



OUR SONG OF PRAISE

Part I: Music in Service of the Liturgy

When we come together to celebrate important events in our families or in our communities, music is most often part of the celebration. Singing *Happy Birthday* or *Las Mañanitas* before the candles on the cake can be blown out or singing Christmas carols around the family tree are a part of many family traditions. Wedding receptions usually include ways of involving guests in playful singing and dancing. Even concert programs on the Fourth of July frequently bring audiences to their feet as people sing and clap to familiar songs celebrating freedom.

In the same way, music is integral to our celebration of the liturgy. As we gather to remember the important events in which God's presence has been revealed to us, we sing the songs of our faith. In the words of the Psalmist, we "sing to the Lord a new song, for God has done marvelous things" (Psalm 98). Music brings forth the beauty of our God-given gift of song (Sing to the Lord [SL], 1). We sing because music has the power to transport us to the realms of the heavenly kingdom. Music can express the heights and depths of the human condition in ways far beyond speech alone. It is the voice of the heart lifted to God. In the liturgy, music performs a ministerial function—that is it serves both the liturgy and the people who have gathered to celebrate the liturgy—and it carries out that function in various ways.

Music draws us together in unity. When we come together for the celebration of the liturgy, we come from a great diversity of cultures, ethnicities and life experiences. We are each called to offer our individual gift of song to form one worshipping assembly, the body of Christ celebrating with Christ our Head (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1140). Through music the assembly "achieves a closer union of hearts through the union of voices" (Pope Pius XII, *Musicae Sacram—On Sacred Music* [MS], 5). We give over our own individual preferences for pitch, key, tempo, instrumentation, style and text to join in the prayer of the Church. The unity of our voices begins the process of bonding us, one voice offering praise and thanksgiving to God and opening us to the transformative power of the liturgy.

Music at worship is an expression and sharing of faith. The musical dialogue, psalms, songs, and hymns that we sing in the liturgy give us a means of expressing our faith and our hope in the resurrection. These musical expressions help to define and support the purpose of each action in the liturgy, enabling us to respond to God's outreach to us and helping us to be transformed into the body of Christ. Our public proclamations in song attest to our beliefs and give witness to the commitment we have to live the Gospel values. "This common, sung expression of faith within liturgical celebrations strengthens our faith when it grows weak and draws us into the divinely inspired voice of the Church in prayer" (SL, 5).

Music allows the words of the liturgy to speak more fully. We can hardly imagine what it would be like to recite *Happy Birthday* or *God Bless America*. The melody of the song becomes part of the message. Music has the ability to express the meaning of a text much more intensively than reciting words alone. We can imagine what would be lost if we recited *Happy Birthday*. Music with its captivating melodies, rhythms and styles can interpret a text, taking us to a level of understanding and participation untouched by merely reciting the words. Perhaps no better example can be given than the difference we experience when we *sing* the *Glory to God*, the ancient hymn of praise, rather than *reciting* the words. Music has the additional power of making texts memorable. This quality helps us to take the texts away with us for prayer in our own homes and work places.

Music expresses a meaning beyond the words. Melodies have the ability to communicate the gamut of emotions within the flow of notes. Music can exhilarate us or comfort us. It can express our joy, our sorrow, and our longing for God. Pope Pius XII aptly quotes St. Augustine when he describes music as the way for God to lead us beyond ourselves to a realm of higher things (MS, 5).

Music sets the tone for the particular feast or season. Nothing can capture our attention at the change of a liturgical season or place the focus on a particular feast of the liturgical year better than an appropriate music selection. The time-honored singing of *O Come O Come Emmanuel* in Advent, “*Vamos Todas a Belen*” in the Christmas season, *All Glory, Laud and Honor* on Palm Sunday or *Jesus Christ Is Risen Today* in the Easter season calls to mind centuries of tradition. The texts of these songs not only express our faith but the musical setting also helps us to enter into the spirit of the season or feast.

Selection of music for the liturgy

With the above gifts and qualities of music in mind, how are the decisions made in selecting the appropriate liturgical music for our parish on a particular occasion? In order to determine the appropriate selection of music for a specific place within a particular liturgy, the bishops of the United States listed three criteria to evaluate the selection. Each piece of music is judged from a liturgical, a pastoral, and a musical perspective. These three judgments cannot be isolated one from the other but must be made in conjunction with one another (SL, 126).

I. The Liturgical Judgment

The liturgical judgment focuses on the proper placement of music within a liturgy, what texts should be used, the structure or type of music to be used, and who is to sing it, e.g. cantor, choir, priest, assembly. The directives that govern these decisions are found primarily in the introduction of the particular ritual book. For the celebration of the Mass this is the General Instruction of the Roman Missal.

