

5-6-2016

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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation

Pike, Elizabeth. 2016. The Place of Psalms in Liturgy. *Obsculta* 9, (1) : 97-111.

<https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol9/iss1/9>.

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THE PLACE OF PSALMS IN LITURGY

Elizabeth Pike

Abstract -The General Instruction to the Roman Missal calls psalms particularly "suited to the liturgy," and the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops acknowledges the Psalter as being "the basic songbook of the liturgy." However, in churches today, aside from the Responsorial Psalm, hymns are generally substituted for the other places for psalmody normative to the liturgy. This paper examines biblical, historical, liturgical, and theological arguments for making greater use of the psalms in liturgical music today .

Pope Benedict has said that in the psalms "God gives us words to speak to him, to place our lives before him, and thus to make life itself a path to God."¹ And indeed, it has been the tradition of the church to use psalmody in worship for this reason and others. After Vatican II the liturgy has enjoyed an expansion of the psalms in the form of the Responsorial Psalm, but the other places of the mass occupied by psalms in the liturgy, the antiphons commonly used in the preconciliar liturgy, are seldom used today. Instead of psalms, many churches choose instead to sing hymns. It is necessary therefore, to examine the reasons that the psalms are particularly suited to Christian worship. Going forward this paper will examine the importance of this practice by looking at biblical evidence, the history of singing psalms in Judeo-Christian liturgies, modern church teaching on the psalms, as well as historical and modern theological arguments for the use of psalms in worship.

PSALMS IN BIBLICAL WORSHIP AND THE
HISTORY OF PSALMS IN THE LITURGY

It is important to know that in the course of liturgical reform, there has never been complete agreement on which century of church history to look to as the best model of worship. However, looking at church history, it is clear that the psalms have been sung in multiple expressions of worship from the beginnings of Christianity through the 19th century.² This should make it clear that something that has been lost, or at least neglected since the 19th century, when liturgical reform began. Outlining the history of psalmody in worship will show not only the characteristics of the psalms that define Christian worship, but also that no matter which century one looks to, singing the psalms was an important practice.

The first place we can find the use of psalms in worship is in the Bible. The psalms themselves speak of singing psalms to praise God. Psalm 95:2 reads “Let us come before him with a song of praise, joyfully sing out our psalms.”³ In the Epistles we can find examples of psalms being sung in early Christian worship. For example, in Colossians 3:16 the apostle says “teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” Similarly Ephesians 5:19 tells us to address each other “in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and playing to the Lord in your hearts.” In fact 129 of the 150 psalms are used in the New Testament, many times by Jesus himself.⁴ This is significant in two ways. First, in that it is indicative of the tradition of praying the psalms passing from the Jewish to the Christian tradition, and as will later be discussed, how in the understanding of the Church, Jesus is the fulfillment of the psalms.

Before examining the psalms in relation to Jesus, it is important to look at the Jewish tradition of praying the psalms, specifically as the tradition had evolved to the time of Jesus. Important to this

discussion is the fact that Jesus' ministry took place during what is called the period of the Second Temple. It is also relevant to this discussion that the psalms have been referred to as the "Songbook of the Second Temple," because of how they functioned in the liturgy of that time. While not every psalm was sung, (although many were), all poetic texts and songs used in ritual at that time, were in fact taken from the psalms, also referred to as the Psalter.⁵ There can be no question, therefore, that Jesus himself was immersed in the psalms. As was mentioned earlier, in the Gospels he quotes from the psalms numerous times, and there is evidence in the Gospels as well of him praying the Psalms. An example of this can be found in the Gospel of Mark after the institution of the Eucharist when Jesus and the disciples sing a hymn.⁶ The commentary in the Navarre Bible suggests that this "hymn" was part of the custom at the Passover meal to "recite prayers called 'Hallel' which included Psalms 113 to 118" the last of which was recited at the end of the meal.⁷ Surely, the fact that Jesus prayed and sang the psalms is a compelling reason for the use of psalmody in liturgical celebrations, also a practice common in the early church.

