

Music Ministry Training: The Responsorial Psalm
September 19, 2014

(GIRM)General Instruction or the Roman Missal

Is the Responsorial Psalm part of the Liturgy of the Word?

The Responsorial Psalm is a part of the liturgy of the Word, and therefore, proclaimed from the Ambo. There are four basic parts to the Mass: (1) Introductory Rites, (2) Liturgy of the Word, (3) Liturgy of the Eucharist, and (4) Concluding Rites

Can the Responsorial Psalm of the week be replaced with another?

GIRM 57: It is preferable that the arrangement of the biblical readings be maintained, for by them the unity of both Testaments and of salvation history is brought out. Nor is it lawful to replace the readings and Responsorial Psalm, which contain the Word of God, with other, non-biblical texts.

155 Music in Divine Worship states, "Because the Responsorial Psalm is an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word, and is in effect a reading from Scripture, it has great liturgical and pastoral significance. Corresponding to the reading that it follows, the Responsorial Psalm is intended to foster meditation on the Word of God."

Does the Responsorial Psalm have to be proclaimed from the Ambo?

GIRM 58. In the celebration of the Mass with a congregation, the readings are always proclaimed from the ambo.

GIRM 309: From the ambo only the readings, the responsorial Psalm, and the Easter Proclamation (Exsultet) are to be proclaimed; it may be used also for giving the homily and for announcing the intentions of the Prayer of the Faithful. The dignity of the ambo requires that only a minister of the word should go up to it.

GIRM 61: The psalmist or cantor of the Psalm sings the Psalm verses at the ambo or another suitable place. *Note: Another suitable place means that if there is no ambo another place is acceptable.*

What is the purpose of the Responsorial Psalm?

GIRM 61: To foster meditation on the Word of God

What are the ways to proclaim the Responsorial Psalm?

GIRM 61, 20, 162, 156:

1. Sing Psalm, Sing Response (Preference)
2. Read Psalm, Sing Response
3. Read Psalm, Read Response

Can any song be used in place of the Responsorial Psalm?

GIRM 61: Songs or hymns may not be used in place of the Responsorial Psalm.

What is the History of the Responsorial Psalm?

We have already discussed how the Old Testament Reading, the Epistle and Gospel came to be in their place and how the number and variety of those readings varied over the years and even today in the various Rites and Forms of the Liturgy. Now we consider the Responsorial Psalm which has a history of its own.

In a way, if you were to walk into Mass for the first time you might find the presence of a sung psalm a bit odd. Here we are reading the Word of God and suddenly another song breaks out! What is going on here. Is it another reading, is it a prayer. What is its purpose? Well let us read and see.

The responsorial psalm or optional “gradual” comes after the first reading. The psalm is an integral part of the liturgy of the word and is ordinarily taken from the lectionary, since these texts are directly related to and depend upon the respective readings. The cantor of the psalm sings the verse at the lectern or other suitable place, while the people remain seated and listen. Ordinarily the congregation takes part by singing the response, unless the psalm is sung straight through without response. If sung, the following texts may be chosen:

1. The psalm in the lectionary,
2. The Gradual in the Roman Gradual,
3. The Antiphon or the psalm in the Simple Gradual

History – In the early Church there was a pattern to the psalm response much like our own today. That is to say, there was an antiphon or verse sung by all followed by extended verses of a particular psalm chosen for the day with the antiphon intervening every so often by way of a response. Many of the Fathers of the Church make mention of this format. St. Augustine makes explicit mention of the practice in his sermons; likewise, St. John Chrysostom and St. Leo the Great among others. In the early days, the psalm texts were sung in their entirety. This was true even of the lengthier psalms. (Today, there are usually selected verses of the psalm used. It is rare that a whole psalm be sung unless it be brief in itself). The responsorial psalm was seen as an integral part of the liturgy with its own significance. This is in contrast to some of the other singing we have previously discussed such as the Entrance Antiphon (Introit) which was sung originally to cover a movement or fill a space of time and set a tone. In this way it existed for a purpose beyond itself. Here the chant has an importance in itself and does not exist to cover motion etc. It was seen as a moment of pious meditation, a lyrical rejoicing after the word of God had been received into the heart of the believer. Originally the deacon was the singer of this psalm and versicle. Later the task moved to the subdeacon & later still to the schola Cantorum (Choir).

It is interesting to note that when the singer mounted the lectern (or ambo, or pulpit) he did not go all the way to the top of the platform but rather stood on one of the steps just below the platform. This was once again due to the reverence given the proclamation of the Gospel which alone was proclaimed from the top platform. Since the singer stood on a step (“gradus“, in Latin) the psalm came to be known as a “Graduale.”

Over time the responsorial psalm began to shrink in size and lose its responsorial character. This seems to have happened for two reasons.

First the music for these chants began to become more and more elaborate. We saw this tendency with the Entrance Antiphon. The simple forms slowly gave way to other, more elaborate forms. Thus, the antiphon which was intended for the people became more ornate and difficult and thus slipped from their grasp. Its execution fell more frequently to the schola. Likewise, as the antiphon became more elaborate it began to overshadow the verses of the psalm themselves which were sheered away slowly. Eventually only one verse remained along with the antiphon. This remained its form until the recent changes in the Mass at Vatican II.

A second factor seems to have been the dropping of the first reading from the Old Testament in the Sixth Century. By this time however the responsorial character of the psalm was well on its way out. Thus this effect may not be direct but may help explain that other factors were at work in the background.

Today the original responsorial format has been reintroduced as an option. This therefore returns to the more ancient practice and also makes the response once again a song or response of the assembly. However, the option still exists to use a Gradual in the form of the Graduale Romanum which retains the format of the Traditional Latin Mass instead of a responsorial format. This would generally have to be sung by a trained schola.