



# The Mass in Slow Motion



## The Responsorial Psalm

*This is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. You are also invited to learn more by attending Sunday School classes for adults which take place in the school cafeteria each Sunday from 9:45 am. to 10:45 am.*

*This series will follow the Mass in order.*

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.

If you were to walk into Mass for the first time you might find the singing of the 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?

The Responsorial Psalm 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:

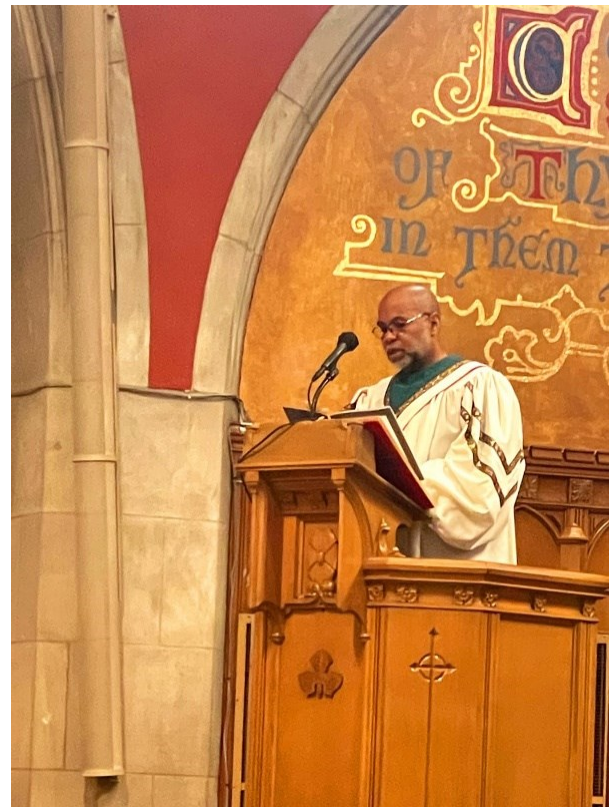
1. -the psalm in the lectionary;
- 2- the Gradual (this word is explained below) in the Roman Gradual book; or,
- 3- the Antiphon and psalm in the “Simple Gradual” book.

In most American Parishes, like our own, option 1 is chosen.

**History** – In the early Church there was a pattern to the psalm response much like our own today. 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 is sung unless it is brief.

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 Song, (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 singing or recitation 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 and 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 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 “Gradual.”

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 choir. 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 from 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.

**Pastoral Reflections** – It is true to say that the Psalm is “another reading” in the sense that the psalm, like the other readings comes from the scriptures, the written Word of God. However, a caution is in order. The psalm should also be seen to enhance the prayer and praise that is integral to the Liturgy of the Word. Thus, it is not merely a “listening event” but also involves prayer and praise in the truest sense of the term. The psalms were (and still are) the prayer book of the Jews and it is our prayer book as well. Hence, the psalm is prayer and not only “another reading.”

The title “Responsorial Psalm” is not given because there is a response or antiphon for the people to sing. The “response” referred to is the reflection of the assembly on the proclamation of the reading which just took place. The psalm is usually related in some direct way to the theme of the Old Testament reading (and by that very fact to the Gospel which is to come). Thus, the people “respond” to the Word of God, make it their own and proclaim it prayerfully. By its nature, the psalm is a song and should thus be sung if at all possible, especially on Sunday.

OK, so the bottom line is once again: YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO PRAY. The Liturgy is not just some ritual to get through, it is a time of prayer. The Psalm response or Gradual is meant to invite you into a prayerful response. Are you praying? Next time you’re at Mass, don’t miss the main point here.

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**Mass schedule:** Sundays: 8 am, 9:30 am, 11 am & 7 pm; Saturdays: 8 am & 4:30 pm; Daily: 7 am in the chapel