Much like active engagement with the Torah being reinforced by the singing of Psalms in synagogue worship, singing psalms was an important expression of worship in the early Christian church.⁸ While the influence of synagogue worship should not be understated, the psalms took on new importance in the early church; they were interpreted as being prophetic of Christ by the apostles, which is no surprise since, as was mentioned, two thirds of Old Testament references in the New Testament are from the book of psalms.⁹ In broad terms, Luke affirms Jesus' own claim that "everything written about me in the law of the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled," and what is known of the early church shows that this understanding was thoroughly embraced. This can be seen when Justin Martyr argues with a Rabbi saying, "your scriptures are rather not yours, but ours, for we are left persuaded by them, while you read them without com-

prehending the spirit that is in them.”¹⁰ The Psalms having this quality of being a “miniature bible”¹¹ combined with their poetic quality has created a strong tradition of singing the psalms in Christian worship from its early days well into the 18th century,¹² even some of which is retained in worship today and, as will be set forth, should be fostered.

In the tradition of the church, both East and West, definitive evidence of psalmody as a formal part of the liturgy can be found as early as the second century. Between the second and third centuries the Responsorial Psalm was developed and took the form that it has today.¹³ In the writing of Saint Athanasius clear evidence exists concerning the practice of a Responsorial Psalm between the readings, but another form is also mentioned: the antiphonal psalm.¹⁴ Antiphonal psalms were first used during the communion procession around the fourth century, and later as a part of the entrance procession, during the sixth or seventh centuries.¹⁵ The tremendous success of antiphonal psalmody is attested to in the testimonies of several church Fathers in the fourth century through late antiquity including Saints Gregory Nazianzen, Basil, Ambrose, and Augustine.¹⁶ It is also significant to note that at this time, singing the psalms was viewed as an “antidote” to the use of song refrains that perpetuated heretical doctrine.¹⁷

It is worth examining some of these patristic testimonies because they point specifically to singing or reciting the psalms as being transformative. Their writing will be important to scholars who later take up the cause of the psalms. Saint Athanasius says, when speaking of one reciting the psalms:

“the marvel with the Psalter is that... the reader takes all its words upon his lips as though they were his own and each one sings the psalms as though they had been written for his special benefit, and takes them and recites them, not as though someone else were speaking or another person’s feelings being described, but as himself speaking of himself, offering the words to God as his own heart’s utter-ance, just as though he himself had made them up... everyone is bound to find his very self in them and each reads in them descriptions of himself.”¹⁸

Saint Basil describes this as the work of the Holy Spirit making the “medicine” of scripture palatable in the “honey” sweetness of the psalms. He continues, saying that the Holy Spirit

“mixed sweetness of melody with doctrine so that inadvertently we would absorb the benefit of the words through gentleness and ease of hearing, just as clever physicians frequently smear the cup with honey when giving the fastidious some rather bitter medicine. Thus he contrived for us these harmonious psalm tunes, so that those who are children in actual age, as well as those who are young in behavior, while appearing only to sing would in reality be training their souls.”¹⁹

John Chrysostom associates the work of the Holy Spirit with the psalms when he says “From the spiritual psalms can come considerable pleasure, much that is useful, much that is holy, and the foundation of all philosophy, as these texts cleanse the soul and the Holy Spirit flies swiftly to the soul who sing such songs.”²⁰ Finally, Saint Ambrose speaks of the unity brought forth between Christians, saying that they “do well to join in a psalm; A psalm joins those with differences, unites those at odds and reconciles those who have been offended, for who will not concede to him with whom one sings to God in one voice? It is after all a great bond of unity for the full number of people to join in one chorus.”²¹

The next major change in psalms in the liturgy takes place in the Renaissance as there is an extraordinary expansion in music, and therefore, the musical expression of the psalms. For the purposes of this argument, the Propers (assigned procession antiphons) remain mostly unchanged in the Catholic liturgy until the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. As Protestant churches emerged however, there was a renewed interest in the psalms.

