

Getting Our Congregations to Sing!

In the March issue of *Intercom*, we ran an interview with Fr Liam Lawton. There was not sufficient space for the following question and Liam's answer, which may be of interest to those whose congregations are reluctant to sing!



Photo: Lucy Foster

EDITOR: *As a priest, I experience some difficulty in getting my congregations to sing (if you'll pardon the understatement!). Any tips?*

FR LIAM LAWTON: The great French liturgist, Joseph Gelineau, once said: 'If one voice in the assembly is silent, then the praise of God is incomplete ...'

Obviously, we here in Ireland have a lot of work to do in order to complete the praise of God! In order to have our congregations sing, a few factors should be considered:

People will sing music where the tradition of singing and music is encouraged. If people come each week to a particular Mass where they know and expect music and singing, this is a start they can build on. Having music intermittently only risks frustrating people who come expecting or not expecting music.

People need the words that they are asked to sing. Unlike choirs, the

congregation are coming from a very different place, so they will need some kind of help to identify the music.

The music should be melodic and accessible. If we pick music that people will remember and learn easily, then they are more likely to sing.

Don't keep changing the repertoire. I often say to choirs that the day they are getting bored with a piece is the very day the congregations are only becoming familiar with it.

The congregation should be led by a cantor or MC. This is especially true since we don't have a tradition of congregational singing. Very often the choir are comfortably ensconced in the gallery, the priest is on the altar and the assembly are in the centre, not knowing what is happening or if they are invited to participate. They begin to feel like unwanted spectators at a liturgy, and so will become bored and unresponsive. The role of cantors, who lead the assembly,

should not be underestimated. Training them properly is essential, if we are to educate our assemblies to take a more active role.

All participants in the liturgy should feel welcome and understand that their place is of equal importance. So to have an animator or cantor is really important – someone who will encourage and guide. It's not a matter of having someone who can prove they should be on X-Factor, but rather someone who understands their role as an animator.

If 'Father doesn't sing,' that's not the most important thing. What is important is that the priest is there to confirm the various roles and ministries. He should know where resources can be found, so that he can support those who lead the people in liturgy and music. People will respond to good liturgy; the reverse, I believe, is also true.

The people who make up our Sunday assemblies are from a huge diversity of backgrounds. Our common bond is our belief in Jesus Christ, and our desire to build up the kingdom of God in our communities. Our liturgies help us to express and celebrate this belief. So when we gather we must do so in the proper setting, where each member can feel a sense of belonging and a desire to share in the community's celebration. Arriving in to a cold, inhospitable, poorly-lit place of worship does nothing to enhance our liturgy.

If the liturgy and music begin without any words of welcome or words of instruction, it's no wonder if congregations feel alienated, particularly if the choir is behind them in a gallery. Little wonder if they see themselves as passive spectators.

Planning is so essential – choosing material that is suitable for your gathering, the time of year (i.e. the liturgical season), coupled with the available resources. To sing a piece of music 'because we like it' is not valid reason for using it. Too often music that is unsuitable, used at the wrong time for the wrong reasons is presented as liturgical.

We have talented people in all our communities and they should feel welcome to build the kingdom of God using their gifts. Such gifts cannot be tapped unless they are identified and encouraged. When this happens, our liturgies are true places of prayer and worship, where we can celebrate the life and death of Jesus in our lives and our communities.