

St. Thomas More  
Catholic Church

Cantor Ministry

Handbook

2020-2021



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*Introduction*

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The minimum standards outlined in this handbook are a guide so that all cantors at St. Thomas More are held to the same level of preparedness and competency in fulfilling the role of Cantor at all our liturgies.

Being a cantor takes real discernment. You must have the will to practice regularly and the ability to effectively proclaim the Sacred Scripture and lead the congregation in song.

To be a cantor requires a certain requisite level of competency. It is more than just showing up to sing for Mass.

Alexis Kutarna, Professor of Liturgy at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, offers us a wonderful explanation of the theological principles in the role of the cantor.

The role of the cantor is to lead the people of God in “singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” in liturgical worship. He is at the same time a singer as well as leader of the congregation in singing.

Singing is one of the means of actively, or actually, participating in the liturgy, and one of the essential sacramental signs with which the liturgy is woven. In the liturgical celebration, we are participating in the heavenly song, joining with the angels, saints, and the whole company of heaven, as the veil between earth and heaven is lifted. The significance of the song of the Liturgy is not found in the music, that is, the notes, alone, but in the relationship of music to the sacred text.

The principal medium of this song is the human voice. It is the voice carried on the breath, created in the image and likeness of God, singing the Word of God, as one of the principal means with which we participate in the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy.

The voice, carried on the breath, is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The sound of the voice is a symbol of the breath of life, just as the breath that God breathed into Adam to give him life. (Gen 2:7) It is the breath of Jesus upon his apostles after his Resurrection when he greeted them, “Peace be with you,” and he breathed on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. (John 20:21) It is also the rush of a mighty wind of the Holy Spirit that came upon the apostles at Pentecost to guide the Church, the driving wind which guides her mission.

Our earthly song, joined to heavenly song, is an image of the Holy Trinity, of the love song between the persons of the Trinity, as well as in Christ’s love song to God the Father. “Cantare amantis est,” or, “Singing is for the one who loves,” says Saint Augustine. Cardinal Ratzinger writes, “The Holy Spirit is love, and it is he who produces the singing. He is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit who draws us into love for Christ and so leads to the Father.” The song of the Church is a symbol of love, the dialogue of love between three persons of the Trinity, united in one love-song. How does the lover communicate with his beloved? He sings to her. This is the great reality that the sung liturgy symbolizes, our participation in the life of the Trinity, and a key reason as to why music is integral to the sacred liturgy.

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*The Three Standards*  
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The list offered below represents the minimum requirements to be a cantor at St. Thomas More. As a cantor you must make a concerted effort to discern serving in this ministry based on your commitment level and skill level. Please take some time to think and pray on each of these points. If you feel you are lacking in any of them, please speak with the Director of Music.

These standards are divided by degree because you must have a solid grasp of each degree before the next degree can be considered.

*Musical Standard*

- Cantors should possess at least a rudimentary knowledge of music theory (i.e. basic note/interval reading).
- Cantors must be able to sing with proper intonation (in tune) with a pleasing and confident tone, and with a steady rhythm.
- Cantors must practice the music on their own with rehearsals scheduled with the Director of Music and/or accompanist as needed.

*Liturgical Standard*

- Cantors must have a thorough understanding of the Liturgy for which they are assigned (Mass/LOH) and be well prepared to fulfill the duties of the cantor.
- Cantors should have at least a general understanding of the liturgical cycles.
- Cantors must always remember they are in a role of service, not only to the congregation but also to the liturgy.

*Pastoral Standard*

- Cantors should be fully prepared for the liturgy, but should be ready to adapt quickly as needed.
- Cantors are expected to continue their formation (spiritual) and training (technical).
- Cantors should be comfortable with critique and coaching.

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*The Various Musicians*  
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There are four distinct roles in which musicians perform the musical functions of the Liturgy. Just as the deacon has a different role from the priest and from the lector, so the musicians have distinct responsibilities. Many times, these roles can be performed by the same person and each role may not be present together with the others in every liturgy, but it is important to understand the distinction nonetheless. They are:

- Organist
- Choir
- Cantor
- Psalmist

*Organist*

It is the organist that ultimately “leads” the **congregational singing** when accompanied music is desired. It is the organist that sets tempo, defines phrasing and breaths, and supports the voice of the congregation through registration. It is also the organist who decides when a hymn will be concluded based on the liturgical action.

*Choir*

The Choir’s role is to “[carry out] the parts proper to it...” (GIRM 103). These parts include the Proper of the Mass, the Ordinary of the Mass (as permitted without congregational singing), and other acclamations. It also includes supporting the voice of the congregation in singing the Ordinary of the Mass and

hymnody where appropriate. The choir can even take the role of psalmist at times.

*Psalmist*

The psalmist's responsibility is to proclaim, in song, the psalm during the Liturgy of the Word.

*Cantor*

The cantor sings the acclamations and litanies of the Liturgy and assists in facilitating the congregational singing. The cantor, in effect, is the proxy when there is no choir. When the choir sings, the role of the cantor is superseded.

