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THE DAYS OF THE CHOIR ARE OVER... ~ PART 2

Yes, faithful reader, Part Two. For **PART ONE** you'll have to scroll back to the earliest days of these postings, to [Essay 14](#), almost ten years ago, to recall what I said there, if you want to know what this posting is Part Two to.

To save you the work, I'll briefly summarize Part One here. First, the title for that Essay was a teaser, as is this one, meant to shock you into reading on. My title then, and now, is actually a quote from a Roman Catholic (RC) friend who was reflecting on his experience since the very first days of the Second Vatican Council and its historic document, "*The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*." He was celebrating the fact that now, since Vatican 2, among Roman Catholics, worship had once again become the "work of the people", and the choir was no longer presumed to **USURP** the people's role in praise. In the dark days – dark decades! – before Vatican 2 and its marvellous reforms, the choir had done all the people's work, among RCs at least. So now that the people, the assembly of the faithful, were reclaiming their rightful roles in singing the liturgy themselves, the choir, among RCs at least, was out of business.

In Essay # 14, I joined my RC friend in **CELEBRATING** that change. And I joined my friend in clucking my tongue in disapproval at what had pertained earlier: The choir singing the Mass for the people while the people stood mute.

Today I want to revisit that territory and ask, Are our own churches, presumably "catholic" but not Roman Catholic, guilty of the same excesses as Pre-Vatican 2 Rome? Are we ourselves **CULPABLE** of allowing our own choirs to usurp too significant a portion of the peoples' praise? And if you think I'm kicking a dead horse again, or harping on the same strings I've played before (in Essays # 14, 71, and 81, among others), you're probably right.

In Essay # 14, I summarized the rightful roles of any Christian choir, cheerfully borrowing my argument from my friend and mentor Henry Horn. Any Christian choir has **THREE RESPONSIBILITIES**, in descending order of importance:

- A) to **ENLIVEN** the congregation's own song, in the Day's liturgy, the Day's psalm, and the Day's hymns,,,
- B) to **ENRICH** the congregation's experience in worship with anthem or motet or sung Verse or Offertory...
- C) Perhaps to **INSTRUCT** the community's soul in occasional concerts or recitals...

That set of PRIORITIES still seems to me to make good sense. First and foremost, to assist the people's own praise: That's the choir's meat and potatoes. Everything thereafter is gravy.

Now out of those duties I extract **THREE PRINCIPLES**. I've noted something like these Principles in previous postings here:

1) The **CHIEF VOICE** in worship will always belong to the people. The word Liturgy means "the work of the people". The people, not the choir or worship leaders, are the principal actors on stage. Worship leaders, pastors, choir: They are none of them on stage. They are instead, all of them, in the prompter's box, encouraging and enabling the people's praise. (Would that most of our church architecture did not betray us in this respect!)

In another figure: Pastors, worship leaders and choir are the **CHEERLEADERS** to the people. The people: They're the actual team on the field.

The **PEOPLE**, their song, their prayers, their praise, their witness to the Word: That's what's primary in Christian worship. The assembly of worshippers themselves are the Holy Communion. The people are in their collective bodies the Body of Christ. That Biblical Principle, for me, is unshakeable, unbendable, unassailable...

2) Christian Worship, therefore, is primarily **PARTICIPATORY**, not presentational. The pastor, the choir, the worship leaders are not performers before an audience. They are simply, chiefly, primarily, predominantly among those who enable the people's own praise. Who invite the people's praise. Who facilitate the people's praise. Who (yes!) lead the people's praise. Who preside at the people's praise.

3) Hence, it is absolutely crucial that A) above be **HONOURED** as THE responsibility of the choir. If the choir does *nothing else* in worship than enable and enliven the people's praise, serving that obligation alone is enough. If the choir does *anything else*, but fails in fulfilling this responsibility, it will have neglected its service. Period.

In these paragraphs let me extend and enlarge on **THREE CONCLUSIONS** I draw from all of the above.

l) In light of A, B, C, and 1, 2, 3, above, the people, after any act of Christian worship, should feel **THEIR OWN GIFTS** have been honoured and used.