Each selection is examined to ensure that it expresses our Catholic faith and the particular intention of each part of the liturgy. For example, the directives instruct us that the music that accompanies the distribution of Holy Communion should begin when the priest receives and continue until the last person receives. It tells us that the purpose of this song “is to express the communicants’ union in spirit by means of the unity of their voices, to show joy of heart, and to highlight more clearly the ‘communitarian’ nature of the procession to receive Communion” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [GIRM] 86).

All liturgies are celebrations “performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members” (Cf. CSL, 7). It falls under the liturgical judgment to ensure that the text of the music used in the liturgy expresses the communal nature of the liturgy rather than a personal, individual relationship with God.

II. The Pastoral Judgment

The best musical choices for a particular liturgy are made with the make-up of the particular worshipping community in mind (cf. SL, 130). This judgment is sensitive to the culture of a given people, embracing the gifts, characteristics, and preferences of a particular culture. It also takes into account the age and language of the participants, as well as, the economic or social stresses with which they may be struggling. Even the education and level of faith formation of the specific group of people are considered. All of these pastoral considerations are taken into account in order that we can engage more fully into the sacred mysteries and be strengthened in our faith.

III. The Musical Judgment

The Musical Judgment focuses on the quality of the musical setting, asking the question: “Is the music technically, aesthetically, and expressively good?” These decisions are not based on style since there are pieces of music of quality in every style and genre. This judgment is based on a good marriage of text and melody. Musicians search out the treasures of sacred music from the past but also new settings that meet the changing needs of the worshipping assembly.

We have looked at our God-given gift of music and why singing brings us into a realm of communication with God like no other. We have examined the power of music to unite us, this body of Christ with Christ our Head. Thinking about the threefold judgment that must be made on each music selection in the liturgy will lead us in Part Two: The Forms of Sung Prayer, to reflect on what parts of the liturgy we should sing.



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415 Michigan Avenue, N.E., Suite 70, Washington DC 20017.
www.fdlc.org; email: publications@fdlc.org; voice: 202-635-6990; fax 202-529-2452.
Author: Judy Bullock, Ph.D. Art: Jane Pitz.



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Part II: The Forms of Sung Prayer

The decision on which parts of the Mass are to be sung is determined by a number of factors. Certain seasons and feasts in the liturgical year call for a higher level of celebration, such as Easter and Christmas with their respective seasons. During these more important seasons we not only sing more parts of the liturgy but we also may add additional instrumentation and embellishment of the parts we usually sing. This principle is called “Progressive Solemnity” (General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours, 271–273). Another aspect of this principle takes into account the ebb and flow of each individual celebration of the liturgy and the relative importance of each part (GIRM, 40). The makeup of the assembly is also considered when determining what parts are to be sung. For example, if the assembly consists predominately of young children, or there are only a few people in attendance or when language or culture is a factor, some simplification may be needed. The parts of the Mass that should be sung, if possible, fall into four categories:

I. Dialogues and Acclamations

A. Dialogues

In the liturgy there are a number of short exchanges between the priest, deacon, lector, cantor and the rest of the assembly. Singing these dialogues—the greetings, the openings and conclusions to the scripture readings, and the dialogues within the Eucharistic Prayer—engages us in an active participation and helps to unify those serving in a ministerial role with the rest of the assembly (Cf. GIRM, 34).

B. Acclamations

The acclamations, short responses or phrases sung by the entire assembly, have been placed within the liturgy to provide the opportunity for the assembly to give their assent to what is taking place and to reaffirm the content of a particular prayer text (Cf. SL, 115). We are called to sing these acclamations vigorously and enthusiastically. Acclamations in the liturgy should be well-known by the assembly so that they can be sung spontaneously without referring to a hymnal or worship aid, even when musical accompaniment is unavailable. These acclamations are sung even at daily Mass with a small congregation. The most important acclamations in the Mass are:

1) The Gospel Acclamation

In joyful anticipation of Christ’s presence in the proclamation of the Gospel, we stand to sing the Gospel Acclamation. This is an Easter acclamation in which we acclaim the Risen Lord present and living among us in His Word. This acclamation consists of an Alleluia refrain, sometimes introduced by the cantor or choir, then repeated by the rest of the assembly. A short scripture verse based on the Gospel of the day or a particular feast follows, concluding with the Alleluia refrain. During Lent the Alleluia is replaced with another acclamation of praise.

