

Music ministry is more prayer than performance

Clap on or clap off? What to do about the clappers at Mass?

When the choir or the music group finishes, it's understandable that parishioners might applaud at the end of Mass to show their appreciation for the music ministry. St. Thomas More is a parish in south Edmonton where clapping is considered a sign of gratitude.

However, as understandable as that may be, is it liturgically appropriate?

"The simple answer is no," said Rev. Paul Kavanagh, director of the Office of Divine Worship for the Archdiocese. "Our music ministers are sharing in a liturgical ministry. They are leading people in prayer, and they themselves are also sharing in prayer."



Rev. Paul Kavanagh

It's more prayer than performance, and Kavanagh said choirs are not aiming for the acclaim.

"Our music ministers spend a great number of hours preparing for their involvement in the music ministry, but they are also the first to say that they are not there for entertainment but to lead people in the sung elements of the liturgy," Kavanagh said. "Our music ministers are parishioners who want to focus their ministry on God and not themselves."

There has been no official direction by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops on applause after Mass, and the Edmonton Archdiocese does not have a policy on it either. But popes have commented on it in the past.

In his 2000 book *Spirit of the Liturgy*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger – later Benedict XVI – put it this way: “Wherever applause breaks out in the liturgy because of some human achievement, it is a sure sign that the essence of liturgy has totally disappeared and been replaced by a kind of religious entertainment.”

Kavanagh said the best way of showing appreciation to the music ministers, rather than applauding, is to speak with them personally after the Mass.

Nevertheless, people want to show their appreciation. In Edmonton, choir directors and cantors have struck “a good balance.”

“They know that their ministry in music is an important part of our praise and worship of God. They offer their music gifts and talents as part of their prayer,” Kavanagh said.

Rev. Mitchell Fidyka, the pastor at St. Thomas More Parish, agreed.

“This is not for a performance, it is for the glory of God,” Fidyka said, adding the music ministers are grateful to use their talents for that purpose. “The choir never asks for any applause ... it comes from people’s gratitude.”

In the pews at St. Thomas More, parishioners say there’s a desire to show their appreciation.

“It’s a way of appreciating the choir as well as all the people participating in Mass,” said Reda Talusig.

Al Girard said he knows the music ministry spends a lot of time getting ready for Masses.

“I think it encourages music ministers and tells them they’re appreciated,” said Girard.

Sharon Tarnowski, a member of the parish choir, said applause after masses at Easter and Christmas has always been common, but within the last year and a half it has expanded to every Mass.

“We can see them smiling. I feel they’re applauding the music touching them,” she said.

Fellow choir member Pam DeLuca adds: “Sometimes I really like it, especially when we’ve worked very, very hard.”

Kavanagh stressed that music has always been a vital part of the Mass.

“Music has a fundamental role in the Liturgy. We are literally called to sing the Mass, not just sing at Mass,” said Kavanagh, noting that liturgical music has changed over the centuries.

“The use of Gregorian chant has a pride of place in the Liturgy. We have seen the introduction of musical instruments other than the organ, which continues to hold its rightful presence in the Sacred Liturgy.”

Pastor Fidyka noted he is not surprised that people applaud to show their appreciation – and it doesn’t just happen to music ministers in local parishes.

“When the Pope says just two words and is not able to finish the sentence, people clap! And this is not after the Eucharist but during the Eucharist,” Fidyka observed.

-Theresa Seraphim a freelance writer based in Edmonton