

Note: The following is a summarization from the document, Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship. Issued by United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2007

WHY WE SING

God has bestowed upon his people the gift of song. God dwells within each human person, in the place where music takes its source. Indeed, God, the giver of song, is present whenever his people sing his praises.

THE CHURCH AT PRAYER

The Church is always at prayer in her ministers and her people, and that prayer takes various forms in her life. Authentic sacred music supports the Church's prayer by enriching its elements. What follows below are the principal persons and elements that should guide both the development and the use of sacred music in the Liturgy.

The Priest

The importance of the priest's participation in the Liturgy, especially by singing, cannot be overemphasized. 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.

The Deacon

After the priest, the deacon is first among the liturgical ministers, and he should provide an example by actively participating in the song of the gathered assembly. In accord with their abilities, deacons should be prepared to sing those parts of the Liturgy that belong to them.

The Gathered Liturgical Assembly

Singing is one of the primary ways that the assembly of the faithful participates actively in the Liturgy. The people are encouraged "to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalms, antiphons [and] hymns. . . ." The musical formation of the assembly must be a continuing concern in order to foster full, conscious, and active participation. So that the holy people may sing with one voice, the music must be within its members' capability.

MINISTERS OF LITURGICAL MUSIC

The Choir

The Second Vatican Council stated emphatically that choirs must be diligently promoted while ensuring that "the whole body of the faithful may be able to contribute that active participation which is rightly theirs. . . ." The choir must not minimize the musical participation of the faithful. The congregation commonly sings unison melodies, which are more suitable for generally unrehearsed community singing. This is the primary song of the Liturgy. Choir members, like all liturgical ministers, should exercise their ministry with evident faith and should participate in the entire liturgical celebration, recognizing that they are servants of the Liturgy and members of the gathered assembly. Music during liturgy is not performance, and should never be treated as such.

The Psalmist/Cantor

The psalmist, or cantor; proclaims the Psalm after the first reading and leads the gathered assembly in singing the refrain. The psalmist may also, when necessary, intone the Gospel Acclamation and verse.

The Director of Music Ministries, Organist and the Other Instrumentalists

Directors of music ministries and other lay ecclesial ministers exercise their role in relation both to the ordained and to the community of the faithful. Directors are collaborators with bishops, priests, and deacons, who exercise a pastoral ministry based on the Sacrament of Holy Orders, which configures them to Christ the Head and consecrates them for a role that is unique and necessary for the communion of the Church.

The primary role of the organist, other instrumentalists, or instrumental ensemble is to lead and sustain the singing of the assembly and of the choir, cantor, and psalmist, without dominating or overpowering them. There are also times when the organ or other instruments may be played alone, such as a prelude before the Mass, an instrumental piece during the Preparation of the Gifts, a recessional if there is no closing song, or a postlude following a closing song.

Although instruments are used in Christian worship primarily to lead and sustain the singing of assembly, choir, psalmist, and cantor, they may also, when appropriate, be played by themselves. Such instrumental music can assist the gathering assembly in preparing for worship in the form of a prelude. It may give voice to the sentiments of the human heart through pieces played during the Liturgy and postludes after the Liturgy. Instrumentalists are to remember that the Liturgy calls for significant periods of silent reflection. Silence need not always be filled.

Recorded Music

Recorded music lacks the authenticity provided by a living liturgical assembly gathered for the Sacred Liturgy. While recorded music might be used advantageously outside the Liturgy as an aid in the teaching of new music, it should not, as a general norm, be used within the Liturgy.

Sacred Silence

Music arises out of silence and returns to silence. God is revealed both in the beauty of song and in the power of silence. The Sacred Liturgy has its rhythm of texts, actions, songs, and silence. Silence in the Liturgy allows the community to reflect on what it has heard and experienced, and to open its heart to the mystery celebrated. Ministers and pastoral musicians should take care that the rites unfold with the proper ebb and flow of sound and silence. The importance of silence in the Liturgy cannot be overemphasized.

MUSIC AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE MASS

Those responsible for preparing music for the celebration of the Eucharist must have a clear understanding of the structure of the Liturgy. They must be aware of what is of primary importance. They should know the nature of each of the parts of the Mass and the relationship of each part to the overall rhythm of the liturgical action.

The Entrance Chant or Song

After the entire liturgical assembly has been gathered, an Entrance chant or song is sung as the procession with the priest, deacon, and ministers enters the church. “The purpose of this chant is to open the celebration, foster the unity of those who have been gathered, introduce their thoughts to the mystery of the liturgical season or festivity, and accompany the procession of the priest and ministers.”

The Penitential Act – Lord Have Mercy

After the greeting, the Act of Penitence follows as the entire assembly prays a formula of general confession. When the priest or deacon sings or recites (“You were sent to heal the contrite of heart: Lord, have mercy . . .”), the choir does not sing this in repetition.

“The Gloria is a very ancient and venerable hymn in which the Church, gathered together in the Holy Spirit, glorifies and entreats God the Father and the Lamb. It is sung or said on Sundays outside the Seasons of Advent and Lent, on solemnities and feasts, and at special celebrations of a more solemn character.”

The Collect

The priest then invites all to pray and, after a brief silence, sings or says the Collect.

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

The Responsorial Psalm

“As a rule the Responsorial Psalm should be sung.” Preferably, the Psalm is sung responsorially: “the psalmist, or cantor, sings the psalm verses and the whole congregation joins in by singing the response.” If this is not possible, the Psalm is sung completely without an intervening response by the community. If it is not possible for the Psalm to be sung, the response alone may be sung, while the lector reads the intervening verses of the Psalm “in a manner conducive to meditation on the word of God.”

