

The Responsorial Psalm

After the First Reading, the next part of the Liturgy of the Word that demands our attention is the Responsorial Psalm. Now, if you're like me when you were growing up, if you grew up Catholic, I never understood what this meant. I didn't know what responsorial meant and I thought they were saying the Responsorial Song, S-O-N-G, but just kind of saying it wrong. And I didn't know that it was the Responsorial Psalm, P-S-A-L-M, from the Book of Psalms. So, if you have a Roman Missal...so that's my little embarrassing story there. If you have a Roman Missal and you turn to the Liturgy of the Word, you're going to find the Responsorial Psalm, and this is what it will say in #11 of the Order of Mass:

The psalmist or cantor sings or says the Psalm, with the people making the response. (Roman Missal, The Order of Mass, no. 11).¹

So there you see the two parts. It's the Psalm, which means it's from the book of Psalms, the 150 Psalms, many of which are attributed to King David, the Psalter in the Scripture, and the word response comes from the fact that the people ordinarily make a response to the Psalm that is being sung by the Psalmist, or Cantor is the name for the person singing the Psalm.

So, okay, what's this all about? Well, if you want to dig in deeper to the liturgy in the Roman Missal, one of the things I've said before, but I'll say it again, is to actually look in an official Roman Missal at the General Instruction of the Roman Missal that's at the beginning of the Missal. This is a document published by the Magisterium that gives an official magisterial description of the Mass and also a theological explanation of each part of the Mass and what is being said, what is being sung. Why it's being said, why it's being sung, and what its implications are for how we worship as Catholics. So this General Instruction of the Roman Missal, sometimes abbreviated as the GIRM, although that makes it sound like a pathogen, so may not be the best abbreviation, but the General Instruction will give a theology and explanation, a theological explanation, and an official one as well. So if you turn to The General Instruction of the Roman Missal, paragraph 61 describes

¹ Roman Missal, *The Order of Mass*, no. 11.

the Responsorial Psalm, and I'd just like to read what it says there by way of introduction to this part of the Liturgy of the Word. So if you look, it says this about the Responsorial Psalm:

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...(General Instruction of the Roman Missal, no. 61)²

And then it goes on to say some other detailed things about various options with regard to the Responsorial Psalm. But that's the basic description that I want to highlight here. So I want to make, notice, a couple of points about Church teaching on the Responsorial Psalm in the General Instruction. First, this is an integral part of the liturgy, right? So that means it's an important part of the liturgy. It belongs as part of the Liturgy of the Word. It's not just like some optional thing you can do or, you know, take it or leave it. No, it's integral to the liturgy.

Second, it's meant to foster meditation on the Word of God. And this is one of the things about the contemporary Roman Missal in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, is that a lot of the reforms that took place with the liturgy, and the Liturgy of the Word in particular, are meant to foster meditation on the Word of God. So that we're not just reciting prayers, or we're not just praying quietly and privately by ourselves, but that we're hearing the word of God and that we're pondering it in what is called meditation. So the First Reading, we're supposed to listen quietly to that and meditate on it. And the same thing is true of the Responsorial Psalm. That's why the Psalm is meant to be chanted or sung at a pace and with tones that

² Roman Missal, *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 61.

allow us to hear the words so that we can reflect and ponder them, and then also, in a sense, participate in them and engage those words by responding to the word of Scripture with words from Scripture as we sing the Responsorial Psalm, the part of the Psalm that is repeated, the chant, the kind of one line or two that will be the refrain that's part of the Responsorial Psalm. So again, this is one of those parts of the Liturgy of the Word, the Responsorial Psalm is, that it's easy for us to kind of get distracted and maybe just let it blow by or let it roll over us without actually entering into it, without listening carefully to it, and without meditating on it. But the Church actually wants us to do all those things, to listen attentively, to participate by responding, and to ponder the words of the Psalm.

