

The Role of Song

In the New Liturgy

by Mannes Burke, O.P.

*Song, the ideal means of forming or expressing a communitarian spirit, is the art form best suited to the liturgy.*¹ (Cyprian Vagaggini, O. S. B.)

A study of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of Vatican II reveals a striking amount of emphasis on the role of song in the liturgy. The reason for this lies in an argument based on this logic: the faithful best take part in the liturgy when they actively participate as a community; song is one of the essential means of promoting communal participation; thus the importance of song in the liturgy.

There are many references in the *Constitution* which support this argument. The clearest ones can be found in paragraph 7; speaking of

Christ's presence in the liturgy, it reads: "He is present, finally, when the Church prays and sings, for He promised, 'When two or three are gathered together for my sake, there I am in the midst of them' (Mt. 18:20);"² In paragraph 8, referring to the union in the liturgy of the faithful on earth with the blessed now with Christ, it reads: "We sing a hymn to the Lord's glory with all the warriors of the heavenly army"; and in paragraph 30, "By way of promoting active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence." Finally, in the chapter on *Sacred Music* we read: "Liturgical action is given a more noble form when sacred rites are solemnized in song, with the assistance of sacred ministers and the active participation of the people." (Paragraph 113)

The Nature of Song

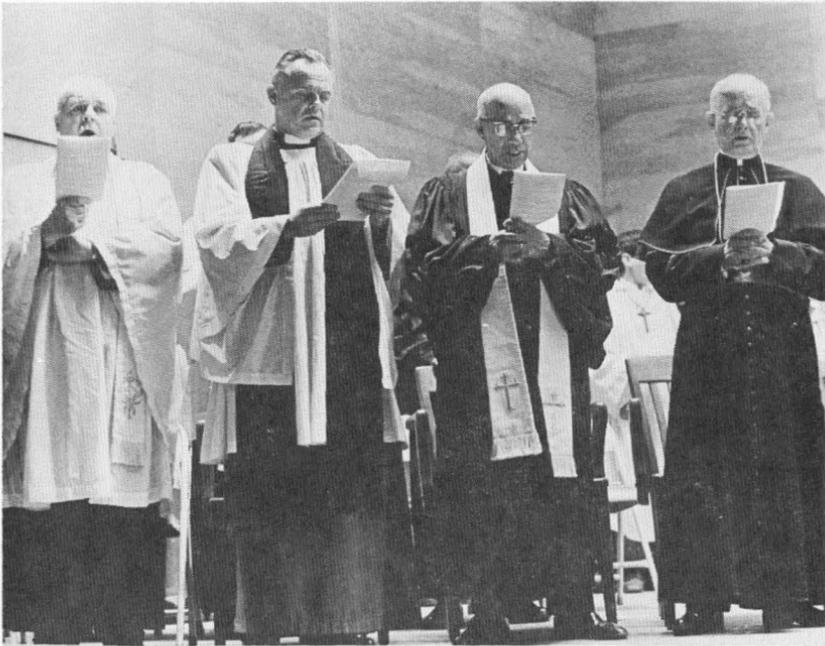
With these references in mind let us now examine the nature of song to see why it is so effective in bringing people together especially in the liturgical assembly. Father Gelineau says:

In singing, a man becomes, as it were, a pouring out and a gift, because song, compounded of the breath which he breathes out from his inmost self and of the sound of his voice which cannot be held or imprisoned, is the free expression of himself, the manifestation of his interior being and the gratuitous giving of his personality.³

The emphasis on personal self-giving in song is of key importance. But one might reasonably question at the outset if it is necessary to "sing" in order to give of oneself. The answer is simply, "no." The psychology and all the "ologies" of words, knowledge and communication tell us that to speak is to communicate and though we may not realize it, a word is a "gift," more specifically a gift of self. Through words we begin to establish contact with others and by words we are joined to them in a "communion-situation."⁴ This communion-situation is the goal or end of the word. It begins with a word which leads to knowledge which in turn leads to love. Applying this to the liturgy, we see that it is in love that all the members of the Mystical Body are united. Dietrich von Hildebrand sees this in terms of the development of the human personality within the liturgy:

Thus we see that the Liturgy draws us quite obviously and organically into that true spirit of communion which is the indispensable foundation of true personality. It leads us through Christ to the "I-thou" communion with our brother and to the ultimate "We-communion" of humanity in the Mystical Body of Christ.⁵