The contribution of reformation age reformers cannot be ignored, since they kept the tradition of the psalms in the church, even as it was divided. Their interest in the psalms created a “renewed appreciation for the liturgical possibilities of the Psalter.”²² Martin Lu-

ther said of the psalms “No book of moral tales and no legends of the saints which have been written, or ever will be written, are to my mind as noble as the Book of Psalms,”²³ and John Calvin states that when singing the psalms “we are certain that God has put the words in our mouths as if they themselves sang in us to exalt his glory.”²⁴ Under a later heading one can see how this relates to the understanding of the church fathers concerning the psalms, as well as modern scholars.

PSALMS IN LITURGICAL DOCUMENTS AND TEACHING
IN THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

While the psalms, as they occur in the antiphons of church, have fallen out of use in much of the United States, the liturgical documents do not indicate any desire on the part of the church that the psalms should be used less frequently in the liturgy; in fact there seems to be a general attitude that singing the psalms should be encouraged. In documents since the Second Vatican Council, church leaders have tended to do four things with respect to the place of psalms in the liturgy: affirm the importance of psalms in the liturgy, emphasize participation on the part of the faithful, including participation in the Propers and offer pastoral guidance and/ or suggest modifications for the antiphons of the church.

It is certainly true that participation in the music of the church has been a major focus in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Sacrosanctum Concilium, from the Second Vatican Council calls for “active participation” of “the people... by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes.”²⁵ This documents also calls for composers to write music that will foster active participation and accommodate the needs of small churches,²⁶ and allows for music of different cultural traditions.²⁷ Similarly Musicam Sacram says “It is desirable that the assembly of the faithful should participate in the

songs of the Proper as much as possible, especially through simple responses and other suitable settings.”²⁸ Sing to the Lord and the General Instruction to the Roman Missal both indicate that music should be chosen for the entrance and communion “chant” that enables the assembly to participate.²⁹ While these documents are somewhat ambiguous in their treatment of the Propers, they also show that the use of the Propers is encouraged as far as possible, and even more so that the psalms should maintain their place in the liturgy.

Fidelity to church texts and tradition is another theme that can be found in these documents, and is very pertinent to this discussion on the psalms. For instance, while Sacrosanctam Concilium invites composers to add to the musical “treasury of the church,” it also says the texts of these new compositions “must always be in conformity with Catholic doctrine; indeed they should be drawn chiefly from holy scripture and from liturgical sources.”³⁰ It also calls for the books of Gregorian Chant Propers to be revised and books with simpler melodies created “for use in small churches.”³¹ Both Sacrosanctum Concilium, Musicam Sacram, and the General Instruction of the Roman Missal speak to the fact that the proper antiphons and responsorial psalm are particularly “suited to the liturgy.”³² The United States Conference of Bishops illustrate the importance of the psalms to the liturgy when the bishops write this under the heading of “Antiphons and Psalms”:

“The psalms are poems of praise that are meant, whenever possible, to be sung. The Psalter is the basic songbook of the Liturgy... The Responsorial Psalm in the Liturgy of the Word of the Mass and of other rites “holds great liturgical and pastoral importance, because it fosters meditation on the word of God.” The Entrance and Communion chants with their psalm verses serve to accompany the two most important processions of the Mass: the entrance procession, by which the Mass begins, and the Communion procession, by which the faithful approach the altar to receive Holy Communion.”³

The difficulty in allowing for new music and inculturation of liturgical music while leaving a place in the liturgy for Gregorian Chant and the text of the Propers is very apparent while examining the previous two topics; but the church offers pastoral solutions in the form of what Kathleen Harmonn calls the “hierarchy of musical selection.”³⁴ As Harmon points out, with regards to the antiphons and their psalm verses, Sing to the Lord and the General Instruction first suggest a psalm drawn from the Graduale Romanum or the Graduale Simplex be chosen for the Entrance or Communion Song, specifically one appropriate for that day. Second from the top of the hierarchy is a “psalm from another episcopally approved collection,” and lastly allowed is a hymn or song that is “in keeping with the purpose of the entrance or communion chant and that carries the stamp of episcopal approval.” She aptly says these options balance “the Church tradition with contemporary needs while upholding the normative priority of psalmody in the liturgy.”³⁵