Because, and here's the fourth thing, you'll notice it says the Responsorial Psalm should correspond to each reading, right? And, if you look carefully at the Responsorial Psalms, which I've done in my series, *The Mass Readings Explained*, where we go through all three years of the cycle of the Sunday readings. One of the things that I show over and over again is how the Responsorial Psalm often acts as a thematic bridge between the Old Testament reading and the Gospel. So if you think of the Old Testament here and the New Testament here, maybe like a river between them, the Responsorial Psalm is like a bridge that traverses the span, the distance between the two. It bridges the two sides of the river so that you can see a connection between the old and the new. So it's really important to pay attention to that bridge, because if you want to get from the old to the new, if you want to cross over to the other side of the river, to extend the analogy, you need to pay attention to the bridge that connects them. Because it will often highlight the theme that the Magisterium, that the Church, in putting the readings together, is trying to highlight in that particular Sunday, with those particular readings. So the Responsorial Psalm is very, very important to the Liturgy of the Word.

So the question we might have then, is, well, where does it come from, right? Where is the Responsorial Psalm in the Bible? And where is the Responsorial Psalm in Tradition? So we're looking in this series at the Roman liturgy in Scripture and Tradition. So where's this from in the Bible? Where's it from in Sacred Tradition? Alright, so let's answer those questions. The first thing we want to say is this. If you if you go back to the Old Testament, a lot of people don't notice this, but there's no music in the liturgy of the Tabernacle in Moses' day,

right? Yeah, it's true, Moses and Miriam, his sister, sing a song of praise when they cross through the waters of the Red Sea. But if you look at the description of the worship that's carried out in the Tabernacle in the Pentateuch, in the Book of Exodus and Leviticus, there are no prescriptions for liturgical music or liturgical psalms as part of the sacrificial worship of the Tabernacle. The sacrificial worship in the Tabernacle is largely silent. Now, I shouldn't say it's entirely silent because you're going to hear the bleating of lambs and sheep and goats, right, as they're being slaughtered. You hear the crackling of the fire as the sacrificial holocausts are being burnt up and offered to God, right? But it's a silent liturgy.

It's really only when you come to the time of King David in around 1000 BC, that you're going to have an explicit description of music being brought into the liturgy. So, in other words, if you take the traditional dating of the Exodus to about 1450 BC, from the time of Moses to the time of David in 1000 BC, for that 450 year, that 400 year period, Israelite worship is largely silent worship in the Tabernacle. But once the Tabernacle gets to Jerusalem, and once King David wants to build a house for it, and then Solomon makes a temple for it, with the time of David and Solomon, David's going to introduce music into worship. And guess what that music's going to consist of? Singing Psalms, right?

So for example, if you look at 1 Chronicles 6:31-42, we have a description of David bringing in singing to the Tabernacle. This is, again, 11th 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)³

It gives a bunch of lists of all the various men that David appointed, like Ezra, and then there was another man called Heman—I always thought he was kind of cool because it reminded me of the Masters of the Universe. But there are these various

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

figures at the time of David that are, like Asaf, who are associated with the composition of Psalms and for chanting in the Tabernacle, and then eventually in the Temple. And, of course, if you have a Bible, which I know you do, and you open to the Book of Psalms, effectively what the Book of Psalms is, is the liturgical hymn book for the Tabernacle of David, the Temple of Solomon, all the way down to Jesus' day. So the book of Psalms is the book of chants for the Jewish people, for the Israelite people. And although in Hebrew, you might note that the actual Hebrew word for the Psalm is the Book of Praises, *Tehillim*. So these are the Psalms we're going to sing to praise the Lord when we enter into the Temple.

The term Psalm, *psalmoi*, is a Greek word that's the Greek translation of the title of the Book of Psalms and it comes from the Greek word *psaltérion*, which is a description of a stringed instrument that would be strung and sung over, right, as the psalms were chanted. So the Psalter in its Greek form presupposes instrumental worship. You'll sometimes see the *psaltérion* translated as the harp or the lyre. Those would be different words that are used to describe the stringed instrument that David is often depicted with. You will see images of King David, and he will often have a harp or a lyre with him, some kind of stringed instrument. Even into the Middle Ages, David will often be depicted as a Saint — in the East they will sometimes call him St. David — who is known not just for writing the Psalms or chanting or singing them, but for strumming his lyre or his harp singing with him. So the Psalter is the book of Psalms to be accompanied and to be chanted along with a lyre or or *psaltérion*. A little background there, probably too much information, but I just want you to know that that's what we're talking about. This book is really crucial in terms of liturgical music, and this is one of David's great contributions to the liturgy and the development of the liturgy in the Old Testament.