2) The Holy, Holy or *Sanctus*

This acclamation is one of three that are sung within the Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass. This acclamation comes in response to the preface where the priest celebrant names the things for which we want to thank God on this day. We join our voices with the company of angels and saints in singing Isaiah’s song of praise to God, Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might.... Like all liturgical acclamations, this is a song of the entire assembly so familiarity with the particular musical setting is a necessity.

3) The Memorial Acclamation

In this second acclamation within the Eucharistic Prayer we recall the great things that God has done and continues to do for us in Christ. We remember with gratitude the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ and we look forward to his coming in glory. We boldly proclaim this mystery of our faith in song.

4) The Great Amen

The Eucharistic Prayer, proclaimed by the priest in the name of all, concludes with this third acclamation in which the whole assembly gives its assent to the prayer. Musical settings here are strong and inviting so that all may give voice to their faith in the transformative power of the Holy Spirit and to share in this great prayer of thanksgiving and praise.

II. Antiphons and Psalms

The psalms enjoy a special place in Christian worship because they are the songs from Scripture itself. Although written for prayer and worship services of the Hebrew people, early Christians continued to use them as their own. Psalms are a rich source of sung prayer. They reach into the depths of our experience of God and allow us to express a wide range of emotions.

The primary psalm during the Mass is the one sung during the Liturgy of the Word after the first reading. There is a particular psalm designated for each liturgy based on the readings of feast of the day. Certain psalms are designated for each season of the liturgical year and may be substituted for the psalm of the day. The responsorial form is normally used with a cantor or psalmist singing the verses and the rest of the assembly singing a refrain or antiphon between the verses.

Psalm texts are also recommended for the opening song, the song during the presentation and preparation of gifts, and for the song to accompany Communion distribution. Psalmody is also appropriate on special occasions when a song of thanksgiving may be sung after the period of silent prayer following the distribution of Holy Communion. The use of psalm texts works well during the times in the liturgy when we are processing, such as the procession to receive Holy Communion or when we are focused on watching the procession, when the gifts of bread and wine are brought to the altar. The cantor or choir can sing the verses while the rest of the assembly sings a familiar refrain or antiphon.

III. Refrains and Repeated Responses

The litany is another form of dialogue used during the liturgy in which the assembly sings a short response after each invocation usually sung by the deacon or the cantor. Litanies draw us into a deeper sense of prayer through the repetition of the same response, especially when the dialogue becomes rhythmic and constant. Some examples of litanies are the Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy of the Kyrie in the Introductory Rite of the Mass and the Lamb of God litany sung during the Breaking of the Bread in the Communion Rite.

IV. Hymns and Songs

Hymns are musical settings of poetic texts normally sung in a metrical form. The melody serves not only to clothe the text with beauty but also enriches the text and heightens its expression. Christians have been composing hymns from the earliest days. In fact, St. Paul sometimes quoted these hymns in his letters to the early Christians, such as in Philippians 2:6–11. It is common practice to interchange the term hymn with the term song, although song may indicate a more varied structure.

Hymns have continued to enjoy a special although limited place in Christian worship. The Gloria, for example, an ancient hymn of praise, is a designated hymn text that is sung or recited during the Mass on Sundays except during Advent and Lent and on special feasts during the entire year.

Suitable psalms, hymns or songs are also recommended to begin the liturgy, during the presentation/preparation of the gifts and to accompany the distribution of Holy Communion. Although there are no specific texts designated for this music, the liturgical season, particular feast or sacramental celebration, as well as, the specific directives governing each part of the Mass provide guidance in making the appropriate decisions.

Now that we have looked at the various musical forms used in the celebration of the liturgy and on the importance of these sung expressions of our prayer texts, the final part of this series will focus on the diverse musical roles in the liturgy.



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Part III: Musical Roles in the Liturgy

The Gathered Liturgical Assembly

The Second Vatican Council restored the importance of the participation of all the people in the liturgy and directed that they “should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs” (CSL, 30). The musical role of the assembly then is integral to the celebration.

Through common song that helps to unify us, we give thanks and praise, present petitions, and offer prayer to God who calls us together in Christ.

The Priest

The bishop or priest leads the assembly in its celebration and presides over it. “The importance of the priest’s participation in the liturgy, especially by singing, cannot be overemphasized. There is a renewed emphasis placed on the importance of singing the dialogues within the liturgy between the priest and the rest of the assembly. The priest sings the presidential prayers and dialogues of the liturgy according to his capabilities, and he encourages sung participation in the liturgy by his own example, joining in the congregational song” (SL, 19). His participation is contagious, drawing others into the song. In those sung parts of the Mass that include the entire assembly the priest participates fully but does not amplify his voice over the rest of the assembly in a dominant manner.