It is in this context of the liturgy that we see the reason for intensifying the meaning of the spoken word by means of song. The explanation for this lies in the nature of love. St. Augustine said centuries ago, "*Cantare amantis est*" ("To sing is the act of the lover."). Love is the essence of the communion-situation as well as the end of it. Words lead naturally to knowledge which leads to love. This means that love is a fulfillment of man's desire and elicits all those thoughts and feelings which are part of total personal fulfillment. Love of its nature is intense because in a sense it is an achievement. So "naturally" people in love "burst into song." Those people who celebrate the liturgy are just such people—people in love. Love fills the atmosphere of the liturgical assembly, for nowhere else can we conceive of a more intense communion-situation. Here the People of God are gathered together in



response to the eternal act of love of God manifested in Christ. If song is the natural expression of human love, it is not less so as an expression of our love for God.

Song Forms Community

But just how does song form community? We realize that if we had many voices breaking into different songs the atmosphere of the liturgy would be chaotic rather than devotional. It is the form of music, and in this case of song, which guarantees the unity. In song we have a melody set to words which is ordered by rhythm or beat. This combination of rhythm and melody unifies and, "the same words of all lips make up a single cry."⁶ The rhythm especially insures this unity. Its regular pulse is the guide for all the individual singers. Without it, each singer might be filled with a heart full of song, but with no unifying principle. Rhythm makes it possible for all hearts to sing as one. Of course, the opposite is true. When all the singers are not on the same pitch or singing in the same rhythm, the unity suffers. During this difficult period in our liturgy when we are adjusting ourselves to community singing in Church there are moments when one wonders if the song is working against community rather than for it. But these instances of discord should be few and gradually disappear as our congregations become better trained in singing Church music.

Part of the difficulty in fostering congregational singing in Church is psychological and emotional and not just a matter of lack of training in reading music. Most people have no trouble in singing a song by the campfire or on the beach in an informal atmosphere. Granted that the melodies are usually simple (not necessarily unartistic because of their simplicity), the informality is relaxing and most people can "loosen up" and be themselves. It is this kind of spontaneous atmosphere that must pervade the liturgical assembly if we are to have people eager to participate. In such a climate the faithful will respond freely to the liturgy and open themselves to the inspiration of the Spirit. This is not a plea for dissipation of the religious or devotional spirit by any means, though our concept of what is truly sacred is becoming gradually more inclusive in proportion to our understanding and appreciation of the goodness and "Godliness" of music that was once disdainfully called "secular." It is, rather, only a desire to create a situation where people will be anxious to sing out—where they will

not feel self-conscious, but losing themselves in song, will be group-conscious.

What is Good Church Music?

If we expect the People of God to sing we must give them good music. So now we must ask what is good Church music. Good Church music implies two things. First that it is good musically speaking and also appropriate for the liturgy. Form should be the principal criterion for judging the music itself. This is determined by a variety of factors such as harmony, melody and rhythm. When these elements are employed by experienced and gifted composers the result is good music. But to have good Church music the composer must be "in tune" with the liturgical atmosphere, and it is thought by most liturgists today, when possible, that he should be aware of the capacities and needs of the individual liturgical assembly. If song is to be a natural response we cannot expect that the majority of our parishoners today will find Gregorian chant very appealing or satisfying as an expression of their religious spirit. Even the monks who are supposed to be at home with chant are finding it a bit weak in a modern dynamic religious atmosphere which demands a quick, spirited and meaningful response emerging from the sounds and rhythm of contemporary life. What monks and laymen need today for the liturgy is good music that will be an authentic and genuine mode of expression for the 20th century Catholic.

So the guitar seems to be very appropriate as an instrument for accompanying song in the new 20th century liturgy. Yet, conscious of the tension in the minds of some that folk music and guitars are "out of place" in Church, Ray Repp, one of the outstanding composers of folk music answers that folk music is not in competition with the classical; both suit a particular occasion. "Why cannot the two media complement each other so that the family of God can universally proclaim its joy in the risen Lord?"⁷

From the enthusiastic response to folk music among our young people, of today, and even of many not so young, it appears that it is finding its place alongside some of the traditional forms of music in our liturgy. We have had a marvelous and rich tradition of Gregorian chant and polyphonic music, and no attempt is being made here to exclude these altogether from the liturgy. What is asked for is an understanding of the problem that congregations do vary considerably and that in a sense liturgical music must be "all things to all men."