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*General Norms for Liturgical Musicians*

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The following norms apply mainly to the roles of cantor and/or psalmist, but are important to remember for the choir as well. Remember, the organist is the musical leader, and the choir (or cantor at Liturgies without a choir) sing the parts that pertain to them and facilitate congregational singing.

*Leading and Amplification*

The first norm is that the singers are members of the congregation. This means, when possible, you should sing all congregational music away from the microphone. We should hear the voice of the congregation singing, and not an amplified voice through the sound system. If the congregation is not fulfilling its role in singing, the cantor should then help lead using a strong voice and electronic amplification **as necessary**. Judicious discretion is advised and

needs to be made in the moment by the cantor. The US Bishops publication, *Sing to the Lord reminds us*:

As a leader of congregational song, the cantor should take part in singing with the entire gathered assembly. In order to promote the singing of the liturgical assembly, the cantor's voice should not be heard above the congregation. As a transitional practice, the voice of the cantor might need to be amplified to stimulate and lead congregational singing when this is still weak. However, as the congregation finds its voice and sings with increasing confidence, the cantor's voice should correspondingly recede. At times, it may be appropriate to use a modest gesture that invites participation and clearly indicates when the congregation is to begin, but gestures should be used sparingly and only when genuinely needed. (§38)

This might mean that for some music you are not using the microphone at all; at other times, you may be stepping closer to/further from the microphone as needed.

### *Psalmody*

In collaboration with the accompanist, the **psalmist** should set the tempo and phrasing of the psalm, especially the verses, which she typically sings alone. It is important to remember for chanted psalm-tones, that the text dictates the flow of the rhythm. A good way to begin analyzing how you might sing it is to follow the punctuation.

What this means in practice is that the cantor should NOT wait for a chord at the beginning of each phrase of the psalm tone, but rather, should sing the text as if it were spoken. The organist will follow and place the chord changes on stressed syllables throughout the verse. This means that each verse could be phrased differently.

### *Solos*

From time to time, the cantor may also be called upon to provide preludes and/or solos during the liturgy. These will be assigned by the Director of Music. It must be remembered that music is servant to the liturgy. We do not perform ANY music for the sake of performance, but rather to give glory to God the Father.

### *Distinct Ministries*

Cantors and Psalmists need not be members of the choir; it is a separate and distinct ministry. However, it is strongly encouraged that non-choir cantors join the choir for Solemnities and Feasts.

### *Weddings and Funerals*

Cantors may also be called upon to sing for funerals and weddings as the need arises. This is based on special requests, availability and rotation. There IS a stipend given to the cantor for singing for a wedding or funeral. Because of this, only the most qualified cantors will be considered. Wedding cantors are placed in a rotation and receive a call, in order, from the music office as they are needed or specifically requested by the couple.

### *Practice vs. Rehearsal*

As a cantor, you are expected to practice assigned music on your own. However, the Director of Music is always willing to help you on an individual basis as needed. There is a difference though, between practice and rehearsal. Practice is what you do on your own. Rehearsal is when you come (well-practiced) to “run” the music with the accompanist or director.

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*Dress Code for Musicians*  
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Due to the sacred nature of the liturgy and the dignity of your role as a liturgical musician, you are called to discharge your office “with sincere piety and decorum demanded by so exalted a ministry and rightly expected (of you) by God’s people” (CSL#29). These words from the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy remind us of how we should approach our service at Mass. Our sincere piety and decorum begin with and are reflected by the way we dress for Mass. The focus of the congregation should be on the Mass, not on the appearance of the liturgical musician. Musicians should dress respectfully and with decorum. Clothing that is too casual or flamboyant will distract the assembly from the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar. Attire that is immodest may cause scandal amongst God’s people.

At this time, there is no requirement to have a matching color scheme among the musicians, only that everyone is dressed appropriately for serving the Liturgy.

*Women*

- Dress of modest length and neckline (i.e. no low-cut attire) that covers the shoulders and is not see-through.
- Skirts of modest length with a dressy top or blouse (tops cannot be see-through, sleeveless, or low-cut).
- Dress slacks that reach the ankles with a dressy top or blouse. Jeans (*of any color*), capris, and leggings are not appropriate.

- Dress shoes or dress sandals that have a strap that comes around the heel or has a back to them.

*Men*

- Suit/Sports Coat with button-down shirt, dress slacks and dress shoes.
- A tie is recommended but not required.

Clothing for both men and women should fit comfortably and not be form-fitting or tight.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “The Mass at the same time, and inseparably, the sacrificial memorial in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated and the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord’s body and blood is made present” (CCC#1382). Moreover, the Catechism recognizes the need for outward signs of our inward understanding of just what is happening at Mass. “Bodily demeanor (gestures, clothing, attitudes) ought to convey the respect, solemnity, and joy of this moment when Christ becomes our guest” (CCC#1387).