



## GUIDELINES FOR CANTORS

*Diocese of Lansing*  
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### INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF HISTORY

What is a cantor? A brief history might create a better understanding of this liturgical ministry.

In ancient Jewish tradition, the cantor (a solo singer) offered sung prayers on behalf of the congregation during worship. With the end of persecutions of the Church in the early fourth century, the cantor became more formally a part of liturgical worship.

Later, as choirs became prevalent the original role of the cantor was usurped. In the tradition of Old Roman and Gregorian chant, a solo voice or cantor (most often a cleric) would intone various chants of the Mass Ordinary and Proper before the entire chant would be taken up by other singers. The cantor also served a specific role in the Liturgy of the Hours. It is important to remember that until more modern times our liturgical celebrations were almost entirely sung, especially in monastic and cathedral communities.

The term *cantor* in Christian practice dates from about the fifth century and referred to the person who sang the psalms. The Lutheran tradition assigns the title of “cantor” to music directors; the most famous cantor being Johann Sebastian Bach.

As early as St. Pius X’s *Tra le sollecitudini* (1903), lay men were allowed to sing the incipits of chants and litanies. In Pius XI’s *Divini cultis sanctitatem* (1928), the cantor is described as a choir director, but also as one who would guide the faithful in singing. Within the reforms of the early twentieth century there is clear evidence of the emergence of the post-conciliar cantor.

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* indicates: “There should be a cantor or a choir director to lead and sustain the people in singing. When in fact there is no choir, it is up to the cantor to lead the various liturgical songs, and the people take part in the way proper to them” (*IGMR 2000* #104). [Note: All references to the *General Instruction* in this document correspond to the *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romanum 2000*.]

*Music in Catholic Worship* (#35) also supports this: “...an individual singer can effectively lead the

assembly, attractively proclaim the Word of God in the psalm sung between the readings, and take his or her part in other responsorial singing.”

Note that the *psalmist* -- the one who sings the psalm -- is considered to serve a function different from the cantor. But according to *Liturgical Music Today* (#69), these two roles are often combined. From these sources it is possible to deduce that the cantor needs to be a strong and competent leader who has a very important role in communal worship.

## THE CANTOR AND THE MASS

*Music in Catholic Worship* (#35) elaborates on the important role of the cantor in the modern Roman Rite. Quoting from the *Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy Newsletter* (1966), it notes that although a cantor “cannot enhance the service of worship in the same way as a choir, a *trained* and *competent* cantor [emphasis added] can perform an important ministry by leading the congregation in common sacred song and in responsorial singing.” The cantor is not to replace the choir, but the service of this minister is indeed appropriate at a celebration of the Mass or the Offices when a choir is not present.

There are specific parts of the Mass Proper most appropriately sung by the cantor. They are:

- **Entrance Hymn**  
(may be sung in alternation between the choir and congregation or the cantor and congregation; or it is sung entirely by the congregation or by the choir alone): GIRM #48
- **Penitential Rite (*Kyrie*)**  
GIRM #52, LMT #20.
- **Responsorial Psalm**  
CB #33, MCW #35, GIRM #61, 67, 90, LMT #36.
- **Gospel Acclamation**  
CB #33, GIRM #62.
- **General Intercessions**  
GIRM #71
- **Breaking of the Bread (*Agnus Dei*)**  
GIRM #83
- **Communion Antiphons:**  
GIRM #86 (may be sung by the choir alone, or by the choir or cantor with the congregation)

While these are not the only specific parts of the Mass where the cantor may have a role, these are the only ones mentioned in contemporary liturgical documents. However, there are other ways a cantor can serve at Mass or the Offices.

The most obvious is in leading communal singing, that is to say, supporting the singing of hymns and eucharistic acclamations. Care must be taken by the cantor (and choir) not to usurp the parts appropriate to the assembly, namely the *Holy, Holy, Holy* (GIRM #79b, MCW #56), and the other eucharistic acclamations which form the community's assent (GIRM #79h.)

Other instances where the cantor is indispensable include newer, refrain settings of the *Gloria* which alternate between the cantor or choir and the assembly. Many fine settings of this type of *Gloria* exist composed by some of the most eminent Catholic musicians of our time. It is a common practice in Europe (especially France and Italy) to sing the familiar *Gloria* from the *Missa de Angelis* in alternation between the people and the cantor or choir.

While these are the appropriate times for the cantor to lead and enhance the assembly's participation, there are instances where, without careful planning and a clear understanding of the role of cantor, abuses may occur (MCW #35.) One such abuse is the addition of overly ornamental and distracting vocal descants which, if the music is not familiar to the congregation, can confuse and overpower the people's part. While this may be done with sincere motives (as a way to enhance the musical setting for a special feast or other occasion) it may be viewed by the assembly as merely “showing off.” It is not the cantor's role to dominate the liturgy with solos. Their true responsibility is to lead the assembly, pray with them, and proclaim the Word of God.

