

SINGING IN ORDINARY TIME

Lynn Eustis

I began writing this article with the expectation that by its publication date, we would all be recovering from a busy spring choral season, and entering the restorative period known to the church as “Ordinary Time.” We would have prepared ourselves diligently for the discipline of Lent, the power of Holy Week, and the continuing joy of Eastertide. While I appreciate the meaning of all of those times, I usually look forward to the slower summer time when nothing special is happening. This year as we struggle to cope with the global pandemic of COVID-19, we may feel a deep longing upon hearing the phrase “ordinary time.” It is my fervent hope that by the time you read this, we will be able to see a light at the end of the tunnel, a promise of return to some level of normalcy, not too far in the future.

For the liturgical singer, Ordinary Time means that we sing because we want to, not because we have to. In normal years, we would now be entering a time of much-needed rest and rejuvenation after long months of intensive service. This year we still await the time when we can rejoice in communal worship after weeks or months of social isolation.

Many of us were heartened by the footage of the Italian people singing across alleyways from the balconies of their apartments. I don't think any of

us will need to be reminded this year of why we love to sing. When we can finally return to our parishes, we will be overjoyed to join our voices with other worshipers after worshiping virtually for an extended period of time.

If your parish has a summer choir—or if that is something that waits until next summer—settle into the calmer pace and enjoy singing with other people under less performance pressure. This time of slightly relaxed expectations serves as a reminder that our liturgical singing should never be treated as a public performance. We strive to sing as well as we can in order to glorify God and build up our congregations. In the summer, we often present less challenging repertoire, which allows us to focus on why our singing plays such an integral role in the service.

Surrounded by voices

When I'm not singing with the choir and I'm out in my regular pew, I savor the contemplative pleasure of congregational hymn singing. I listen for the voices around me and I choose a part no one else is singing. I especially like to take the tenor part up an octave during the third verse, quietly if it's an introspective hymn or more joyously when appropriate. I pay more attention to the texts as poetry, and I am often moved to tears by a particular verse. One of my favorites is verse three of “Dear Lord and Father of mankind” with poetry by John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–1892) and gloriously set as the tune REPTON by C.H.H. Parry (1848–1918):

*Drop thy still dews of quietness
till all our strivings cease;*

Take from our souls the strain and stress

*And let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.*

We long for the time when we are able to travel and worship with other communities—in summers past, we have found ourselves away from our home parishes on a Sunday morning, giving us the opportunity to sample other singing communities. Maybe you normally sing with a large volunteer choir and then get to spend time visiting a small church with just twenty people in the congregation. Perhaps one day not too far in the future you may again get to spend a holiday in a new major city, experiencing the wonder of a cathedral for the first time. As of this writing we do not know if we will be traveling during the summer at all, or worshiping with other groups—but we know that when we can, we will be especially grateful to be able to worship alongside other people.

A larger community

All of these churches and their liturgical singers reassure us that we are part of a larger community than we will ever know. However you spend your singing time this summer, by choice or by necessity, listen for the Spirit's voice and give yourself permission to be less than perfect. We all need the Spirit to soothe us during Ordinary Time so that we can return to our full lives with renewed confidence and joy. •