of the Responsorial Psalm as one of the readings in the Liturgy of the Word.
2. The choice of text and music.
3. The authority for adaptation.

Taking the last first, the Bishop (Ordinary) has some responsibility for determining local adaptations in the liturgy along with colleagues in the Episcopal Conference. So, find out from your diocesan framework what, if anything, has been agreed locally.

In order to understand the other two points, we need to be aware of what the new General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) says, and consider also *Celebrating the Mass* (CTM), recently published by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. This will allow us to understand what we might do and to see that what is being done is 'correct'.

After the First Reading comes the responsorial Psalm, which is an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word and holds great liturgical and pastoral importance, because it fosters meditation on the word of God. The responsorial Psalm should correspond to each reading and should, as a rule, be taken from the Lectionary. It is preferable that the responsorial Psalm be sung, at least as far as the people's response is concerned. Hence, the psalmist, or the cantor of the Psalm, sings the verses of the Psalm from the ambo or another suitable place. The entire congregation remains seated and listens but, as a rule, takes part by singing the response, except when the Psalm is sung straight through without a response. In order, however, that the people may be able to sing the Psalm response more readily, texts of some responses and psalms have been chosen for the various seasons of the year or for the various categories of Saints. These may be used in place of the text corresponding to the reading whenever the Psalm is sung. 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. The following may also be sung in place of the Psalm assigned in the Lectionary: either the responsorial gradual from the *Graduale Romanum*, or the responsorial psalm or the Alleluia psalm from the *Graduale Simplex*, in the form described in these books.

GIRM n61.

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, the assembly responds with words which are themselves God-given. This response, the Psalm, holds great liturgical and pastoral importance because by this use of the word of God meditation, on the word of God is fostered.

CTM n161.

The assembly is to be helped and encouraged to discern God's word in the psalms, to adopt them as their own prayer, and to experience them as the prayer of the Church. It is preferable that the psalms, the songs and hymns of Israel, be sung. The singing of psalms may be done in a variety of ways. The usual form is responsorial: the psalmist or cantor sings the verses and the whole assembly takes up the response. In the direct form, which is also permitted, there is no intervening response and the cantor, or the whole assembly together, sings the verses consecutively.

CTM n162.

The psalms have been used to give prayerful expression to the faith and feelings of God's people over the centuries. They were used by Christ himself in prayer. In these words of wonder and praise, repentance and sorrow, hope and trust, or joy and exultation, the Church now responds to God's word. The psalms in the Lectionary have been selected to help the assembly to meditate on and respond to the word that has just been proclaimed.

CTM n214.

In general, it would seem that we are to use the psalm appropriate to the day as the norm, because it has been selected to help us meditate on the Scripture that immediately precedes it. However, both documents encourage us to consider the pastoral needs of the assembly — and we are reminded in CTM n51 'The choir remains at all times a part of the assembly... It should never displace, or dominate the rightful song of the assembly' — in as much as they recognise that sung participation might best be served by using seasonal common responsorial Psalm texts:

The common responsorial Psalms, and responses provided in the Lectionary for various seasons and days, may be used instead of the one assigned for the day, if that choice would facilitate sung participation.

But if other ways of singing or sharing the psalms are appropriate, such as the use of a sung response with a 'recitation General' of the text, these too may be used, so that the people's participation may be facilitated by every means.

Even when it is impossible to sing the psalm, it may be possible to support and enrich its recitation with instrumental music. Psalms should always be recited in a manner conducive to meditation.

The psalm should not be replaced by a non-scriptural song or text.

CTM n215–218.

Of course, this raises an interesting point for this publication! 'Psalms should always be recited in a manner conducive to meditation' might seem to be at odds with suggested song settings of the texts, especially where the Editors have suggested that a particular text is 'hard' and needs to be 'gritty' or 'sung with oomph!' If you have views on this, please write to the Editors (address on page 2 of the journal).