

III. The Lord upholds my life.

A Case Study of a Responsorial Psalm

"What is more pleasing than a psalm?
David expresses it well:

'Praise the Lord, for a psalm is good:
let there be praise of our God
with gladness and grace!'

Yes, a psalm is a blessing on the lips of the people,
praise of God,
the assembly's homage, a general acclamation,
a word that speaks for all, the voice of the Church,
a confession of Faith in song."
St. Ambrose of Milan

Responding to the Word through Psalmody

The faithful respond to the Word of God proclaimed in the First Reading by singing the *Responsorial Psalm*. Thus, the *Responsorial Psalm* is both a response to the Word proclaimed and, in its very structure, is characterized by *proclamation and response* – a sung response alternating with chanted verses by a cantor or choir.

"By responding to [the First Reading],
the gathered people
honor the word of God
that they have received in faith
and with grateful hearts." (GIRM 59)

A Test Case:

Let us take the 25th Sunday of the Year (Cycle C) as a test case. The first reading from the Book of Wisdom, chapter 2 follows. A portion of the *Psalm* of the day, Psalm 54, appears next.

"The wicked say:
Let us beset the just one,
because he is obnoxious to us;
he sets himself against our doings,
reproaches us for transgressions of the law
and charges us with violations of our training.
Let us see whether his words be true;
let us find out what will happen to him.
For if the just one be the son of God,
God will defend him
and deliver him from the hand of his foes.
With revilement and torture
let us put the just one to the test
that we may have proof of his gentleness
and try his patience.
Let us condemn him to a shameful death;
for according to his own words,
God will take care of him."
(Wisdom 2:12, 17-20)

What words, phrases, or images stand out? What attracts or repels *you*? How does the reading locate *you* in your life before God? Does psalm 54 help?

R. (6b) **The Lord upholds my life.**
For the haughty have risen up against me,
the ruthless seek my life;
they set not God before their eyes.

R. **The Lord upholds my life.**
Behold, God is my helper;
the Lord sustains my life.
Freely will I offer you sacrifice;
I will praise your name, O LORD, for its goodness.
(Psalm 54:3-4)

The Church applies both the Wisdom reading and *Psalm 54* to Jesus, the Beloved Suffering Servant. The assembly sings the refrain as the Risen Christ in the world, "The Lord upholds *my* life." The psalm proclaims trust in God alone in times of suffering and distress. In *our* silent prayer, we get to speak to reflect on our attraction and aversion to trusting God. See how this practice can situate us in our lives before the Word proclaimed *now*?

"After the first reading comes the responsorial psalm, which is an integral part of the liturgy of the word...
because it encourages meditation on the word of God.
The responsorial psalm should correspond to each reading and should, *as a rule*, be taken from the Lectionary." (GIRM 61)

Take note that we employ God's Word to *respond* to God's Word. Drawn from the Book of Psalms, as well as a few canticles from selections, the *Responsorial Psalm* provides the faithful with words tried and tested in the fires of life's joys and sorrows. The *Catechism* highlights the importance of the *Responsorial Psalm*, setting it on equal footing with first and second readings.

"[The psalm *recalls*] the saving events of the past, yet extends into the future, even to the end of history;
it *communicates* the promises God has already kept, and *awaits* the Messiah who will fulfill them definitively.
Prayed by Christ and fulfilled in him, the Psalms remain essential to the prayer of the Church.
(*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2586)

A Clarification:

There appears to be a common practice, even default, among lectors in so many places, who seem to treat the *Responsorial Psalm* as one more reading at Mass. Many leave little or no silence after the first reading. Many maintain the same tone of voice. What would it be like to regard the psalm as *its own* significant proclamation of the Word?

While it seems better to sing the psalm, rather than recite it, all care ought be given to the clear

proclamation of the text of the (sung) psalm so it might more easily be engaged and received.

"It is preferable that the responsorial Psalm be sung, at least as far as the people's response is concerned. 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."
(GIRM 61)

The revised *GIRM* calls for the *Responsorial Psalm* to be sung from the *ambo* (the altar of the Word from which the Word is proclaimed). *It could* also work to sing the response while the lector proclaims the verses.

The Gospel Acclamation – Singing *Alleluia!*

The second musical piece of the Liturgy of the Word is the Gospel Acclamation (*Alleluia* during much of the Church year). It immediately precedes the proclamation of the Gospel, the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. Notice that the *Alleluia* is **not** a response to the Second Reading. The appropriate response to that reading is silence. The *Alleluia*, rather, announces the Gospel.

"After the reading that immediately precedes the Gospel, the *Alleluia* or another chant indicated by the rubrics is *sung*, as required by the liturgical season. *An acclamation of this kind constitutes a rite or act in itself. By it the assembly of the faithful welcomes and greets the Lord who is about to speak to them in the Gospel, and professes its faith by singing. All stand and sing the Alleluia, led by the choir or a cantor.*" (GIRM 62)

We revere the Gospel in song, using our most festive of acclamations. The *Alleluia* focuses our attention on the most important part of the Liturgy of the Word, the gospel. This acclamation is so important that *GIRM* is very specific - *it must always be sung - never recited.* (GIRM 62c)

Shaped by the Seasons of the Year

Every Sunday, the Church celebrates the gift of our redemption in Christ's death and resurrection, and so we sing, *Alleluia!* However, as we read earlier, liturgical seasons form and shape what music and acclamations we choose. We fast, as it were, from this song of joy during Lent – from Ash Wednesday until the Easter Vigil – when the Church takes it up again with jubilation. The return of the *Alleluia* at the Easter Vigil is so momentous, that *GIRM* asks the church to sing *several verses* instead of one.

Other musical options in the Liturgy of the Word

The Profession of Faith (the Creed) and the General Intercessions are also available to be set to music. The Profession of Faith was included in many musical settings of the Tridentine Mass. Few have been composed since Vatican II, perhaps from the desire not to overwhelm the next part of Mass.

The Profession of Faith

The Profession of Faith has the church together acknowledge and profess the great deeds of God in salvation history – creation, redemption, and the era of the Church. The assembly also remembers and gives thanks to our faithful God for the same in the prefaces to the Eucharistic Prayers.

"By reciting the rule of faith in a formula approved for liturgical use, the people *call to mind and confess* the great mysteries of the faith before they begin to celebrate these mysteries in the Eucharist." (GIRM 67)

The Prayer of the Faithful

Many parishes sing the people's response to the Universal Prayer, often in several languages. It is important to note that this is the prayer of the *faithful*, not of the priest or lector or deacon. These ministers facilitate the community's exercise of its baptismal priesthood by a judicious use of silence within the petitions.

"In the general intercessions or prayer of the faithful, the people *respond* in some way to the word of God which they have *welcomed* in faith and, *exercising an office of their baptismal priesthood, offer prayers to God for the salvation of all.*"
(GIRM 69)

For discussion/reflection:

- What insights did you receive from this article?
- Is it easy to enter into the singing of the psalm on Sundays? What would help you enter into the Word more fully and actively?
- How does the *Alleluia* help me prepare to hear Christ addressing me in the Gospel?
- Do you experience the General Intercessions as the prayer of *the faithful*? What would help you discover or rediscover this prayer as an exercise of your baptismal priesthood?

This is the second in a series of articles about the liturgy. Article #4 is entitled, *The Gospel of the Lord.*