

CANTOR NOTES:

We continue to keep a schedule online as well as on the choir loft steps. Please use either one as is convenient; we will try to keep them both the same.



Continue to practice the psalm words in order to strive for the rhythm displayed in spoken speech, as that is the rhythm desired in our singing; what we might call “declamatory” singing. In short, during the reciting tone (the long tone which carries most of the words), slow down and lengthen the words that you would lengthen if you were speaking slowly to a large group in a large room. Minimize the number of breaths you must take so that the natural flow of speech can shape the text. Take longer, deeper breaths to assist. Place breath marks in longer phrases that cannot be sung in one breath so that breathing is planned, not accidental. When the reciting tone moves on to the “formula” ending, move more directly, but retain the natural spoken rhythm as possible. Do not linger on the final note. Take time to breathe well before going on. Work to stretch your breath longer by using it more efficiently; more softly and sustained, rather than bursts of sound punching each note. Consonants need to be strengthened, especially as you soften your presentation. Listen to the organ for pitch. If you ignore it and are not on key, the organ will sound right and you will sound wrong. It is to your advantage to “tune in” to it.

These are not details for a cantor, but are important to those who listen because you are often their only model for good singing. You need not have a highly trained voice with solo characteristics (in fact that usually works to the detriment of the cantor’s role) but you do need to tune well and be understood. Breathing well is one area for improvement. As breathing improves, we relax, and when we are more relaxed, we slow down, and when we slow down, we can almost always be understood more clearly. In addition, of course, tension is transmitted through the voice and we will serve better if we give a relaxed model to the singers in the pews. Finally, tension is essentially what speech pathologists call “vocal abuse” or even “vocal suicide”. Better vocal “hygiene” does not mean cleaning your throat, but developing everyday habits of vocal use (yes, speaking as well) which use the muscles of our body in the most relaxed and appropriate manner without stress or overuse, leading to injury, or even permanent damage. It sounds scary, but is not so bad when we remember that the main answer lies in relaxation (with some training to achieve it) not strain.

I want us to ponder our use of the word song, and hymn. There is a difference and in recent years this difference has often been neglected with some resulting theological effect. The answer lies in the text. If it addresses God in praise, it is certainly a hymn. If it talks ABOUT God only, it is more of a song. We need a balance of both to keep a proper and healthy relationship with God. If a text is a prayer to God, the question arises about whether to call it song or hymn; song seems to make more sense. In the new GIRM, the English translation is “Chant” but this is not intended to specify what we would call “Gregorian Chant” but to signify something sung. It still leaves the notion of Song vs. Hymn. I am not really comfortable using only one or the other. The process of considering which is which is a healthy one for us all and I encourage you to look at sung portions with this question in mind. It is food for interesting thought and discussion; there may not always be one “right” answer.

Announcing of selections remains an area of interest to me (and others) and an area that may undergo future adjustments as well. In short, we are trying to minimize these spoken portions so that oneday they might even cease altogether. On the other hand, a growth area for cantors will be the increased use of Psalms in other parts of the Mass, such as at communion where a short response is much easier to walk around and sing. We also will use more music from the Taizé community, much of which offers a substantial cantor role.

We are considering acquiring a permanent hymnal. Not only would this save Holy Cross many thousands of dollars in the medium term, we would save quite a few trees, and make more permanent some literature that comes and goes from a yearly book. Each year I have seen favorites of Holy Cross be removed from *Breaking Bread*. We can do better with a book like the new *Gather: Comprehensive*, second edition. It's hot off the press, contains most of the things we already use, plus more new stuff that OTHERS are using. I'll keep you all informed as decisions are made. If we do this I would guess that the new books might hit the pews no earlier than end-of-summer 2005, and might well wait for Advent/Christmas.

Thank you all for your time spent leading our singing. You are important and I value your work. I hope it is increasingly rewarding, and yes, increasingly easy and enjoyable. Our mission through music here could not begin to do what we do, or dream of things we want and ought to do, without your continued participation.

Daniel Susan
01/16/05