Put another way: Worship planners, church musicians, and worship leaders should think of the people themselves as their chief "**CHOIR**".

Put still another way: The people, not just the pastors, or worship leaders or choir, should have **FUN** at worship as well.

A few examples:

Item: I can't abide singing that wonderful chorale *Lasst Uns Erfreuen* without parsing it out in alternating phrases, phrase against phrase: men's voices against women's voices, or choir against people, or south side of the hall against north side, or whatever. Truth to tell, I *refuse* to sing it *except* in **ALTERNATUM**, even if only by myself in the privacy of my pew. And all together on that grand final "Alleluia!" Couldn't this be done regularly in your parish?

Item: *O Come o come Emmanuel* sounds terrific when it's sung in *parallel ORGANUM*, men's voices singing the identical melody but a fourth below the women's voices. Couldn't that be done, with this and with other plainsong hymns, in your parish without too much trouble?

Item: The magnificent new songs from Taize and Iona are gifts from our own age to the ecumenical treasury of the Church. They feature simple repeated texts to very singable four-part tunes any assembly can master, and they sound great when they're enlivened with a solo voice singing the prescribed verses on top of the people's **OSTINATO**. You're failing your people if you don't learn them!

Item: I've mentioned before in these postings those transcendently beautiful settings of the **PSALMS** by Hal Hopson and Peter Halleck in the Westminster Press volume *The Psalter: Psalms and Canticles for Singing*. The people sing a simple refrain or antiphon, learned on the spot, and choir or cantors sing the verses. We use them regularly in my parish, and the peoples' participation in their beauty often brings tears to my eyes.

Item: In how many congregations is the Hymn of Praise *This is the Feast*, *LBW*, page 60, sung by **ALTERNATING** congregational voices, as suggested? Or the *Venite*, page 132, in Morning Prayer, as suggested? Or Psalm 141, page 145, in Evening Prayer, as suggested? Alas, I fear, too few. One of the people's real pleasures in Marty Haugen's *Holden Evening Prayer* is their own participation in

that splendid, swelling, spiralling *stretto* in the same psalm: “Let my prayer rise up...”

Item: The grand Reformation tradition of singing the Hymn of the Day (HOD) in **ALTERNATION** with instruments, or choir, or both, must never be allowed to languish, in Lutheran parishes at least. I remember attending a Hymn Festival years ago where the great Paul Manz was featured musician. The HOD was *St. Anne, O God, our Help in Ages Past*, and the congregation was invited to sing with pauses between each stanza, while Manz improvised at the keyboard in between each stanza. Each improvisation – six of them! – was different, each unique! It was electrifying! I can further remember my last Sunday as Interim Pastor in my daughter’s parish in Kentucky, when the organist-choirmaster had provided a hymn alternation that featured – yes! – a snare drum! Electrifying too! At the very least, the HOD could be sung with dark voices on some stanzas, light voices on others. Or alternating south side and north side of the hall. Imagination, and a determination to give the people their proper share in the joy of singing – that’s all that’s required. The HOD could be embellished this way every Sunday, in every parish, simply as a matter of course.

You get my point? The people **ARE** the choir, in my examples above. It’s the people themselves offering their voices, the people themselves making their witness, the people themselves – Dare we confess it? – having fun. Not simply a choir on their behalf.

Yes, the choir participates as well, in my examples above: Leading the hymns and songs, singing the verses to the peoples’ *ostinato*, enabling the smooth alternations of voices. There will be plenty for the choir to **REHEARSE**, each week, if my model is followed. Even without any anthem.

II) Hence, Conclusion Number Two: The choir’s major energy, the musicians’ major energy is most properly focussed here: In leading the **PEOPLE’S** own song: The liturgy itself, the hymns, the psalms. Even without an anthem each week.

III) And finally, Conclusion Number Three: Sure, go ahead and sing an **ANTHEM** also. If you’ve got rehearsal time left over. And if you’ve got extra energy. And if you’ve got the resources in people, the voices, the instrumentalists. It’d be gravy.

But don’t neglect the meat and potatoes.

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