

EDITORIAL

Words, Words

By William Mahrt



Words make a difference. Even though two words are identical in basic meaning, their connotations may suggest that one is much more appropriate than the other. When it comes to music and liturgy, the connotations of some commonly-used words point to a mistaken ecclesiology. This was an issue in the discussions of *Music in Catholic Worship* and *Sing to the Lord*. The former document represented an anthropocentric view of the church and her liturgy, while the latter, while far from perfect, included a much more theocentric view. I would suggest that if musicians and liturgists would consistently use the more appropriate terms, a change in attitude might gradually be effected.

Take, for example, two words: assembly and congregation. “Congregation” was used before the council, but has largely been replaced by “assembly.” Etymologically there are subtle differences. “Assembly” derives from *ad + simul*, a coming together, making similar. “Congregation” comes from *con + grex* (flock), a gathering together in a flock. Some would object to calling the people in church a flock, as in a flock of sheep, who are simply herded around without exercising their own independent judgment. But I would suggest that the difference between the two terms is more functional: “assembly” implies bringing people together without distinction, being made similar; “congregation” implies being brought together under the guidance of a shepherd. That shepherd, as we know, is Christ, who is represented liturgically by the priest, who acts *in persona Christi*, who leads in the place of Christ himself. Moreover, in the use of the English language, congregation is specifically religious, while assembly is not. In my recollection, “assembly” was something we had in elementary school, where all the classes gathered in the auditorium, either for some extraordinary entertainment or for some stern exhortation in the face of a looming problem of behavior. It was a noisy affair, but it had the benefit of interrupting the normal schedule of classes, which, even for those who loved school, was a pleasant break in the routine; there was certainly nothing sacred to it. In modern church usage, “assembly” sometimes includes everyone in the liturgy, priests, ministers, and people, emphasizing their similarity, while “congregation” retains the distinction of people from clergy. I would suggest, then, that “congregation” better represents the Catholic view of the hierarchical nature of the church, and that “assembly” represents the anthropocentric view of focusing only upon the people. This stands in striking contrast to a Christocentric view of the liturgy, in which the focus is upon the action of Christ, which subsumes priest and congregation without erasing the distinction between them.

There is a consequent term that follows from the de-emphasis upon the distinction of the ordained from the congregation: “the president of the liturgical assembly” or more commonly “presider,” as opposed to “celebrant.” A president is a member of a group, elected by the group as one of them to preside for a time. The notion of a minister, elected by the congregation out of the

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congregation is characteristically Protestant, and stands in striking contrast to the Catholic notion of priesthood, whose vocation is principally from God, and whose appointment is from the hierarchy of the church. Some will say to single out the priest as celebrant is to deny the fact that the congregation celebrates the Mass, too. That objection can be answered by using the term “priest” itself, though “celebrant” is the traditional term. Either is preferable to “presider,” which has the connotation of being temporary and provisional and not particularly sacramental.

If the liturgy should be Christocentric, then Christ should be the focus of attention, not the congregation. The question of orientation is addressed very well in this issue by Msgr. Guido Marini, Papal Master of Ceremonies, who reports two solutions, clearly endorsed by Pope Benedict: facing east, or facing the crucifix. The eastward direction places the priest at the head of the congregation, with all facing the same direction, making it clear that the action is addressing God. If that is not possible, the usage of the early church of having a large image of Christ in the apse of the church, which is faced when facing east, is approximated by placing a crucifix on the altar which serves the priest as a focal point for his celebration of the Mass.

It is not widely known that the stance facing the people is not required by the liturgy; all that is required is that in constructing new churches, altars be built so that it is possible to celebrate the Mass facing the people. This, of course, should mean that it should remain possible to celebrate *ad orientem* as well, something not always observed in the construction of new churches.

There are two different Latin terms for the stance “facing the people,” *versus ad populum*, and *coram populo*. We know “versus” from its legal usage in expressing an adversarial relationship, as in Brown versus Board of Education, clearly not the kind of relation to be expressed concerning the priest and the people. Etymologically, it stems from “verso,” I turn, so it says “turned to the people.” This is in fact used in the Latin missal, even the new edition of 2002; there it substantiates the *ad orientem* stance: at certain points the missal directs the priest, “versus ad populum,” turned toward the people, to address of the congregation, such as at “orate, fratres”; or at communion, “conversus ad populum.” Such rubrics clearly express the normal stance of the priest as facing the altar, suggesting a new term “facing God.” This is an important distinction, since the popular media insist on describing the stance of the priest in the old rite as turning his back to the people, consistently overlooking the fact that both priest and people face God.

