

PRAYING PSALMS IN COMMON

The Psalms are a cherished Judeo-Christian prayer form. Intended to be sung, they are frequently recited, either in common (i.e., together as a group) or in private prayer. We are probably most familiar with them as the sung responses between Scripture readings during the Liturgy of the Word at Mass. They are also a principal component of the Liturgy of the Hours, also known as the Divine Office, which major clerics (deacons, priests, bishops) pray daily. When sung or recited in common, there are different styles or patterns that may be used, sometimes chosen because of the texts themselves. The same principles apply to the various Old and New Testament canticles (e.g., *Magnificat*) that are often prayed with the psalms, such as in the Liturgy of the Hours.

We are familiar with the “Antiphonal” style, in which a cantor or leader gives an antiphon (verse) to repeat and all repeat it together after each verse proclaimed by the leader. This is how we usually do it at Mass as a response to the first reading. In the various other styles, the leader offers the antiphon before the Psalm and everyone repeats it after the Psalm ends. It is also customary to conclude the Psalm with a “Glory Be ...” before saying the antiphon together.

“Choir” – Usually the group is divided into two sections (Left/Right). The leader says the antiphon, then the two sections alternate praying the verses and the “Glory Be.”

“Unison” – When a psalm is very short (e.g., Ps. 117, 134), it is sometimes said by everyone together, rather than being split between (or among) sections.

“Call and response” – When a psalm (e.g., Ps. 67 or 136) has a repetitious verse (or phrase), the leader may pray the first part and all say the repetitious part in unison.

“Round” – This may be used when the group is divided into 3 or 4 sections. Those in the 1st section say the 1st verse, then the 1st and 2nd sections say the 2nd verse together, then the 2nd and 3rd sections say the 3rd verse together, and so on, with two sections saying each verse (after the first) until the psalm concludes.

Sometimes the text of a psalm lends itself to a combination of these styles. Ps. 150 is 6 short verses of praise to God; the first might be said in unison, the next 4 alternate in choir style, with the final one in unison. The first part of Ps. 132 is a plea to God and the rest recalls God’s promise to David; the first part might alternate between two sections, with the rest alternating between a third and fourth section.

Preparation is the key to effective use of the various options. Prayer leaders should consider the texts of the psalms to be used and the number of people participating to choose the most meaningful manner in which to pray as a community.