So, for example, if you look then at the book of Psalms, you'll see that some of them are actually explicitly responsorial in character, where it is clear from the text itself that one group of people is saying one thing and then another people are responding with chants in a responsorial fashion. For example, turn to Psalm 118:1-4. This is one of the Psalms that would be sung at Passover, one of the Hallel Psalms, and it takes a responsorial form. This is what it says:

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)

And so on and so forth. So a couple things. First, every time I read this Psalm, my first Hebrew exam was this Psalm. So the teacher thought he was doing us a favor by giving a Psalm with a refrain because you translate one line and then you get to the next line. And once you have that, you know, “His mercy endures forever” line translated, you could do it over and over again. So every time I see this, I think about that first Hebrew exam. But the refrain there shows the responsorial character, but also the directives. "Let Israel say" means let the Twelve tribes say "His mercy endures forever." "Let the House of Aaron say, His mercy endures forever." That would mean the priests, right? So you have like a chant going on here. The priests say one part and then the people say another part. And then “Let those who fear the Lord say, His mercy endures forever.” That means everybody. So priests say one part, the people say the next part, then everyone says together, "His mercy endures forever...His mercy endures forever.” So it's a chorus going back and forth in a responsorial fashion.

So, by the time of Jesus, from David to Jesus, there's 1000 years. If you had gone to Passover at the time of Jesus, the Levites would actually have choirs in the temple chanting this Psalm, Psalm 118, responsorially, with these kind of choirs going back and forth. Ancient Jewish writings will describe the choral singing, so to speak, of the Psalms in the Temple while the sacrifices were being offered. So it's not surprising then, with these scriptural roots, that we see Jesus and the Apostles themselves singing a Psalm at the Last Supper. So this is really crucial. Most Catholics are familiar with the fact that the Last Supper is the first Eucharist, that at the Last Supper Jesus institutes the Sacrament of the Eucharist. So we see the words of consecration: "This is my body...This is my Blood." We link that with the Last Supper. But what we often miss is that Jesus sang a Responsorial Psalm at the Last Supper, so that the Psalm is part of the liturgy of the First Eucharist as

well. It's easy to miss, especially in English translation, but if you go back and you look at the account of the Last Supper in the Gospel of Matthew, this is what it says:

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 then the English translations will say:

And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.
(Matthew 26:26-30)

Now it's easy to blow over that last verse and just run right by "when they had sung a hymn." But as scholars who have studied the Last Supper have shown, that is a reference to the Psalms that would be sung during the Jewish Passover liturgy, because there was a series of Psalms known as the Hallel Psalms, Psalms of Praise, that were actually part of the Passover liturgy. Psalm 113 and following, according to Jewish tradition, would not only be chanted in the Temple while the sacrifices would be offered, but would also be chanted over the meal by the laity who were participating in the celebration of the Passover meal. In a sense then, the chanting of the Hallel Psalms functioned as a kind of bond uniting the sacrifice, the Passover sacrifice, which happened in the Temple and the Passover meal, which happened in Jesus' case in the upper room, and all the other Jews would have their Passover meals in their homes as well, in the city of Jerusalem. So the Psalm is a constitutive element of the liturgy of both the sacrifice and the meal of the Passover, and Jesus and the Apostles would have sung a Psalm at the last, they actually would have sung probably several Psalms at the Last Supper, which, as I talk about in my book, *The Jewish roots of the Eucharist*, is something to think about. Just pause for a second and imagine Jesus singing, right? What would that be like to listen to Jesus chant the Psalms and then to sing with him as the Apostles

would have done in the Upper Room. I can imagine Jesus was good at most things, you know, being the Incarnate Son of God. And if an ordinary person's human voice is a beautiful thing to behold, imagine listening to the voice of the Son of God chanting the word of God with the words of God and the Holy Spirit in the context of that first Eucharist meal at the new Passover with Jesus. So just something to kind of meditate and think about as you reflect on the role of chant in the Liturgy. So if Christ sings at the Last Supper, and if he sings a Psalm at the Last Supper, then it is certainly fitting that Psalms continue to be sung during the Eucharistic liturgy as part of the Mass.