Decidedly, in the tradition of psalmody in the liturgy, the scriptural text is important, or at least text that keeps with “the purpose” of the chant. The purpose of the chant is something that Paul Ford suggests liturgical musicians have misunderstood in composing and using songs about gathering or about communion for these two processions. He says this of the Entrance Antiphon:

“Why would you sing anything but a psalm for the entrance procession? In the Church’s two official books for the songs to be sung at Mass, almost all the entrance songs are psalms. In the Roman Gradual there are 164 entrance songs, and 160 of them are psalms. In the Simple Gradual there are 63 entrance songs, and 56 of them are psalms. Several psalms even tell us how we are to begin liturgy: with gratitude and reverence (Psalm 5:7; Psalm 100:4; Psalm 118:19), out of a sense of commitment (Psalm 66:13; Psalm 96:8), with joy and praise (Psalm 95:2), and with song (Psalm 100:2).”

Ford reminds us that the GIRM says that the Entrance Chant is not

only to “open the celebration [and] foster the unity of those who have been gathered,” which a song with the topic of gathering could certainly do, but also to “introduce their thoughts to the mystery of the liturgical time or festivity.”³⁶ He says similar things of the trend to sing communion themed songs for the procession:

“If we had paid attention, we would have noticed that of the 163 Communion songs of the *Graduale Romanum*, only eight songs refer to the Body and Blood of Christ... Of the sixty-two Communion songs of the *Simple Gradual*, only four songs refer to the Body and Blood of Christ. And of the 618 Communion antiphons of the *Roman Missal*, only sixty-eight songs refer even indirectly to the Body and Blood of Christ.”

The General Instruction gives a high priority to the antiphons, which are scriptural, and tied to the other readings of the liturgy, he argues, “communion is the fruit of the proclaimed word.”³⁷ Ford is not alone in making such theological arguments to support the role of psalms in the liturgy.

THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS FOR THE PSALMS IN LITURGY

From antiquity to present day there is no shortage of individuals who have found the psalms to be an important force in both the lives of individuals and the Christian Community. Modern scholars have drawn on patristic testimonies in their own writings on the psalms. Like the Saints discussed earlier, modern accounts point to the transformative power of the psalms as a reason for their importance in the liturgy.

In the patristic accounts the psalms are said to have qualities that lend themselves to belonging to the individual “as though they were his [sic] own,” and also that create a bond of unity. Some modern scholars argue that both are true. David F. Ford suggests that the psalmists’ “I” fosters unity because it “accommodates a vast congregation of individuals and groups down the centuries and around

the world today. They are all somehow embraced in this ‘I’.”³⁸ John Witvliet builds on this idea, identifying that the psalms are a type of prayer that is both “communal and corporate.” He goes on to explain that liturgical prayer is different from individual prayer in a public space in that while it names the “needs and hopes” of individuals, it also gathers the needs and hopes of many people, races, and cultures, and accents the corporate dimension of these prayers. Further, he claims, the psalms allow us to “sense our solidarity with those who prayed these words over three thousand years ago,” in addition to those in our community.³⁹ According to Kathleen Harmon, the psalms therefore “shape who we are as individuals and as members of the church. Even more, the psalms teach us that our individual identities are not separate from our communal identity.”⁴⁰

Harmon is not alone in writing about how the psalms shape individuals. Witvliet claims that just as children learn how to communicate by imitating the words given to them by their parents, God teaches us how to communicate with him through the psalms.⁴¹ In this same line of thinking Pope Benedict XVI teaches that God calls us to conversion through the psalms because in them “God gives us words to speak to him, to place our lives before him, and thus to make life itself a path to God;”⁴² An article presented by the National Association of Pastoral Musicians expands on the words of the Holy Father and continues

“But the psalms do far more than that. Not only do they give us words to place our experiences “in the sight of God,” they help us shape how we understand and respond to those experiences. As we pray these song texts, as we allow them to become a source for reflection on life and its meaning, we find them making a home in our heart, and we discover ourselves drawing on the language of the psalms to understand what’s happening to us and in our world. They help us to hear; they help us ourselves drawing on the language of the psalms to understand what’s happening to us and in our world. They help us to hear; they help us to know how to say what ought to be said. At its heart, the Christian life is marked by an encounter with Jesus Christ—an encounter that

deepens, if we allow it, through the Holy Spirit's action in every aspect of our lives. In the psalms, God gives us a voice that resonates with the myriad experiences that arise and evoke in us hope, lament, thanksgiving, and praise. We can find in these songs a wisdom that helps us, as the Holy Father said, "make life itself a path to God."⁴³

Centuries earlier, Saint Athanasius had also made the claim that the psalms have a way of 'molding' a person,⁴⁴ and it is his words that Harry P. Nasuti uses in arguing that the psalms have a "sacramental" nature.

