

VOCAL PRAISE IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

1. Popularized recently by renewal movements, vocal and expressive praise of God belongs to the whole Church. It is Biblical and is the renewal of something that already exists in our Catholic spiritual heritage.
2. The history of the Church and writings of the Fathers are rich in references to this reality, including the great Father of the Western Church, St. Augustine: “‘*Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands*’ (Ps 98:4). You already know what it is to make a joyful noise. Rejoice, and speak. If you cannot express your joy, shout! Let the shout manifest your joy, if your speech cannot. Let not joy be mute. Let not your heart be silent respecting its God. Let it not be mute concerning His gifts... ‘*Sing, rejoice, and make melody.*’ (Eph 5:19)” (St. Augustine, *Commentary on Psalm 98*)

“‘*Let us make a joyful noise unto God, our salvation.*’ (Psalm 95:2) ... Consider, beloved, those who make a joyful noise in any ordinary songs, as in a sort of competition of worldly joy. You see them reciting the written lines and bursting forth with a joy that the tongue cannot express the measure of. How they shout, indicating by that utterance the feeling of the mind, which cannot express in words what is conceived in the heart. If they in earthly joy make a joyful noise; then might we not also do so from heavenly joy, which truly we cannot express in words?” (St. Augustine, *Commentary on Psalm 95*).

3. Augustine, along with many others, used the term *jubilatio* to describe this spontaneous vocal praise intermixed with shouting and other sounds: “What is to *jubilate*? To break forth into the expression of rejoicing that you cannot express in words... as of a heart laboring and bringing forth into voice the pleasure of a thing imagined, which cannot be expressed.” (St. Augustine, *Commentary on Psalm 66*, free translation)

“One who jubilates, utters not words, but it is a certain sound of joy without words: for it is the expression of a mind poured forth in joy, expressing, as far as it is able, the affection, but not compassing the feeling. A man rejoicing in his own exultation, after certain words which cannot be uttered or understood, bursts forth into sounds of exultation without words, so that it seems that he indeed rejoices with his voice itself, but as if filled with excessive joy cannot express in words the subject of that joy.” (St. Augustine, *Commentary on Psalm 100*)

These descriptions seem to resemble the present-day experience of praise and worship that includes singing and praying in tongues. Many spiritual authors believe this is what St. Augustine is describing.

4. Cassiodorus, a 6th century scholar, describes spontaneous improvised praise as follows: “The tongue of singers rejoices in it; joyfully the community repeats it. It is an ornament of the tongue of singers... like something good of which one can never have enough. It is innovated in ever-varying jubilations” (Cassiodorus, *Psalm 104*, from George Chambers, *Folksong - Plainsong*, (London: The Merlin Press, 1956), p. 7).
5. Here is one example in an account of the canonisation of St. Francis of Assisi: “[After the *Te Deum*] there was raised a clamour among the many people praising God: the earth resounded with their mighty voices, the air was filled with their jubilations... New songs were sung, and the servants of God jubilated in melody of the Spirit” (St. Thomas of Celano, *Vita Prima*, Acta Sanctorum Octobris Tomus Secundus, p. 718, from Eddie Ensley, *Sounds of Wonder: A Popular History of Speaking in Tongues in the Catholic Tradition*, (New York: Paulist, 1977), p. 60).
6. St. Theresa of Avila describes several accounts of jubilation, likening it to a state of spiritual intoxication: “Many words are spoken during this state, in praise of God, but, unless the Lord himself puts order to them, they have no orderly form. The understanding, at any rate, counts for nothing here; the soul would like to shout praises aloud... [The soul] utters a thousand holy follies, striving ever to please him who thus possesses it” (St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*, ed. by E. Allison Peers, pp. 164-165).
7. The gift of charismatic praise is being renewed in the Church today. Pope John Paul II encouraged the revival of this form of prayer. Referring to the expressive form of charismatic prayer and praise he has said, “...the singing, the words and the gestures. It is... how does one say it? I can say that it is a revolution of this living expression (of the faith). We say that the faith is a matter of the intelligence, and at times also of the heart, but this expressive dimension of the faith has been absent. This dimension of the faith was diminished, indeed, inhibited, scarcely there. Now we can say that this movement is everywhere...” (*Private audience of Pope John Paul II with the ICCRO Council*, Rome, December 11, 1979).