And of course, that's why we will see if you turn to the early Church, St. Paul doesn't give us a description, like a kind of point by point of how the Mass was celebrated, but he does say things in passing that give us some insights into the liturgy. And one of them is that Psalms were sung during early Christian assemblies. So in 1 Corinthians 14:26, Paul says this about singing of Psalms in the church at Corinth:

What then, brethren? When you come together, *each one has a hymn* (Greek *psalmos*)...

I don't know why the English translators don't translate the Greek word *psalmos* with the English word which seems closest to it, which is Psalm, but there it is. So they translated it as a hymn, when in fact what he says is each one has a psalm:

...a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

So Paul expects that when the Christians come together, it's not just going to be Jews who sing psalms, psalmoi, it'll be Christians as well. So the scriptural basis for the Responsorial Psalm being part of the liturgy couldn't possibly be stronger. Now, it is true there was a period where there was no music in the liturgy. 500 years almost, you know, really more like 4 centuries. But for 1000 years after that, the Psalms are a constitutive part of the liturgy of Israel.

What about tradition, though? That's from the Bible. If we look at the tradition, and not just the tradition as a whole, but the tradition of the Roman church in particular, or of churches following the Roman liturgy, like the Churches of North Africa for example, we're going to see that the Responsorial Psalm has a really important place in the early centuries of the Roman liturgy. Well, let me give you a couple of examples to this. Nowhere is this clear than in the writings of St. Augustine. So, St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, late 4th early 5th century. His most famous book is *Confessions*, right? Maybe if you went to a Catholic college or went to Catholic High School, or maybe just of your own volition, you've read this classic work, *Confessions*. It is one of the greatest books in Western history and in Church history, to be sure. And it's interesting, in the course of telling his story and what is effectively his kind of spiritual autobiography. St. Augustine gives us a window into the singing of Psalms and the use of music in the liturgy of the Roman Church and in churches following that Latin liturgy when he writes these words. This is from *Confessions*:

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...

Pause here. So remember, Ambrose was the Bishop of Milan in northern Italy, and Augustine was his protege. He looked up to Ambrose. Ambrose was being persecuted by Justina, the mother of the Emperor Valentinian. And so one of the things he did was he began to sing in the church, to sing in in the basilica there. And Augustine tells us. he continues:

*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.*⁴

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.8.15. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 3:12.

Okay, so pause there. This is really important historical data, Augustine tells us in the *Confessions*. Effectively what he says is that in the Eastern churches, like the Greek speaking churches of the East, they already had a custom of chanting the Psalms during the liturgy, something they've probably gotten from Judaism. But in Rome and in the West, and in Milan, for the first three or four centuries, it wasn't customary to sing the Psalms in the liturgy. But when there was a time of persecution of Ambrose's day, Ambrose adopted that Eastern custom of chanting the Psalms in order to give the people consolation through the sweetness of the music, and to start singing the hymns and Psalms like their Eastern brothers and sisters did. So Augustine himself tasted this, he experienced it, and he attributes it to St. Ambrose. So if you want to think, why do we sing the Responsorial Psalm in the West? Well, it goes back at least in part, to the action of St. Ambros.

Now, why was there no singing in the liturgy for the 1st centuries according to Augustine, in in Rome and in the West? Well, in the early centuries of the Church, there was some controversy about music. I know this might sound hard to imagine, like controversy about liturgical music? But that's how it was in the ancient world. There were controversies about music, and I can't go into this in any detail, but I'll recommend two books to you. One of them was by Johannes Quasten, a famous scholar of the Church Fathers. This is called *Music and Worship in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*. And then another one is by James McKinnon, called *Music in Early Christian Literature*. And one of the things that Quasten shows , and McKinnon as well, is that some early Christian writers were opposed to music, especially instrumental music, but even singing in the liturgy because they associated music and worship with pagan worship, because pagans used music in their worship, and pagans used instruments in their temples and in their festivals and in their cultic worship. So there were some Christian writers who thought there shouldn't be any music in the liturgy, who thought the liturgy should just be read and said, but not sung and certainly not accompanied by instrumental music? So there's a debate about this, right? And there were some churches, in this case Milan for example, which had a custom of not singing the Psalms in the liturgy, in the way that the Jews did, for example, or the Eastern Christians. And so Augustine, this is really fascinating in his *Confessions*, he admits he's ambivalent about music,

because he really likes the music, but he also recognizes that it can be a temptation to distraction from the words of the liturgy and from the message of the liturgy.