The argument that Nasuti presents is essentially that the psalms are unique from the rest of scripture in that they have a "power not shared by the rest of Scripture, one rooted in their special ability to have a decisive effect on those who use them."⁴⁵ Quoting Saint Athanasius, as was mentioned above he states "the distinctive nature of the psalms lies in their ability to 'affect' and 'mold' a person. Athanasius claims that the psalms may even be said to "constrain" a person, conforming that person to the text in a special way" The psalms, Nasuti says, "do something to a person that would not happen without their agency," an ability that he attributes, like Pastristic sources, to being the work of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶ He goes on, using the example of Saint Augustine to show how the "transformative power of the psalms 'inflamed' the Church Father towards God."⁴⁷ Nasuti claims that when the psalms are used in this liturgy they likewise have the power of transformation. He argues that while there "is no guarantee that the psalm accurately reflects what the individual participants in the liturgy feel like praying at that given moment;" because it a psalm prescribed by the church, singing the response is transformative because the response is what the "participants are called on to pray," and through the "agency of the psalm" the person singing the psalm is "shaped as a particular type of person,"⁴⁸ the "type of persons God wants them to be."⁴⁹ Therefore, the psalms are "the means by which the rest of scripture is actualized in the believer."⁵⁰ Na-

suti's description shows how the psalm is "a ritual response to which the assembly members assent through the singing of the psalm concerning how God's word in the liturgy is reshaping their identity."⁵¹

It is interesting to see how similar many of the presentations made by these scholars are and how congruous their work is with the teaching of the church fathers as well. From both these modern theologians and patristic sources we can see clearly how the psalms, sung in the liturgy are both formative of individuals in a personal way but also in their ability to shape and join individuals to the community (both the community that is physically present and the generations of the church that have also prayed these psalms).

From these arguments, it is plain that the historical practice and liturgical norms of the church in regards to the place of psalmody should be given their due merit. Anyone who works in a pastoral capacity in the church- priests, liturgists, musicians, associates, and others, would be wise to consider how to best make use of the psalms in the liturgy. If we truly believe that the psalms have the ability to shape, form, and transform those who sing and pray them, then making full use of them in the liturgy is a valuable gift to the community. Conversely, if we are not forming our communities in this type of scripture, we should consider if we are robbing them of the power of the psalms to connect them to a fuller understanding of salvation history, or of the opportunity to communicate with God not in a way that we feel like praying or have been taught to pray, but in the words "God calls on us to pray."

Notes:

1. Pope Benedict XVI *Verbum Domini*, (Vatican, 2010) article 24
2. Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Eerdmans Publishing Co. Cambridge, 2010), 38
Waltke was an Evangelical Reformed professor in Old Testament and Hebrew. He served on the translation committee for the New American Standard Bible and the New International Version. He is currently an Anglican pastor in Wash-

ington State. Houston is a professor of Spiritual Theology at Regents College in Vancouver, Canada.

3. *New American Bible* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1991), all Scripture citations here after are from the New American Bible unless otherwise noted.

4. Paul Ford, *Making a Home For the Word: Psalmody in Catholic Worship*, Pastoral Music Volume 36 (National Association of Pastoral Musicians. Silver Spring, Maryland, 2012), 16. Ford is the professor of theology and liturgy at Saint John Seminary in Camarillo, CA. He is the author of *Flowing Waters* produced by Liturgical Press.

5. Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Eerdmans Publishing Co. Cambridge, 2010), 25.