The Gospel Acclamation

In the Gospel Acclamation, the assembled faithful welcome “the Lord who is about to speak to them.” The cantor may intone the Acclamation, which is repeated by the whole assembly. After the cantor or choir sings the verse, the entire assembly again sings the Acclamation.

During most of the church year, the Alleluia with the proper verse serves as the Gospel Acclamation. During the season of Lent, alternate acclamations with their proper verse are used, as found in the Lectionary for Mass. The Gospel Acclamation may be omitted when it is not sung.

The Gospel

“Of all the rites connected with the Liturgy of the Word, the reverence due to the Gospel reading must receive special attention.”

THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

The Liturgy of the Eucharist is made up of three main parts: the Preparation of the Gifts, the Eucharistic Prayer, and the Communion Rite.

The Preparation of the Gifts: Offertory Procession

After the altar has been prepared, gifts of bread and wine are brought to the priest or deacon by members of the liturgical assembly. This procession is accompanied by an Offertory chant or song, “which continues at least until the gifts have been placed on the altar.”

Even when there is no procession with the gifts, singing may still accompany the rites at the Offertory. Instrumental music is also appropriate.

The Eucharistic Prayer

The Eucharistic Prayer is the center and summit of the entire celebration. Joining the people with himself, the priest prays the Eucharistic Prayer in the name of the entire assembly “to God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.” Through the Eucharistic Prayer “the entire congregation of the faithful should join itself with Christ in confessing the great deeds of God and in the offering of sacrifice. The Eucharistic Prayer demands that all listen to it with reverence and in silence,” giving voice to their interior participation by joining in the Eucharistic acclamations.

The Eucharistic Prayer is a single liturgical act, consisting of several parts: an introductory dialogue, the thanksgiving or preface, the Sanctus, the calling down of the Holy Spirit (epiclesis), the institution narrative, the Memorial Acclamation, the anamnesis, the intercessions, and the doxology with its Amen.

In order to make clear the ritual unity of the Eucharistic Prayer, it is recommended that there be a stylistic unity to the musical elements of the prayer, especially the Sanctus, the Memorial Acclamation, and the Great Amen.

The people take part in the Eucharistic Prayer by listening attentively to the words sung or spoken by the priest and joining their hearts and minds to the actions of the prayer. Their voices should be joined together in the acclamations of the Eucharistic Prayer, including the Sanctus, the great cosmic acclamation of praise; the Memorial Acclamation, by which the faithful participate in keeping the memory of Christ’s Paschal Mystery; and the Amen that follows the concluding doxology, by which they give assent to the entire prayer. These acclamations should be sung, especially on Sundays and solemnities.

The Communion Rite

The high point of the Communion Rite is the reception of Holy Communion. This is preceded by rites that prepare the faithful to receive the Lord’s Body and Blood as spiritual food.

The Lord's Prayer

The rites of preparation for the reception of Holy Communion begin with the Lord's Prayer. When the Lord's Prayer is sung, the doxology should also be sung by all. If possible, the invitation and embolism should also be sung by the priest.

The Sign of Peace

The brief period of time needed for the exchange of the Sign of Peace must not be protracted by the singing of a song.

The Fraction Rite and the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God)

The supplicatory chant Agnus Dei (Lamb of God) accompanies the Fraction Rite. It is, "as a rule, sung by the choir or cantor with the congregation responding; or it is, at least, recited aloud.

The Communion Chant or Song

"While the priest is receiving the Sacrament, the Communion chant [or song] is begun. Its purpose 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." The singing begins immediately and continues "for as long as the Sacrament is being administered to the faithful." The Communion chant or song may be sung by the people with choir or cantor, or by the choir alone. Because the Communion chant expresses the unity of those processing and receiving the Holy Sacrament, communal singing is commendable. The singing of the people should be preeminent.

In selecting a Communion song suitable for the Eucharistic banquet in which God's blessings are bestowed so abundantly, one should look for texts that have themes of joy, wonder, unity, gratitude, and praise. Following ancient Roman liturgical tradition, the Communion song might reflect themes of the Gospel reading of the day. It is also appropriate to select a Communion processional song that reflects the liturgical action, i.e., eating and drinking the Body and Blood of Christ.

As a processional piece, the Communion chant or song presents particular challenges. The faithful are encouraged to grasp ever more deeply the essentially communitarian nature of the Communion procession. In order to foster participation of the faithful with "unity of voices," it is recommended that songs are chosen with easily memorized refrains. When the Communion procession is lengthy, more than one piece of music might be desirable.

If there is a hymn or song after Communion, the Communion music should be ended "in a timely manner." A period of silent reflection for the entire congregation after the reception of Communion is also appropriate.

"When the distribution of Communion is finished, as circumstances suggest, the priest and faithful spend some time praying privately. If desired, a psalm or other canticle of praise or a hymn may also be sung by the entire congregation." The song after Communion should focus the assembly on the mystery of the Holy Communion in which it participates, and it should never draw undue attention to the choir or other musicians.

The Concluding Rites

Although it is not necessary to sing a recessional hymn, when it is a custom, all may join in a hymn or song after the dismissal. When a closing song is used, the procession of ministers should be arranged in such a way that it finishes during the final stanza. At times, e.g., if there has been a song after Communion, it may be appropriate to choose an option other than congregational song for the recessional. Other options include a choral or instrumental piece or, particularly during Lent, silence.