“Coram populo,” on the other hand, with its use of the ablative, suggests a less direct relation; the priest is not facing the people in the sense of directly addressing the people, but celebrating the Mass, “before the people.” I remember the first years after the council, when priests began to celebrate *coram populo*, seeing the priest begin the Canon of the Mass by incongruously looking the congregation in the eye while saying “We come to you Father.” The whole direction of the Eucharistic prayer is to the Father in renewing Christ’s sacrifice, and must bring the congregation into the act of offering up as the direction of prayer. Too direct address of the congregation by the priest runs the risk of both priest and people overlooking the necessarily transcendent object of the dialogue.

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Other terms indirectly express an anthropocentrism. One names the entrance hymn a “gathering song,” often including its function as “greeting the priest.” The introit of the Mass is the procession of the clergy into the church processing to the focal point of the liturgy, the altar, and marking the altar as a sacred place by incensing it. The music of the introit is to accompany that action and to establish the sacred character of the whole liturgy which is to take place. It is not about the congregation, but about the Mass; the congregation has already gathered, and it need not “greet” the priest yet; this takes place after the introit, when the priest greets the congregation, “The Lord be with you,” and the congregation responds.

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identify it as being for the introit. Chant, for the introit, means that this chant is only sung for the entrance of the priest and only on that day, that it is proper. The loss of the Propers of the Mass and of the great repertory of proper chants is one of the negative results of the council that is only now beginning to be remedied by the revival of chant scholas and the introduction of English propers, whose purpose ultimately will be to lay the ground for the revival of the singing of the Latin propers.

Another misnomer is “opening prayer.” This is properly called a collect, which means the *closing* prayer of a liturgical action, collecting the prayers and intentions of that rite in a general summarizing prayer. Thus the collect at the beginning of the Mass concludes the entrance rite as a whole, just as the prayer over the offerings concludes the offertory rite, and the postcommunion prayer concludes the communion. The Latin collects of the Roman Mass are models of concise statement and little schools of prayer all in themselves; we rarely hear them, though, because their present English translations are banal, and longer alternative prayers have been provided, leading most celebrants understandably to choose the seemingly more interesting prayers, overlooking the classic Roman collects.

A similar misnomer is the “prayer over the gifts.” The Latin is *oratio super oblata*, and “oblata” is better translated as “offerings,” being etymologically linked to “offero,” I offer. It has always seemed to me a bit presumptuous to call the bread and wine offered in preparation for the Holy Eucharist “gifts.” The real gift is what is made of them, the Body and Blood of the Lord, his gift to us. Our humble offerings are but natural elements offered in preparation for the Eucharist; they do not give the Lord anything he needs or wants, but rather are symbols of our offering of ourselves to be incorporated into his Mystical Body, by his action, not ours.

Why address these matters in a journal about sacred music? Because music is an essential element of the liturgy, making substantial contributions to its sacredness and beauty. The words discussed above are off the mark precisely because they contribute more secular connotations, which militate against the sacredness of the liturgy and are thus out of consonance with its music. So let us always choose the more sacred term, that the underlying notion of the sacredness of the liturgy will be properly expressed and thus be consonant with the same purposes of the music. ❧



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EDITORIAL

Words, Words | William Mahrt 3

ARTICLE

John Paul II's Statements on Music in the Church | Elizabeth-Jane Pavlick 6

REPERTORY

A Profile of Kevin Allen, Composer | Susan Treacy 25
 The Propers for the Feast of All Saints | Ted Krasnicki 47

DOCUMENT

Introduction to the Spirit of the Liturgy | Msgr. Guido Marini 55

COMMENTARY

The Mass: Attention to Detail | Fr. Allan McDonald 65
 To Whom Does the Liturgy Belong? | Jeffrey Tucker 68
 "We're No Angels": Helping Singers Find Their Bodies | Mary Jane Ballou 70

REVIEW

Antiphonale Romanum II | William Mahrt 72

NEWS

The Winter Chant Intensive, 2010 | David Sullivan 76
 Implementing the Vatican II Reform: The Cathedral Chant School | Angela Manney 77
 In Pace in Idipsum | Fr. Robert A. Skeris 79

THE LAST WORD

Creativity and the Liturgy | Kurt Poterack 81

EVENTS 82