6. *The Navarre Bible: The Gospels and Acts of the Apostles* (Four Courts Press. Dublin, Scepter Publishers, Princeton, 2008), 303. Mark 14:22, 26: “And as they were eating, he took bread, and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them... And when they had sung a hymn they went out to the Mount of Olives.”

7. *The Navarre Bible*.

8. Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 39.

9. *Ibid.*, 38.

10. *Ibid.*, 41

11. *Ibid.*, 37

12. *Ibid.*, 38.

13. Robert F. Taft, “Christian Liturgical Psalmody: Origins, Development, Decomposition, and Collapse;” From *Psalms in Community: Jewish and Christian Textual, Liturgical, and Artistic Traditions* edited by Harold W. Attridge and Margot E. Fassler (Society of Biblical Literature. Atlanta, 2003), 17. Taft is an American Jesuit priest and archimandrite of the Eastern Catholic Church. He is professor emeritus of the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome.

14. *Ibid.*, 19, 21.

15. *Ibid.*, 28.

16. *Ibid.*, 23.

17. *Ibid.*, 24.

18. John D. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms as Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources*, (Eerdmans Publishing Co, Cambridge, 2007), 8. Witvliet is

director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship and professor of worship, theology, ministry studies at Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, MI.

19. *Ibid.*, 3.

20. *Ibid.*, 6.

21. *Ibid.*, 5.

22. *Ibid.*, 13.

23. *Ibid.*, 37.

24. *Ibid.*, 14.

25. *Sacrosanctum Concilium (SC)*, (II Vatican Council, Rome, 1963), article 30.

26. *Ibid.*, 121.

27. *Ibid.*, 119.

28. *Musicam Sacram (MS)*, (Congregation for Divine Worship, Rome, 1967), article 33.

29. "Sing to the Lord," (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington DC, 2007), article 144, 190, *General Instruction to the Roman Missal (GIRM)* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington DC, 2010), article 41, 86.

30. *SC*, 121.

31. *SC*, 117.

32. *SC* states "The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy," (114) because of the focus on the importance put on scripture and liturgical texts elsewhere (24, 30, 121). It is likely it is "suited" because of both aesthetic and scriptural qualities. *MS* states "It is desirable that the assembly of the faithful should participate in the songs of the Proper as much as possible, especially through simple responses and other suitable settings. The song after the lessons has a special importance among the songs of the Proper. By its very nature, it forms part of the Liturgy, of the Word." (33) Finally *GIRM* states "The main place should be given, all things being equal, to Gregorian chant, as being proper to the Roman Liturgy." (41)

33. "STL", 115b.

34. Kathleen Harmon, "Roman Catholic Music after Vatican II" from *New Songs of Celebration Render*, Michael C. Hawn, (GIA Publications, Chicago, 2013), 23. Harmon is the music director for programs of the Institute for Liturgical Ministry in Dayton, Ohio, and is the author of numerous publications for GIA as well as Liturgi-

cal Press.

35. Ibid., 24-25.

36. Ford, *Making a Home*, 17. Ford is quoting article 47 of the *GIRM* here.

37. Ibid., 20.

38. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms*, 27.

39. Ibid., 26-27.

40. Kathleen Harmon, *Becoming the Psalms: A Spirituality of Singing and Praying the Psalms*, (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2015), 89.

41. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms*, 11-12.

42. *Verbum Domini*, 24.

43. *The Psalms that Sing Us*, Pastoral Music vol. 36 (National Association of Pastoral Musicians, Washington DC, 2012), 60.

44. Harry P. Nasuti, “The Sacramental Function of the Psalms in Contemporary Practice and Liturgical Function” in *Psalms and Practice: Worship, Virtue, and Authority*, edited by Stephen Breck Reid, (Liturgical Press, Collegeville MN), 2001. 79 Harry Nasuti is professor of Old Testament in the theology department at Fordham University. His main research area has been the poetic books of the Bible, especially the Psalms.

45. Ibid., 78.

46. Ibid., 79.

47. Ibid., 80.

48. Ibid., 82.

49. Ibid., 86.

50. Ibid., 81.

51. Harmon, “Roman Catholic Music,” 28.