So I'm going to give you one more quote from Augustine, because I just think this is interesting, about the beauty of the Psalms in the liturgy, because it was particularly the Psalms that he was moved by. Alright, this is what Augustine says:

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.*

Notice. What he reflects here is there were people who were, in a sense, kind of chanting the Psalms, but very little inflection. It wasn't really a glorious singing. And that was evidently Athanasius' custom in Alexandria. St. Athanasius, one of the great Doctors of the Church. So it was a very modest and constrained form of chanting the Psalms, but Augustine says:

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.⁵

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.33.50. In Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, 3:13.

That's from *Confessions*, book 10. In Book 9 and 10 he goes through some of this. Again, this is not official Church teaching, but it's a great window into the heart and mind of a Saint, one of the greatest Saints, who both love the beauty of the Psalm, chanted Psalms, of Responsorial Psalms, like Ambrose, because of what they could do in the heart and how they could move the heart. But he also recognized the temptation to focus more on the music than on what is being sung. And that tension is there to this day. You don't want to be so swept up by the beauty of the music that you don't listen to the words, but you also maybe don't want to just have the words which can be magnified by the beauty of the music. So Augustine, as ever, a great Saint, gives us a window into early Christian music. And it is in fact during his period as Bishop, that Augustine will adopt Ambrose's practice, as evidently a lot of churches in the West did, and began chanting the Psalms, in a responsorial fashion. So Augustine, for example, in one of his sermons is going to actually give a sermon on the Responsorial Psalm, where he takes one of the verses from the Psalm and then he explains it to the people. So this is kind of interesting. You'll see that although sometimes people today think you can only preach on the Gospel, right? Or maybe the Gospel and the Old Testament. No, Augustine actually could preach on the Gospel, would preach on the Old Testament, or, in some cases, we would actually preach on the Responsorial Psalm itself, right? So, for example, in his sermon, he says this:

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 praise the Lord all my life, I will play music to my God as long as I live" (Ps 146:2).⁶

And then he goes on to give a homily about praising God and about how music functions in that way. So it's kind of a neat sermon on the Responsorial Psalm. So we know the Responsorial Psalm was being practiced in North Africa. We also have witnesses to the Responsorial Psalm from the 5th century in Rome, from the Pope himself. So, one of the great Popes, greatest popes is Pope St. Leo the Great, from the 5th century. And in one of his sermons, I have a book collection of them

⁶ 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.

here. They're wonderful. They will give you an idea of what preaching and worship was like in Rome at a Papal Mass in the 5th century. And Pope Leo says:

We have chanted with one voice the psalm of David, dearly beloved...⁷

And then he goes on to give his sermon. So we know that in the 5th century the Psalms were being chanted not just by the priest, or in this case the Pope, but by the people. As with one voice you have this chorus of people singing the Psalm. And then finally, the terminology of Responsorial Psalm is also from the Roman tradition. I have mentioned this book before *Ordo Romanus Primus*. It's the first Roman order of mass. It's from about the 7th century AD, a couple centuries after St. Leo the Great. And here, this book describes how when a minister would go up with the book of chants, it says, "and sings *the responsory*."⁸ In Latin, *responsum*. So the responsory there is the Responsorial Psalm that would be, again, sung in the 7th century AD.

So when the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, and then Pope Paul the VI, were reforming the liturgy of the Roman Church after the Second Vatican Council, one of the things that the contemporary liturgy did was to bring back the practice of the Responsorial Psalm that was part of the Roman tradition at the time of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine and St. Leo the Great. They both talk about the Responsorial Psalm with great frequency, because what happened during the early Middle Ages is that the Responsorial Psalm fell into disuse, or at least I shouldn't say that, it was more that it was transformed into the chanting of what was known as the Gradual. Which, I don't have time to go into a bunch of details about, but effectively the Gradual was the chanting of a portion of a Psalm, but not in the same choral fashion or responsorial fashion that you see in the early Church, where they would work through either all of the Psalm or most of the Psalm, with the ministers and the people singing and chanting it together.

