

## The Responsorial Psalm

### The Responsorial Palm

*The psalmist or cantor sings or says the Psalm, with the people making the response. (Roman Missal, The Order of Mass, no. 11).*

### Guidelines for the Responsorial Psalm (2011)

General Instruction of the Roman Missal: *After the First Reading follows the Responsorial Psalm, which is an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word and which has great liturgical and pastoral importance, since it fosters meditation on the Word of God. The Responsorial Psalm should correspond to each reading and should usually be taken from the Lectionary. It is preferable for the Responsorial Psalm to be sung, at least as far as the people's response is concerned. Hence the psalmist, or cantor of the Psalm, sings the Psalm verses at the ambo or another suitable place, while the whole congregation sits and listens, normally taking part by means of the response, except when the Psalm is sung straight through, that is, without a response... If the Psalm cannot be sung, then it should be recited in a way that is particularly suited to fostering meditation on the Word of God. (General Instruction of the Roman Missal, no. 61)*

## Scripture

### King David and the Singing of Psalms in the Tabernacle (11<sup>th</sup> Century BC)

These are the men whom David put in charge of *the service of song in the house of the LORD*, after the ark rested there. *They ministered with song before the tabernacle of the tent of meeting, until Solomon had built the house of the Lord in Jerusalem...* (1 Chronicles 6:31-32; cf. Psalms 1-150)

### The Passover Psalm and the Responses

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
his mercy endures forever!

*Let Israel say,*

“His mercy endures forever.”

*Let the house of Aaron say,*

“His mercy endures forever.”

*Let those who fear the LORD say,*

“His mercy endures forever.” (Psalm 118:1-4)

### Jesus Sang a Responsorial Psalm at the Last Supper

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I shall

not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." *And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.* (Matthew 26:26-30)

### **The Singing of Psalms in the Church at Corinth**

What then, brethren? When you come together, *each one has a hymn* (Greek *psalmos*), a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. (1 Corinthians 14:26)

## **Tradition**

### **The Addition of the Responsorial Psalms in the West (5<sup>th</sup> Century)**

St. Augustine: Not long ago the church at Milan began to observe this type of consolation and encouragement, *with its members singing together with great zeal in voice and heart.* Truly it was a year ago—not much longer—when Justina, the mother of Valentinian the boy emperor, persecuted your servant Ambrose... *At that time began the practice of singing hymns and psalms according to the custom of eastern lands so that the people, wearied with grief, might not faint away. This practice has been retained up to the present in many, in almost all, of your churches throughout the rest of the world.*<sup>1</sup>

### **The Beauty of the Psalms in the Liturgy (5<sup>th</sup> century)**

St. Augustine: At times I even wish that the melodies of the sweet-sounding songs often used by David's Psalter be banished from my ears and from those of the Church. *What, as I recall, was often related to me about Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, seems better, for he had the reader of the psalm slightly inflect the voice so that the reader was more speaking than singing the text.* Nonetheless, when I recall the tears I shed at the songs of the Church during the early days of my recovered faith, and how I am even now moved not by the singing but by what is sung—when it is rendered with a clear and skillfully modulated voice—then I acknowledge the great usefulness of this practice. So it is that I waver between dangerous pleasure and the experience of wholesomeness; and although I do not wish to utter any irrevocable opinion on this matter, I am inclined to approve the custom of singing in church so that through the delights of the ear weaker minds may rise up to a feeling of devotion. Yet when it happens that I am moved more by the singing than by what is sung, I confess that I sin like a lawbreaker, and then I would rather not hear the singing.<sup>2</sup>

### **Preaching on the Responsorial Psalm (5<sup>th</sup> Century)**

St. Augustine: May the Lord grant me the ability to say something worthwhile to you about the words of this psalm which we have sung just now. What we said was, "I will

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.8.15. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 3:12.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.33.50. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 3:13.

praise the Lord all my life, I will play music to my God as long as I live” (Ps 146:2).<sup>3</sup>

### **Singing “the Psalm of David” in Rome (5<sup>th</sup> Century)**

Pope St. Leo the Great: “We have chanted with one voice the psalm of David, dearly beloved...”<sup>4</sup>

### **The “Responsorial Psalm” in the Roman Liturgy (7<sup>th</sup> Century)**

Ordo Romanus I: The subdeacon... climbs up into the ambo and reads the epistle. Then another minister goes up with the chant book and sings *the responsory* (Latin *responsum*), and another, the alleluia.<sup>5</sup>

## **Mystagogy**

### **The Psalms of David in the Liturgy (7<sup>th</sup> Century)**

St. Isidore of Seville: *The church discloses, in a great mystery, that David the prophet first used the psaltery after Moses [see 1 Chr 13:8; 16:5]... For this reason, the church frequently uses his psaltery with its melody of sweet songs, by which souls may be moved more easily to compunction.* The primitive church, however, so chanted the psalms that it had the psalmist make his voice resonate with only a slight inflection, so that it was closer to speaking than to singing. However, the custom of singing was introduced in the church on account of the sensual ones, not the spiritual, so that, since they do not feel compunction because of the words, they might be moved by the sweetness of the modulation. Thus, in fact, even the most saintly Augustine in the books of his *Confessions* approved the custom of singing in the church, “so that through the pleasures of the ears,” he said, “the weaker spirit might rise up to the feeling of piety” [Augustine, *Confessions* 10.50]. *For in these holy words our souls are moved with more unction and more fervor to the flame of piety when sung than if not sung. I do not know by what hidden familiarity, through the discover or newness of sounds, all our affections are more stirred when sung by a sweet and accomplished voice.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Sermons* 33A. Saint Augustine, *Sermons II: 20-50* (Works of Saint Augustine, III/2; trans. Edmund Hill, O.P.; New York, N.Y.: New City Press, 1992), 176.

<sup>4</sup> Leo I, *Sermons* 3. In St. Leo the Great, *Sermons* (trans. Jane Patricia Freeland, C.S.J.B. and Agnes Josephine Conway, S.S.J.; Fathers of the Church 93; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Ordo Romanus Primus*, 42.

<sup>6</sup> Isidore of Seville, *On the Ecclesiastical Offices* 1.5. In Isidore of Seville, *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis*, 31.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What role did the Psalms play in the Judaism of Jesus' day?

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2. What is your experience of singing the Responsorial Psalm? Is the thematic reason for its selection clear?

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#### For Further Reading

Day, John, ed. *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*. London: T&T Clark, 2007.

Jungmann, Joseph, S.J. *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*. 2 Volumes. Translated by Francis A. Brunner, C.S.S.R. Reprint. Notre Dame, Ind.: Christian Classics, 2012.

McKinnon, James. *The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Nowell, Irene, OSB. *Sing a New Song: The Psalms in the Sunday Lectionary*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1993.