

# PSALMODY

# & HYMNODY:

# SCRIPTURE

# IN

BY  
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# SONG

*“There is the music of heaven in all things and we have forgotten how to hear it until we sing.”*

—ST HILDEGARD OF BINGEN (1098-1179)

Everyone has a favourite hymn. Whether it be simple or complex, loud and rousing, gentle and tender, hymns carry personal and collective faith like no other artistic expression. Often, this is unconscious. What we sing matters, as our prayer informs what we believe about God, and how we wish to live as followers of Christ: *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*.<sup>1</sup> Singing has been part of the life of the church from the very earliest times; and Sacred Scripture has traditionally formed the basis of this sung prayer, with the psalms taking a central role. The psalms formed the “prayerbook” of ancient Israel, and the Jewish and Christian traditions of worship, over many centuries.<sup>2</sup> Jesus quotes Psalm 22:22 in Hebrews 2:12, speaking of singing God’s praises in the assembly; and Jesus leads the singing with his disciples in Mark 14:26 and Matthew 26:30. St Paul famously instructs the Ephesians to

“...be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

For St Ambrose and St John Chrysostom, the singing of the psalms was primary, and Ambrose himself wrote many hymns; the Didascalia Apostolorum called people to sing the psalms if they yearned for songs; St Clement called for songs to be hymns to God; and St Basil called the psalms the voice of the Church: they were at once God’s words to people and the words of the people to God. Saint Augustine wrote in many of his best-known

works the effect music directed to God had on him and on others.<sup>4</sup> This focus was eschatological as well as immediate, and acknowledged how music could deepen and strengthen faith in the present moment and in and for the journey onward to the world to come:

In the way that travellers are in the habit of singing;  
sing, but keep on walking... What’s “keep on walking”?  
Make progress, make progress in goodness.  
There are some people, you see,  
according to the apostle, who progress from bad to worse.  
You, if you’re making progress, are walking;  
but make progress in goodness,  
progress in the right faith, progress in good habits and behaviour.  
Sing and keep on walking.<sup>5</sup>

Liturgical music in the early Church was part of thanksgiving, petitioning prayer, processions, proclaiming the Scriptures, vigils, and the whole sanctification of the faithful for living as Christians. A liturgical celebration has three dimensions: it recalls the past in the present for the sake of the future.<sup>6</sup> It therefore retains a focus that is ultimately eschatological.<sup>7</sup> Music was not seen as a single or separate entity but as a part of the worshipping community’s response of praise to God, even in times of trial and hardship.

Music is part of the larger goals and purposes of liturgy: the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful.<sup>8</sup> As Sacred Scripture is a primary source of revelation, anchoring hymnody in Scripture is integral. Liturgical music is acknowledged as being a powerful means of communicating and proclaiming the Word, as well as a key way to strengthen bonds of Christian community.<sup>9</sup> Strong memories of person, place and time, as well as deep emotions, are often evoked when hearing musical pieces, including hymns, from one's past.<sup>10</sup> This has implications for what is sung in liturgy, due to the complex way that people build and weave symbolic meaning over time. A mix of the old and the new is necessary in choosing hymns for congregational singing. Liturgist and composer, Father Jan Michael Joncas (he wrote the much-loved hymn, *Eagles Wings*, which is based on Psalm 91), states that liturgical music must be attentive to both the text and liturgical action if it is to contribute to its purpose of glorifying God and sanctifying the faithful.<sup>11</sup>

When we sing Scripture in song with attention to the liturgical year, we employ a matchless means to absorb the cycle of death and resurrection into the long term, embodied memory of the singing assembly. Psalmody and hymnody are both creedal and evangelical, with an appropriate hymn often serving as a bridge in liturgy.<sup>12</sup> Song brings people together, proclaims the Word, leads people to communion, and sends believers out into the world strengthened for mission.

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One of the goals of Vatican II was to bring Catholics closer to Scripture<sup>13</sup> and the reform of the liturgy after Vatican II gave a three-year cycle of three readings for each Sunday. This allowed a larger focus on Sacred Scripture within Sunday Mass. The sung Responsorial Psalm was also restored to the Mass in the new liturgy: liturgist and liturgical music composer Lucien Deiss C.S.Sp names this as one of the most significant reforms contained in the new liturgy. It is also anchored in the practices of the early Church.<sup>14</sup>

Deiss also reminds all that the ever-present challenge of the liturgical musician and for music in the liturgy is conformity to the will of Christ. Deiss suggests that obedience to the liturgical laws of the Church should reveal a "new song" that holds the unity of the Church to Christ.<sup>15</sup> We are also called to be attentive to when and how psalmody and hymnody are used, noting when other musical forms—and silence—may be appropriate to the needs of the community as part of a liturgical event. This is the joyful and serious challenge for any musician and disciple in taking their part in the Church and her mission in this new millennium, and beyond. ☩


## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Don. E. Saliers, *Music and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), p 33.
- <sup>2</sup> Don. E. Saliers, "Psalmody and Hymnody." Lecture, Psalmody and Hymnody from St John's School of Theology, Collegeville, Minnesota, July, 2015.
- <sup>3</sup> Eph 5:18-20 NRSVCE.
- <sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. & edited Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), X, xxxiii, 49, p 207; XI, vi, 14, p 164.
- <sup>5</sup> Augustine, *Sermons* (New York: New City Press, 1993), Sermon 256, p 168.
- <sup>6</sup> Adrien Nocent, *The Liturgical Year, Book 1*. Translated by Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013), 54.
- <sup>7</sup> E. Byron Anderson and Bruce T. Morrill Eds., *Liturgy and the Moral Self* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 208.
- <sup>8</sup> Austin Flannery, O.P. *The Basic Sixteen Documents. Vatican Council II*. (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 2007), Sancrosanctum Concilium, article 112.
- <sup>9</sup> Ruff, *Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform*, 7, 12, 13.
- <sup>10</sup> Lutz Jancke, "Music, memory and emotion," *Journal of Biology* 7:21(2008): 21.1-21.5, accessed October 1, 2014, doi: 1186/jbiol82.
- <sup>11</sup> Ruff, *Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform*, 11; SC 112.
- <sup>12</sup> E. Byron Anderson, "The Measure of our song: Liturgical Music and Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi," *Liturgical Ministry* 11 (Spring 2002): 70.
- <sup>13</sup> Flannery, Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum*, article 8.
- <sup>14</sup> Lucien Deiss C.S.Sp, *Visions of Liturgy and Music for a New Century* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 98.
- <sup>15</sup> Deiss, Lucien. *Visions of Liturgy*, 238.

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