The Individual Within Community

Although the new liturgy emphasizes participation, meaningfulness and spontaneity, a one-sided view of these ideas may actually weaken community. If, for instance, we focus on the meaningful to the extent that each individual regards the liturgy as designed exclusively for his own enjoyment, then the idea of meaningful has been distorted. For the liturgy to be meaningful in the true sense, the individual participant must see his activity within the context of community. This necessarily implies a sacrifice on the part of everyone involved. The liturgy is a success if it is meaningful to the community and to the individual as part of the community. To achieve this balance and union of community and individual there must always be that gift of self in union with others. There must be a communal as well as a personal response to the objective mystery of our redemption. It is by combining a sense of the personal and the communal that we achieve the most meaningful and spontaneous liturgy. Father Gelineau writes:

He who delivers and loses himself in singing expects to find himself in the voices of those who have joined him in unison.⁸

In the practical realm of singing, then, we must realize that there may be times when the imperfections of the human voice or the mechanics of singing may distract one from his own private devotion. It is at times like these that one must reflect that part of the gift of self involves accepting these imperfections. In time a large part of these difficulties should be eliminated. But there is the much deeper reality of the effort it takes to give of oneself in community which can at times be more challenging and even painful than enduring someone singing off key. It is the reality that singing demands—that we “come out” of ourselves. It asks us to be joyful with those around us, possibly at a time when we feel least joyful. But it is at this very time that our redemption becomes most effective, because we are saved in community.

Liturgy must be the experience of redemption in which isolation and self-concern give way to brotherly love and community consciousness. As this mystery of redemption is accomplished, it should spontaneously elicit thankful celebration through festivity, song and joy.⁹

Far from regretting that we must forget ourselves, we should be thankful that communal liturgy, indeed, “saves us” from ourselves. Our personality grows as we give in community. If we were to think

that the liturgy asks for a denial of individuality, we would be emphasizing the objective to the detriment of the subjective or the personal. What the liturgy calls for is neither extreme, but a blending of the person within the community, so that in giving self, the individual remains distinct yet joined to others in Christ. Thus we encounter Christ in each other, and in Him we meet the living God who speaks to us in the liturgical action. Our understanding of the catalytic role of song in forming the liturgical community will help us to accept wholeheartedly the stress which the Council places on it in promoting active participation. Indeed, we will be eager to sing and join ourselves to our brothers in a common response to the Word and love of God in the liturgy. Together we will go to meet our God in song.

Our song will be a sign that we are cheerful givers, for to give self in community costs something of each one. Let us hope, too, that the moments of friction will gradually disappear amidst a joyful atmosphere of praise and thanksgiving—and, it should be added, within a liturgical celebration that allows time for periods of silence. The spirit of the liturgy is the same as that which characterizes the “give and take” in any love relationship. There must be moments within the celebration when all singing ceases and we are silent and listen for the voice of God. Then, refreshed by His Word, our dialogue with Him will be an intelligent one, one in which our song will be a response to love. With the psalmist we will join our voices and sing:

Cry out with joy to God, all the earth,
 Oh sing to the glory of his name;
 O peoples, bless our God,
 Let the voice of his praise resound . . . (Ps. 66: 1, 2, 8.)

FOOTNOTES

¹ Cyprian Vagaggini, O.S.B., *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy*, translated by Leonard J. Doyle, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1959), p. 32.

² *The Documents of Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, Ed. by Walter M. Abbot, S.J., (New York: Guild Press, 1966).

³ Joseph Gelineau, S.J., *Voices and Instruments in Christian Worship, Principles, Laws, Applications*, translated by Rev. Clifford Howell, S.J., (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1964), p. 17.

⁴ Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Liturgy and Personality*, (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1960), p. 87.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶ Gelineau, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁷ Ray Repp, “Folk Music—Secular or Sacred,” *Liturgical Arts*, XXXV (November, 1966), p. 19.

⁸ Gelineau, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁹ Patrick Regan, O.S.B., “The Change Behind the Changes,” *Worship*, XV (January, 1966), p. 43.