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Singing the Word: A Practical Guide
WHAT DOES THE GIRM SAY?

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) sets out the Church’s requirements for the faithful celebration of Her Liturgy. It explains the purpose of the responsorial psalm and acclamation. Of the responsorial psalm, the GIRM says the following: “After the First Reading follows the Responsorial Psalm, which is an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word, and which has great liturgical and pastoral importance, since it fosters meditation on the Word of God.” (GIRM No 61). Of the Gospel Acclamation, the GIRM says the following: “After the Reading that immediately precedes the Gospel, the Alleluia or another chant laid down by the rubrics is sung, as the liturgical time requires.” (GIRM No 62). “...the gathering of the faithful welcome and greet the Lord who is about to speak to them in the Gospel, and profess their faith by means of the chant.” (GIRM No 62)

Singing the Psalm and acclamation are not optional extras, something we only do if we can organise the people and find the music. “It is preferable for the Responsorial Psalm TO BE SUNK.” (GIRM No 61) “The Alleluia IS SUNG in every time of year other than Lent. The verses are taken from the Lectionary. During Lent, instead of the Alleluia, the Verse before the Gospel as given in the Lectionary IS SUNG. (GIRM No 62).

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3 Ibid
4 Ibid
COMMON TEXTS FOR SUNG RESPONSORIAL PSALMS

While singing the specific Psalm provided in the Lectionary for the day is the best practice, Church musicians are not required by the GIRM to find a Psalm for every occasion. “Texts... of some responses and Psalms have been chosen for the different times of the year, or for the different categories of Saints. These may be used instead of the text corresponding to the reading whenever the Psalm is sung.” (GIRM No 61). The Common Texts are found in Volume One of the three volume Lectionary pp. 913-927.5

SINGLE NOTE PSALM

Below we outline several simple methods for chanting Psalms.

1. The Psalm can be chanted on one note: g above middle c is a favoured pitch. It does not require accompaniment. Congregations can sing a one note response, with a cantor singing the verses on the same note. If done with care, this is a very effective method.

2. A second method of chanting the Psalm on one note might be to encourage your congregation to alternate verses from one side of the church to the other.

3. A third method might be to get the cantor to chant the verse with the congregation chanting the following verse (alternating throughout the Psalm). This is a good way to teach people to listen to each other and form a singular congregational voice. It works best in a reverberant acoustic and may sound stilted in a dry acoustic.

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Excerpts from the English Translation of the Roman Missal (2010) ICEL. All rights reserved.

5 Excerpts from the three volume lectionary, Volume 1 (1981) Collins. All rights reserved.
**SIMPLE PSALM**

By adding two or three other notes to the end of each line, you can give your Psalm a Gregorian feel. You simply recite the bulk of the line on the first note, and the last few syllables on the few final notes. Again, it does not require accompaniment and the cantor can take the line at normal, church-reading speed.

**RECITING NOTE: 1-2-3**

Make up your own four-line tune. Recite most syllables on the first note, with the final three notes given to the last words of each line. Using even two tunes, one in a major key for a bright sounding Psalm and one in a minor key for a reflective Psalm, will not demand too much from the cantor, but will still be effective. Again, no accompaniment needed. For examples of this method, refer to Gregorian psalm-tones for English words by D.G. Murray (1967), L.J. Cary.

**PSALMS WITH GUITAR ACCOMPANIMENT**

If you are a guitarist in your parish, it is easy for you to accompany chanted psalms. You simply roll chords under each line of text, only using two or three chords under key words.
**THE PSALM SETTINGS OF GELINEAU AND MEWS**

The Psalm settings of Fr Joseph Gelineau can be ordered online. They are well crafted. The verses have a singular pulse rhythm and the words are fitted around it. For a practical demonstration of how to sing the Psalms of Gelineau refer to the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0xuLDBIfNQ. The Psalm settings of Douglas K. Mews are available for order and follow the reciting note: 1-2-3 method already outlined. The settings of Robert Loretz are freely downloadable and use the Gregorian Psalm tones. All three composers use the text from the Lectionary. They are best sung with a simple organ accompaniment but can be sung effectively unaccompanied. Details for sourcing these settings are appended.

**JOSEPH GELINEAU (FOR PURCHASE)**

Gelineau Psalm
Lent 1

\[\text{R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.}\]

1. Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness. In your com

passion blot out my offence O

wash me more and more from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. R.

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7 Taken from the Grail/Gelineau Gradual by J. Gelineau (1958), GIA. Psalm Response by Ken Joblin.
DOUGLAS MEWS (FOR PURCHASE)\textsuperscript{8}

45 Psalms with refrains

\textbf{102}

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

\textbf{104}

1. Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness. In your compassion blot out my offence.

O wash me more and more from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. R.

\textsuperscript{8} Taken from the accompaniment book 45 Psalms with Refrains by D. Mews (n.d.), CPC.
Here is another instruction from the GIRM: "The Alleluia or the Verse before the Gospel, if NOT SUNG, may be omitted." (GIRM No 63). The same chant style options are available for the Gospel Acclamation as for the Psalms. The Gregorian Alleluia is a good option.

The first pages of the "Sing Praise" hymnal provide useful options for Gospel Acclamations. A further option is to sing Christopher Walker’s "Celtic Alleluia", with the correct verse from the Lectionary chanted or read between the alleluia refrains.

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FINDING CANTORS

The "safety in numbers" principle works well.

- Set up a Psalm Group in your parish with three people available to sing at each Mass. Three male or three female voices usually blend well into a singular voice.
- Learn the same Psalm setting and divide a group of nine into the three Masses for that weekend.

You can draw cantors from choirs or singing groups. Find out who the musical people are in your parish, for example those you hear singing well around you at Mass. You may have teenagers who sing in school choirs and who may find responsibility for chanting the Psalm a useful way to be involved at Mass.

Cantoring simply requires a tuneful voice and the right attitude of prayer.

FINAL COMMENT

Finding cantors, sourcing music and getting congregations used to the sung Psalm and Gospel Acclamation at Sunday Mass, may seem daunting. We have outlined ways in which it can be made as simple as possible, while still being beautiful in the service of the liturgy. "To sing well is to pray twice".

We are available to assist parishes on request in establishing this practice. Simply contact the Diocesan Office who will put you in touch with Church music advisers. We wish you every blessing in singing the word.

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