

Alice Matteson, lead cantor at the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Hartford, leads parishioners in singing “Alleluia” at last year’s Easter Mass.



CATHOLICS WELCOME EASTER WITH *Alleluia*

This joyous ritual returns to celebrate the risen Lord.

Story by **SHELLEY WOLF** | Photos by **AARON JOSEPH**

This Easter, the word “Alleluia” will be returning after a 40-day absence. Beginning with the Easter Vigil Mass, cantors, choirs and parishioners alike will be singing “Alleluia,” proclaiming the greatness of the Lord.

But what is so sacred about this word? And how can a single word say so much? Below, four people share their knowledge and experience of singing this glorious word at Easter and throughout the Easter season.

■ A BEAUTIFUL WORD OF PRAISE

“It’s just this beautiful word of praise. It’s a universal utterance of the heart, an utterance of the soul, in praise of God in complete joy,” says Mary Ryan, who has served as a cantor at a number of parishes in the archdiocese.

She has led parishioners in sung prayer at Holy Disciples Parish in Watertown, the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception Parish in Waterbury and St. John Paul the Great Parish in Torrington.

As a result, the word “Alleluia” has a special place in her heart, especially when put to music.

Ryan says, “It’s almost like the breath of the Holy Spirit is lifting us up in praise to God, lifting us up in joy: You are my Savior. Alleluia. You are God. You are Lord. Blessed are you, the most glorious.”

Ryan, who began as a cantor in the eighth grade, holds a bachelor’s degree in vocal performance from The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. Now studying for her master’s degree in theology at Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio, where she also sings in the Schola Cantorum Franciscana, Ryan recognizes the word “Alleluia” as something more: an entry point into the sacred.

“This is the praise of the angels,” she explains. “How sacred that word is. We know we’re entering into the chorus of angels. And we know we’re not worthy of that, except through the merits of Jesus Christ.”

The Catholic Church, in its wisdom, she says, rightfully abstains from using the word “Alleluia” during Lent. “We’re all refraining from using that word,” she explains, “so that we can more joyfully, more abundantly give it back to God in the Easter season.”

■ AN EXPRESSION OF JOY

“Alleluia” is a word and a feeling that connects all of God’s people through the millennia. It tracks back to “hallelujah,” an

ancient Hebrew liturgical expression that today in English means “Praise the Lord!”

Historically, the word “hallelujah” appears in the Old Testament, primarily at the beginning and end of many of the psalms, the prayers and songs of the people of God, which express the human joys and sorrows.



Father Michael Ruminski.

Among the Hebrews, “hallelujah” became a term of rejoicing and giving praise to God. Over time in the Western world, “hallelujah” developed into “Alleluia,” an interjection or animated expression of praise or thanksgiving.

Father Ruminski, the archdiocese’s director of the Office of Divine Worship and pastor of Sacred Heart Parish in Bloomfield, is most taken with the intangible nature of the word. “Even in Hebrew, the word surpasses literal translation,” he says. “It is more an untranslatable expression of joy.”

In addition to being a priest, Father Ruminski holds a bachelor’s degree in organ performance and sacred music from the University of Hartford’s Hartt School of Music.

“In Gregorian chant, for example, the ‘Alleluia’ is often greatly extended with long phrases of just the ‘ia’ (or yah) sound at the end. This was called the ‘Jubilus’ or extended expression of joy,” he explains.

“I think what is fascinating about the word is its instinctive quality,” Father Ruminski adds. “It is more about the sound than it is the literal meaning.”

■ UNITES THE BODY AND THE SOUL

“It’s very hard to define such a perfect word,” says Peter Ryan, the new director of music at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Waterbury. Yet he definitely feels the power of the word “Alleluia” during the Easter Mass, his favorite liturgy of the year.

To him, “Alleluia” means, “Jesus has won. He is with us totally and completely. He has won. All is temporary,” he adds, including Jesus’s death, our tribulations and our own deaths. “Let the Lord be praised for all time.”

Peter Ryan, brother of Mary Ryan, views the three “Alleluias”



Peter Ryan.



Peter Ryan, director of music for the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Waterbury, accompanies the choir during a Sunday Mass.



Alice Matteson.

sung by the people prior to the reading of the Gospel as an emphatic way of saying, “Yes, proclaim the Gospel to us!” and “Yes, let God be praised!”

As a music minister, he hopes Catholics everywhere will recognize that Jesus has freed them from death and from all anxieties. By singing “Alleluia” joyfully throughout the Easter season, they can simultaneously praise God and express that belief, body and soul.

“We truly are a body and a soul,” he says. “And whatever we do with our bodies, it reflects in our souls. And whatever we try to do in our souls, should be reflected in our bodies, too. Which is ultimately why we sing.”

■ ECHOES IN HEARTS AND SOULS

“The most special thing about ‘Alleluia’ at Easter time is that, for me, it equates to pure joy,” says Alice Matteson, the lead cantor at the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Hartford.

Matteson, who holds a bachelor’s degree in vocal performance from Hartt School of Music at the University of Hartford, originally sang as part of the Cathedral Schola Cantorum, but now she is in the sanctuary as a cantor, guiding the congregation in sung prayer.

She is led by organist Ezequiel Menéndez, music director at the Cathedral for the past 25 years, who received a St. Joseph Archdiocesan Medal of Appreciation in March from Archbishop Leonard P. Blair for outstanding service to the Archdiocese of Hartford.

Her favorite recollection of singing “Alleluia” is at Easter, when she sings the word three times, then raises her arms, signaling the entire congregation to respond in kind.

“That moment for me personally when I’m in front of the Cathedral, in front of the whole congregation, and they sing the ‘Alleluia’ back to me, it’s really powerful,” Matteson says.

“It’s not that my personal joy is less,” she notes, “but hearing it reverberate in other people’s hearts and souls, it’s honestly one of the coolest moments of the whole liturgical year. You get it a hundredfold coming back from them, because they’re so joyful about the Resurrection, too.” **CT**



Ezequiel Menéndez.