

## LITURGICAL CHANT: VESTMENT FOR THE VOICE

by Rev. John A. Frahm III

Very often when a congregation has not been accustomed to liturgical chant (at least in the pastor's parts of the dialogue) some will have an emotional reaction to it and declare it "Roman Catholic". This is, of course, not completely accurate and represents an uninformed opinion. Liturgical chant has a long history from the time of the founding of the Missouri Synod and other synods in North America, to the time of Luther in Germany and Scandinavia, on back to the early church and indeed into the worship of the Old Testament believers in the Messiah. It is nothing new and it is not uniquely Roman Catholic at all. Among Christians one not only finds chant among Roman Catholics but also Anglicans (Episcopalians), Eastern Orthodox, more liturgical Presbyterians, and many Lutherans. Historically speaking, it is representative of the majority of worshipping Christians throughout the centuries. As is clear from Martin Luther, his liturgical reforms sought only to revise what was in error and leave intact and cleansed what good gifts were passed on in the church's tradition that were unproblematic (i.e., if it isn't broke, don't fix it!). Both of the Divine Service orders produced by Martin Luther featured chant prominently (*Formula Missae* and the *Deutsche Messe*).

A helpful point of comparison may be vestments. Vestments are the various traditional garments (e.g. alb, chasuble, cassock, surplice) worn by the clergy and other liturgical assistants in churches that follow a form of the historic liturgy. The purpose of vestments is to cover the person so that we do not focus on the individual but upon the means of grace (Gospel and Sacraments) and the office that person holds. It is also to indicate the office the person holds by virtue of call, ordination or consecration. And so a pastor wears a stole and/or a chasuble to indicate his office and the particular order of service that is being conducted. An acolyte may simply wear a cassock and cotta. Another purpose of vestments is to adorn the liturgist and assistants to indicate the reverence, joy, and holiness of the Divine Service. This brings us back to chant in the liturgy of the church.

In many ways chant serves as a "vestment" for the voice. Chant, as a kind of combination between singing and speaking, serves to de-emphasize the idiosyncrasies of the person conducting the liturgy or assisting and helps to emphasize the mystical and sacramental unity and communion between Christ and His Bride, the Church. In this way also, chant serves as a kind of vocal "uniform" like the basic liturgical vestments or even the clerical shirt and collar. Theologically speaking, personality doesn't then matter much from one pastor to another so long as the Gospel is preached purely and the sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution (Acts 2:42;

Augsburg Confession VII). Chant helps convey this uniformity in office and the transparochial nature of the church's ministerium.

When both pastor and congregation chant their respective parts of the liturgical dialogue the simple fact of the liturgy *as a dialogue* is made abundantly more clear. The dialogue or conversation takes place in the same mode or genre, if you will. It is rather odd when the pastor speaks his parts and the congregation sings theirs. Imagine an opera or a musical conducted in such format. Or imagine a conversation in daily life like this! Why this supposedly makes sense to some in regard to worship is very likely due to repetition of a less-than-preferred liturgical practice thought to be "old Lutheran" or "conservative," which may really be Pietistic, protestant, or may simply demonstrate the lack of liturgical training and understanding on the part of a previous pastor or musicians. This is the same kind of misunderstanding which believes that Lutherans cannot have communion more than once per month or make the sign of the cross, and that old Lutheran clergy wore chiefly black gowns in the liturgy. In these instances of speaking pastors and chanting congregations, the two parts seem hardly to go together and understanding the liturgy as a grace-delivering-and-receiving conversation is lost. It may be a conservative and institutionalized liturgical version of what is often called "talking past one another."

Likewise, chant helps to emphasize that the Divine Service is heaven coming down to earth in the means of Christ's grace (Revelation 4,5; Isaiah 6:1-7; Acts 2:42; I Corinthians 11; Luke 22:27). It communicates the divine mystery of this transaction of the means of grace and faith. Chant clothes and elevates the words that are spoken so that the message is the main thing, rather than the personality quirks of the messenger (see I Corinthians 1,2). For we do not preach ourselves but Christ and Him crucified. This vestment for the voice adorns the liturgy with the joy of song in a way that also accommodates the characteristics of regular speech. The Lord's presence is a cause for rejoicing in song, even in this gift's delivery. And yet this is to be in such a way that it is not entertainment, but a high and holy encounter with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who condescends to be with His redeemed people. In short, chant carries benefits from both song and speech in one form. This is what was understood by both the editors of *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941) and *Lutheran Worship* (1982). This is also understood in the recently published *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod and our synod's *Lutheran Service Book*. However, this understanding was somewhat lost inadvertently when the pastor's chant was not included with *The Lutheran Hymnal* but put into a supplementary volume of *Music of the Liturgy*.

While many pastors are reluctant to chant and express some shyness toward the idea of it, most pastors can, with practice and a moderate amount of training, chant quite

proficiently the basic parts of the liturgy that are in our hymnals and agenda. Most pastors are not "tone deaf". A rare few are lacking of those created gifts and those pastors should probably not chant, out of mercy. A pastor could start with the salutation, the preface to the Communion liturgy, and perhaps the Benedicamus and Benediction. Later he might add the Words of Institution, Proper Prefaces, and other prayers. Or he might vary such things as suggested by the festivals and penitential seasons of the Church Year. A pastor should practice it regularly. Chant affords additional variety that is also traditional. In addition there are many chants that the parish choir might also sing, not so much as a performing "anthem" choir, but as a working liturgical choir (Introit, Gradual, Verse, or special settings of the ordinary of the liturgy). A liturgical deacon might also help with such things.

In our consumeristic culture of contemporary worship and "praise bands," chant runs against the *Zeitgeist* and carries its own culture that is shaped by time-tested forms rather than the liturgy *du jour*. The church is in the world and yet not of the world. Chant helps to emphasize this. Chant has been evident and valued in the more confessional periods of Lutheran history. May our churches be such oases of the holy Triune God's grace that we may say with one of our hymns:

*Here Thy praise is gladly chanted,  
Here Thy seed is duly sown;  
Let my soul, where it is planted,  
Bring forth precious sheaves alone,  
So that all I hear may be  
Fruitful unto life in me.  
["Open Now Thy Gates of Beauty", TLH #1]*