

Music in the Liturgy: Let All God's People Sing!



Singing is a powerful way of uniting a group of individuals into a single body. The singing of the national anthem at a sports event, for example, can unite thousands of strangers in a stadium into a single body, standing together in a common gesture of respect and honor.

Similarly, communal singing during the Mass has a way of gathering the many individuals present and making them into a visible expression of what our faith proclaims: that we are one body, united in Christ, offering a single prayer of praise and thanksgiving to God.

The Importance of Singing

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal recalls the old proverb, "One who sings prays twice." This reminds us that our music and singing at worship is not entertainment or background music for our prayer. Our singing is our prayer. Putting our prayer into music not only helps to unite us in the prayer we make, it also gives a unique expression to our prayer that words alone cannot achieve.

Consider, for example, the Alleluia we sing before hearing the Gospel. Our Alleluia is an expression of praise to the Lord who is present to us in the proclamation and hearing of the Gospel. Merely saying this acclamation of praise does not easily convey the joy and strength of our prayer at that point. The Gloria that we sing in the introductory rites of the Mass is another example of a hymn of praise—made to be sung, not recited.

Music is so important to our liturgical prayer that the General Instruction of the Roman Missal says very strongly, "every care must be taken that singing by the ministers and the people is not absent in celebrations that occur on Sundays and holy days of obligation." (#40) We are heirs to a rich repertoire of chant, polyphony, sacred music, and hymns that goes back to the earliest times. And since the Second Vatican Council, when the use of the vernacular was introduced into the liturgy, composers have continually been creating new music for use in worship as well. Our experience of the liturgy has been enriched by a variety of musical styles, and the contributions of diverse cultures have been a wonderful gift.

Who Should Sing?

All who participate in the liturgy are expected to sing. No doubt there are some Catholics who feel that they don't have a beautiful singing voice. Others may feel uncomfortable singing together. But the voices we have are gifts from God. God does not hold auditions for prayer; God simply asks us to use the voice he's given us. When everyone sings, we can truly feel the power of the liturgy encircling the assembly. We owe it to ourselves and to one another to participate as fully as we can to make our experience of worship as rich as it can be.

To help our sung prayer, there are cantors and choirs who lead us. Their role is not to take our part away, but to support our singing. The choir or cantor can provide embellishment to what the congregation is singing. At times, the choir may offer music that fosters a more meditative mood, enriching our prayer. The ideal cantor and choir never dominate the liturgy or become a focus themselves, but by serving the community's worship help draw the assembly more deeply into prayer.

What Should We Sing?

The Church has a preference for singing those parts of the Mass that are more important. Besides the prayers that are proper to the priest, the most commonly sung parts of the Mass are the Gloria, the Responsorial Psalm, the Gospel Acclamation, the Sanctus or Holy, Holy, the Memorial Acclamation, the Great Amen, the Lord's Prayer, and the Agnus Dei or Lamb of God. Hymns or chants at the entry of the procession, at the preparation of the gifts, during the communion procession, and at the conclusion of the Mass are commonly sung in most parishes.

The music is carefully chosen with respect to the liturgy of the day and the place in the liturgy where it is used. Sometimes worshipers wonder why we have to sing all the verses of a hymn. But when we consider the many purposes of singing, we understand. The opening hymn, for example, does not simply give the congregation something to do while the ministers make their way to the front of the church. One of its primary purposes is to help gather and unite the many individuals into one body as we prepare to celebrate the Eucharist. Also, the verses of the hymn all fit together as one composition. The meaning and message of a hymn might be lost if we omit verses. In any case, our hymn singing is our sung prayer.

Pastoral Considerations

Every parish needs to consider the role and place of music and singing in the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. Trained music ministers are all the more important because the Church does not want to lose her heritage of Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony. The General Instruction, like the

documents of the Second Vatican Council, urges that all Catholics be able to chant the commonly sung parts of the Mass in Latin.

The General Instruction gives clear and sound direction about the part that music must play in our weekly celebration of the Eucharist. In a poetic way, the instruction notes that the intense union between God and the Church in the celebration of the Eucharist can be described as a union between lovers whose nature is best expressed in song (#39). As we gather to hear God's Word, to eat the Bread of Life and drink from the Cup of Salvation, our prayer must reflect the joy and depth of this profound mystery of faith. In doing so, we can follow the instruction of Saint Paul, who told the Church to "sing together psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Colossians 3:16) as we wait for the coming in glory of the one whose death we proclaim.



The General Instruction notes the following songs and acclamations that are normally sung:

- Opening song (#48)
- Kyrie (#52)
- Gloria (#53)
- Responsorial Psalm (#61)
- Gospel Acclamation (#62)
- Song at the preparation of gifts (#74)
- Sanctus, Memorial Acclamation, and Great Amen (#79, #151)
- The Lord's Prayer (#81)
- Lamb of God (#83)
- Song to accompany the communion procession (#86)
- Optional psalm, canticle of praise, or hymn after communion (#88).