## THE POSITION OF THE CANTOR

In *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture and Worship*, the November 2000 guidelines from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on building and renovating churches, the paragraphs pertaining to the placement of musicians indicates that: “... cantors need visual contact with the music director while

they themselves are visible to the rest of the congregation” (#89.) While this is the *ideal* situation, this may not be possible in some churches. For instance, this arrangement may place too great a distance between the organist or instrumentalists and the cantor especially if the organ is in a loft at the back of the church and the cantor is at the ambo in the front. However, with practice and careful attention, this can be overcome.

Since the Word of God should be proclaimed from the ambo and the psalms are sacred Scripture, the psalm should be sung from there too. *Built of Living Stones* states: “Apart from the singing of the responsorial psalm, which normally occurs at the ambo, the stand for the cantor is distinct from the ambo, which is reserved for the proclamation of the word of God” (#89.) This statement indicates that is advisable to have a separate stand for the cantor from which she or he leads the assembly in the hymns, Mass Ordinary and other acclamations.

## TRAINING THE CANTOR

The liturgical documents emphasize the desire to have *trained* cantors (MCW #35) and musicians to lead worship, and while it is a fortunate parish which has one or two professional musicians, this is not always the rule. Trained singers have a variety of gifts and charisms. Some people study voice with professional singers, and others possess a natural and beautiful voice with no real training. However, voice lessons alone do not make a good cantor. While a pleasing voice is necessary to be an *effective* cantor, there is much more to it.

The cantor must be extremely comfortable with the order and theology of Mass and the Offices. To know *what* you are doing is important, but to know *why* imbues what you do with reverence.

Cantors must also be individuals who can think quickly on their feet, and always be flexible. Other practical points to consider in the training of the cantor include: familiarity with parish repertory, a good working relationship with instrumentalists and clergy, a knowledge of the equipment used for liturgy (the microphone and sound system), and the appropriate posture for singing and prayer (when to sit, kneel, stand, and if necessary, gesture). These

may be specific to your parish’s tradition and the demands of your worship space.

It is likewise advisable for cantors to have a routine for their own mental, musical, and spiritual preparation. This is invaluable for a more meaningful worship experience for the community. Some of these aspects of the cantor’s training may be up to the parish Music Director, such as rehearsals, gestures, and what the cantor will sing. Be open, honest, and work in a spirit of community and collaboration (Colossians 3:12-17).

## THE MINISTRY OF THE CANTOR

The cantor is not an *instituted* minister, and therefore the sacramental requirements made of Extraordinary Ministers and Lectors are not appropriate. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* addresses the baptismal call of all Christians:

*In liturgical celebrations each one, minister or layperson, who has an office to perform, should do all of, but only, those parts which pertain to that office by the nature of the rite and principles of liturgy (SC #28).*

This statement implies that each lay minister has his or her specific “office” or role to play in the liturgy, and that it is important that he or she only function in that capacity. Therefore, it would be inappropriate for the cantor to be an extraordinary minister of the Eucharist, serve as a lector, or read the petitions at the same Mass where he or she is singing.

*Servers, readers, commentator, and members of the choir also exercise a genuine liturgical function. They ought to discharge their office, therefore, with the sincere devotion and decorum demanded by so exalted a ministry and rightly expected of them by God’s people.*

*Consequently, they must all be deeply imbued with the spirit of the liturgy, in the measure proper to each one, and they must be trained to perform their functions in a correct and orderly manner (SC 29).*

*To promote 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 bearing. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence (30).*

From these two paragraphs, it is clear that the cantor's posture and demeanor should reflect the character of the musical text and style. The appropriate demeanor and attitude will inspire and "promote active participation" of the assembly.

While the documents are silent about specific requirements for the cantor, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* does state:

*The cantor of the psalm is to sing the psalm or other biblical song that comes between the readings. To fulfill their function correctly, these cantors should possess singing talent and an aptitude for correct pronunciation and diction (#102).*

From *Liturgical Music Today* (#68) and other documents we are able to extract the basic requirements of an effective cantor:

- The cantor should be trained (MCW #35).
- The cantor should be able to teach the assembly new music.
- The cantor should be able to help develop congregational singing.
- The cantor must be sensitive to communal prayer and not intrude.
- The cantor must be an effective leader.
- The cantor must be a model to the assembly – a "believer" and "proclaimer" of God's word.
- The cantor must be a minister – someone who "shares faith, serves the community, and expresses the love of God and neighbor through music.

## SELECTED RESOURCES

### Church Documents

- SC *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium*  
Vatican II, December 4, 1963
- GIRM *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (IGMR)* Pope John Paul II, March 2000
- MCW *Music in Catholic Worship*  
USCCB, 1972
- LMT *Liturgical Music Today*  
USCCB, 1982
- BLS *Built of Living Stones*  
USCCB, 2000

### Monographs

- Connolly, Michael. *The Parish Cantor*, Chicago: GIA Publications, 1981.
- Hansen, James. *The Ministry of the Cantor*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1985.
- Joncas, Jan Michael. *From Sacred Song to Ritual Music*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1997.
- Kodner, Diana. *Handbook for Cantors*, Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997.

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