⁷ 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.

⁸ *Ordo Romanus Primus*, 42.

So for a long time the Gradual was a vestige of the Responsorial Psalm that was part of the Roman liturgy from the Middle Ages all the way through the Council of Trent, up to Vatican II, and then after Vatican II, the Responsorial Psalm with the people participating in a choral fashion was restored as part of the contemporary Roman liturgy and the the Missal talks about that to some degree. So for our purposes here, that's a nice little overview, a very quick overview of the Responsorial Psalm in the liturgy. But I just would like to end by asking, okay, that's the Responsorial Psalm. That's where it's from in Scripture, that's where it's from in tradition, especially St. Augustine and St. Leo the Great witnessing to the Responsorial Psalm.

What am I supposed to be doing the Responsorial Psalm? What's happening mystically, mystagogically at this point in the Mass? And here I'd like to end with a quote from St. Isidore of Seville, once again, a 6th century Father and Doctor of the Church who describes the Latin liturgy in Spain. And at his time the Responsorial Psalm was still being practiced with the people, and so he gives a window into what's our spiritual orientation during this part of the Mass. He actually draws on St. Augustine. So let's listen to what he says about chanting the Psalms. St. Isidore writes:

The church discloses, in a great mystery, that David the prophet first used the psaltery after Moses [see 1 Chr 13:8; 16:5]...

St. Isidore knows the history of the music in the liturgy. because he knows his Bible. He says:

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.

So he notes that it's the ability of the Psalms to move the heart, especially to repentance for sin. And so many of the psalms are penitential psalms. Lord, wash me in my iniquity. Cleanse me of my sin. Like Psalm 51. These are psalms expressing sorrow for sin and a desire for God. So he says singing the Psalms can help move the faithful to compunction. He says:

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.

So pause here, notice St. Isidore says that for those who are more spiritual, just the words of the Psalms alone could move you. But those who are more sensual need the music to move their hearts, to move them, and to move their minds to compunction. He continues:

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.*⁹

So, a really fascinating quote there from St. Isidore, because what's he saying? The reason we sing the Psalms is because King David did. We get it from the Jewish tradition. Second, the sweetness of the Psalms is meant to move us to compunction. Third, the Psalm does not have to be sung, however. In fact, he recognizes that in the earlier Church, the Psalm could just be recited, or at least chanted in a very kind of moderate, moderately inflected voice, and that is sufficient, but that the use of music is a kind of concession to human weakness, to try to stir the souls of the faithful, especially the weaker among them, to piety and devotion, so that they might turn their hearts and their minds to the Lord. And

⁹ Isidore of Seville, *On the Ecclesiastical Offices* 1.5. In Isidore of Seville, *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis*, 31.

basically he reflects the kind of idea that St. Augustine himself expresses elsewhere, that the person who sings prays twice. There's a kind of power in music to elevate our prayer and to focus, not just the mind, but the heart, on God.

And that's what the Responsorial Psalm is, and that's what the Responsorial Psalm should do, right? It should be a chant that is slow enough and clear enough, but also beautiful enough to let us hear the words of the Psalm, reflect on them, make them our own, and then offer them back to God in a beautiful, as he put it, a beautiful sweet melody of piety, of pious devotion to the Lord. So with that in mind, I just want to make that, by way of conclusion, if you return to the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*. I want to be clear here that this is why you can see in the section on the Responsorial Psalm, it'll say that it's preferable for the Psalm to be sung right for all these reasons we just heard. So that it moves our hearts to piety and to devotion, at least as far as the people's response is concerned. However, it is permissible, because on some occasions the Psalm cannot be sung for whatever reason, that it can be recited in a way that is suited, however, to fostering meditation on the word of God. So the Church allows for both singing the Psalm and reciting the Psalm, because as you've already seen, both are part of the tradition. They're both part of the Roman tradition. But whichever way is done, the ultimate aim of this Psalm is to be meditation on the Word of God that moves us to devotion for and worship of Christ.