To Sing or Not to Sing: That is the Question!

Americans do not like being told what "they have" to do. Part of belonging to   
the home of the brave and the land of the free is the strong *cultural beliefs that* no   
one can make me do something that I do not want to do. This strong independent   
attitude, at least from my viewpoint, is part of the reason why so many American   
Catholics do not sing when they go to Mass.

A second reason that congregational singing gets a C minus or D in most   
Catholic parishes is that little or no catechesis is made available to parishioners   
explaining what their role and function is as a *community at prayer,* or as a   
*liturgical assembly.* The phrase "full, conscious, active participation" from the   
Second Vatican Council's, *Decree on the Liturgy,* though known to priests and   
many music ministers remains basically unknown to the vast majority of Catholics   
who go to Mass on the weekends.

A third reason why Catholics don't sing at Mass is what I like to call "personal   
reasons." "I have a terrible voice. I'm too embarrassed to sing." "I'd much rather   
close my eyes and just listen to the music. I find it soothing and restful." "Real   
men don't sing." "The Choir sounds so nice. I'd just spoil it if I sang."

There are even deeper *historical reasons* why American Catholics do not sing   
according to Salve Regina professor, Thomas Day, *(Why Catholics Can't Sing,*Crossroads, 1991). Irish and French Catholics, the Irish because of the British and   
the French because of Napoleon, became "quiet" or "secret" communities. In anti-   
Catholic societies, you did not draw attention to yourselves. Loud and robust   
singing would draw unwanted attention. The Latin *low Mass* where the priest   
whispered the prayers of the Mass and the attendants read their missals or prayed   
their rosaries in silence made sense and became the norm. If we add to this   
scenario the strong *penitential spiritualties* in both Irish and French piety,   
especially French Jansenism which conceived of the human person as intrinsically   
unworthy of God's transcendent goodness and holiness, we can better understand   
why Catholics believed that they could only go to Communion if they had been to   
Confession. "You can't receive Holy Communion with a sin on your soul" as my   
me mêre often told me. As recently as the mid 1960's, when I was in the minor

seminary, one of the faculty priests would be hearing confessions at the same time   
as another of the priests would be saying the daily community Mass.

Now, you might think, ok, this is interesting but what does this have to do with   
us the parishioners of St. Joseph's Church in Fairhaven. I want to invite and encourage you to explore your baptismal right to full, conscious, and active participation. As a member of your faith community at prayer, you have the right to praise God in song ... "to praise God twice" as St. Augustine said long ago. **As a member of the liturgical assembly, you are no longer an individual, passive, spectator watching a religious ceremony from the sidelines, but rather, you, in communion with the celebrant and with all present**, celebrate the mystery of Christ's passion, death and resurrection. This celebration asks us to proclaim in word and song our joy at being reconciled to God in Christ, in being set free from sin and death, and being made a new covenant and a new creation. Death has lost its power over us. In Christ, we will live in God's love forever. Now, certainly, this is something to SING about.

By picking up your Heritage Missal and singing, you are putting aside cultural,   
personal, and historical reasons that have muted your mind, heart, and soul from   
fully praising God for what Christ has accomplished for you and me. To sing or   
not to sing, that is the question. What will your answer be?