The musical role of the priest in the liturgy falls into four categories: sung dialogue with the rest of the assembly; presidential prayers such as the Opening prayer and Eucharistic Prayer; the proclamation of the Gospel on more solemn occasions in Masses without a deacon; and, singing with the rest of the assembly for the acclamations, chants, hymns and songs of the liturgy except for the Memorial Acclamation and the Great Amen (SL, 21).

The Deacon

The deacon of the liturgy engages in sung dialogue with the rest of the assembly, for example, in the Act of Penitence, the dialogue before and after the proclamation of the Gospel, and the Prayer of the Faithful. He may even chant the Gospel itself for the more important seasons and feasts of the liturgical year. The deacon, by his example of active participation in the sung parts of the Mass, also provides encouragement to the rest of the assembly to join in the singing.

The Cantor

The role of the cantor falls into three primary categories. The first and most important is the communication of certain musical texts of the liturgy. The responsorial psalm is the most significant of these texts and may even be sung by a specialized cantor called a psalmist. Like the lector, the cantor is called to drink deeply of God’s Word and to prepare the sung text in such a way that the words come alive. While proclaiming the Word of God in these verses of Scripture, the cantor at the same time draws the whole assembly into a sung response to that Word. The cantor brings not only vocal skills to this ministry but also an ability to engage the rest of the assembly in prayer.

Secondly, the cantor engages in certain sung dialogues with the rest of the assembly. Dialogue involves a back and forth exchange between the cantor and the rest of the assembly where the cantor sings the verses and the rest of the assembly is only responsible for the response or the refrain. This dialogue requires the cantor to not only sing his/her part but to also listen attentively to the response of the rest of the assembly. In addition to the responsorial psalm, other examples of this sung dialogue may include some settings of the *Glory to God*, the *Lamb of God* litany and the Communion Song.

Finally, the cantor provides the hospitality and assurance to the rest of the assembly that may be needed to ensure the full, conscious and active participation of all the people. This may include some verbal instructions and gestures of invitation, particularly for the dialogue prayer. Vocal support with the use of a microphone may be needed at times, but should not dominate the voice of the assembly.

In addition to these primary ministries, the cantor is sometimes called upon to perform other related responsibilities, such as welcoming the assembly, introducing the liturgy, rehearsing new music, and intoning the intentions of the Prayer of the Faithful.

The Choir

With a renewed emphasis on the participation of the entire assembly in the sung parts of the Mass, many thought that choirs were no longer needed for the liturgy. The past forty years have taught us otherwise. Parishes with strong assembly singing often have not one but several choirs serving the parish liturgies, composed of adults, children, senior citizens and young adults. These choirs utilize one or more musical idioms with a variety of instrumentation, such as traditional, contemporary, or those reflecting the rich cultural and ethnic heritage of the Church.

The role of the choir is multifaceted. First and foremost, the choir as part of the worshipping assembly supports the singing of the assembly. The choir may engage in dialogue with the rest of the assembly, singing the verses of a psalm or song while the rest of the assembly sings only the refrain or antiphon. In other parts of the Mass the choir may enhance or embellish the song of the assembly by the addition of harmonization. A hymn, for example, can be brought to a soaring, majestic conclusion by the use of an additional melody called a descant on the final verse. A choir can also alternate verses of a song or hymn with the rest of the assembly to provide an opportunity to expand on a musical setting.

In addition to its primary ministry of support, the choir may also serve the rest of the assembly by singing alone at certain times in the liturgy. The people may often be drawn into the spirit of prayer or experience the nuances of a particular liturgical season by listening to an appropriate choir selection at the preparation of the gifts or immediately before the opening procession.

Instrumentalists

Although the primary ministry of the instrumentalists is to lead the assembly's song and to accompany the verses of the cantor and the choir, instrumentalists may be called upon to use their gifts at other times in the liturgy. Instrumental selections can set a tone for the liturgy, establish the liturgical season of the year or provide the atmosphere for prayer and meditation. They can also accompany certain ritual actions, e.g. the sprinkling rite, or they can heighten the festivity of the most important seasons and feasts of the liturgical year. Whether leading the song of the assembly, accompanying the cantor or choir or providing instrumental selections, these musicians perform a ministerial function by serving the prayer of the people.

All these various musical roles within the liturgy present the opportunity for the gifts of music that we have been given by God to be used in service to the liturgy and to build up of the body of Christ in order that we may be sent out to be Christ's presence to the world.



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