

## THE PLACE OF MUSIC IN OUR WORSHIP

This column the past two weeks has been a bit “heavy”, so I thought I’d reflect on something a bit lighter that has always been important to me and that came to mind last Sunday when I presided at the 10a.m. Mass for the second week in a row.

We are so fortunate to have an amazing choir that provides us with beautiful music each week. We are also fortunate to have a parish community which sings with such enthusiasm each week—except at the 10a.m. Mass! So, while our wonderful choir is a great blessing, it also creates a challenge for all of us when it comes to **participating** rather than just listening and marveling at the beautiful sound we hear. Lately, the 10a.m. folks have been so appreciative of the choir that there has been applause at the end of Mass. While I’m sure that gratitude has been appreciated by our music-makers, it can imply that the choir is there to entertain us rather than to support us in our own singing.

The U.S. Bishops’ document, *Music in Catholic Worship*, says this about the musical part played by each of us in the liturgy:

“In liturgical celebrations each one, minister or layperson, who has an office to perform, should do all of, but only, those parts which pertain to that office by the nature of the rite and the principles of the liturgy. Special musical concern must be given to the role of the congregation, the cantor, the choir and the instrumentalists.”

If we boil all that down to everyday language, it simply means that we all have a part to play, no one should steal anyone else’s part, and in the end, we’re all in this together.

Some of us grew up in a church that might be called “musically imbalanced.” By that I mean that, unless we sang in a choir, there wasn’t much for us to do musically as a “congregation” or “assembly” as we name ourselves today. When I was a kid, I remember enjoying Benediction, Holy Hours or novenas as much as Mass primarily because we got to sing. I may not have known what I was singing—usually in Latin—but I felt so much more a part of the whole experience. I was equally happy to have been chosen to sing in the children’s funeral choir when I was in fifth grade—but the bonus there included getting out of class for over an hour! And after Vatican II, I remember how excited I was the first time I was at a Mass that began with an “Entrance Song” that we all could sing together. Unfortunately in those days, after my voice changed, I became basically tone-deaf, so I don’t know how much anyone around me enjoyed the experience.

In the decades since Vatican II, the place of music in worship has continued to evolve to the understanding expressed in the above quote, namely, that we all have a part to play but no one does it all. Yes, we are blessed with a wonderful choir; but they are **not** there to entertain us. Sometimes, of course, there will be a choir piece before Mass, during the Preparation of the Table & Gifts, or after Communion, and then we’re free to simply listen with admiration and gratitude. But most of the time, the choir is there to support **us** in our musical worship, and it’s **our** responsibility to join in, as best we can, even if we might think we’re tone-deaf!

The Cantor or Leader of Song has a role similar to the choir's, primarily during the hymns and acclamations. But at other times, particularly during the responsorial psalm, the gospel acclamation and some versions of the Glory to God, we take on an "antiphonal" relationship with the Cantor, an alternating form of song: the Cantor sings the verse and we sing **only** the refrain. No one else should usurp the Cantor's part at those times—neither the priest nor anyone else in the assembly—no matter how much we might like to sing. The priest also has a musical role, particularly in introducing the acclamations and in chanting the Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer.

"Music is of **preeminent** importance.....an **integral** part of the solemn liturgy." That additional statement from *Music in Catholic Worship* should be a powerful challenge for every Catholic to do our musical part in every Mass—even choir masses—to give praise and thanks to our loving God.

Fr. Bob