



Music in the Liturgy

Liturgical music is the music used in the celebration of official public worship of the Church. The Bishops of Vatican II noted that music is more sacred the more it is an integral part of the liturgical action. At times, a single word, verse or melody will reach the heart of the assembly. In that instant, the group finds itself in communion with each other: one heart, one mind, one voice.

A Glimpse of the History of Liturgical Music

Music was originally an integral part of the Christian liturgy, which evolved from the Jewish worship tradition. In the synagogue, it is likely that scriptural readings were sung, by invitation to particular members, without accompaniment and that a prayer leader chanted part of the prayer to which all the people responded in chant and song. A characteristic of early Christian liturgy was full and active participation, including musical.

From about the fourth to the nineteenth centuries, several factors led to massive changes in church worship: the status of Christianity as a powerful religion in the West, the rise of clericalism and the diminishing of the role of the assembly, a poverty of understanding of the nature of liturgy, the adoption of Latin, the temptation to use musical specialists ... The assembly role became that of spectator and listener to professional singers and musicians and (usually male only) choirs whose repertoire had little to do with the liturgy being celebrated or was very ornate and impossible for the ordinary person to sing.

In the Middle Ages, the community felt the need for religious songs, so for the first time in Christianity, non-liturgical songs in the vernacular grew up. They were

initially sung at various devotions or on pilgrimage. Later, in the Latin “Low Mass”, such hymns became the only permitted hymns in the local language.

Benedictine (beginning in the nineteenth century), papal (in the early twentieth) and Vatican II reforms have refocused attention on the purposes of music in the liturgy.

The Role of Liturgical Music

One cannot find
anything more
religious and more
joyful in sacred
celebrations than a
whole congregation
expressing its faith
and devotion in
song.

Musicam Sacram 16

- Liturgical music is central to liturgy. It is an essential part of the public prayer of the Christian community. We need to sing the liturgy (e.g. sing the parts of the Mass), not sing at the liturgy.
- Music has a ministerial role. It must not dominate the ritual but serve, helping the faithful express and share their faith and strengthen commitment to their faith.
- Music unifies, uniting the gathered faithful to Christ and each other. It draws the faithful into the centre of worship, into full, conscious and active participation in a communal ritual action.
- At times, music makes the ritual event (e.g. song of praise at the conclusion of the rite of reconciliation). At other times, music accompanies:
 - an action (e.g. during the presentation of the gifts)
 - words (e.g. the Gloria)
 - an action and words (e.g. the Lamb of God whilst the large host is being broken for distribution).
- Effective liturgical music contributes to good celebrations which “foster and nourish faith” (STL, 5). It can be evaluated according to musical, liturgical and pastoral standards.

Effective Liturgical Music

The musical judgement

“Only artistically sound music will be effective and endure over time.” STL, 135.

Guiding questions:

- Is the music technically correct, clear and complete in its structure and form?
- Are the phrases, intervals and harmonies singable?
- Is the piece aesthetically pleasing, captivating, provocative and engaging?
- Is the music expressively dynamic, emphatic and rhythmical?

The liturgical judgement

“Faith grows when it is well expressed in celebration. Good celebrations can foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken it.” STL, 5.

Guiding questions:

- Is the music capable of meeting the structural and textual requirements set forth in the liturgical books for this rite (STL, 127)?
- Does the music and text express the intent and the spirit of the rite for which it is proposed?
- Does the music support the posture and action of the assembly at the time of the singing?
- Is the principle of “Progressive Solemnity” being honoured? (see below)
- Are the cantor, choir and instrumentalists located as members of the assembly, yet having their special function stand out clearly?

The pastoral judgement

Does [the music] strengthen [the community’s] formation in faith by opening their hearts to the mystery being celebrated on this occasion or in this season? Is it capable of expressing the faith that God has planted in their hearts and summoned them to celebrate? STL, 130

Guiding questions:

- Is the text appropriate?
- Does music enable the assembly to express their faith, in this place, in this age, in this culture?
- Do the music and the instruments correspond to the sacred character of the celebration and place of worship?
- Is the choice of style in the music sensitive to the cultural and social characteristics of the faithful (their age, culture and education)?
- Is the entire program of music for a liturgy unified, strong in composition and rhythm, supportive of the ritual and expressive of the people?

The Role of Music Ministers

- The whole assembly has a ministry of music. The faithful will sing well if the music chosen is within their range, capability and culture, so that they feel confident to celebrate well.
- Pastoral musicians are official ministers of the church and need to observe the guidelines for liturgical music.

They also need to:

- be aware they are leaders of music, not solo performers
 - realise their choice of music must complement the liturgy
 - be aware that, in singing the psalm, they share with Readers the role of proclaiming the Word
 - know their music.
- The choir has a two-fold task: to ensure the parts proper to it are sung “becomingly”, thus adding beauty and solemnity to the liturgy; and to assist and encourage the singing of the assembly.

To do these, choirs will:

- support the assembly in unison singing
 - assist the assembly to learn new songs
 - enrich assembly singing (perhaps adding two or four part harmony part way through a hymn)
 - sing music the assembly cannot yet manage (e.g. motet, or response in another language)
- The cantor leads and supports the assembly in singing. S/he may:
 - introduce and teach new music (e.g. refrains, Mass settings, hymns)
 - encourage the assembly sensitively and appropriately
 - use voice, expressions and gestures to encourage people to sing, without attempting to dominate the song
 - sing the psalm verses, in dialogue with the assembly.
 - Organists and instrumentalists need to be competent musicians on their particular instrument. Instrumental music is not an adornment or an embroidering of the liturgy, but ministerial, helping the assembly to capture the essence of the liturgical moment.

These musicians have two functions:

- accompanying choral and assembly singing
- playing alone, for example a soft background to a spoken psalm, or during the presentation of the gifts... Appropriate solo playing may precede or follow the liturgy.

What should be sung?

Texts should be those approved for use in the Liturgy. See the table below for the relative importance of singing parts of the liturgy.

The more stars, the more important it is to sing. All music and song needs to be appropriate to the action and match the length of the action, e.g. the Lamb of God needs to be sung until all the large hosts are broken (the Fraction Rite).

RITUAL STRUCTURE	Priority
INTRODUCTORY RITES	
Gathering Song	****
Lord Have Mercy/Sprinkling	***
Glory to God	***
LITURGY OF THE WORD	
Psalm	****
Gospel Acclamation	*****
Profession of Faith	*
General Intercessions	*
LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST	
Preparation of Gifts	
Procession with Gifts	**
Eucharistic Prayer	
Acclamations:	
Holy, Holy	*****
Memorial Acclamation	*****
Great Amen	*****
Communion Rite	
Lord's Prayer	**
Doxology	**
Lamb of God	***
Communion	****
Song of Thanksgiving (after Communion)	*
CONCLUDING RITES	
Blessing	*
Recessional	*

Helpful Hints for Musicians and Singers

*(with grateful acknowledgement to
Green Bay Diocese, U.S.A.)*

- Pray as you sing, pray as you play**
 Augustine said that those who sing pray twice. The gift of singing and musical expressions of faith need to be fostered and encouraged in every possible way, especially in the promotion of assembly singing.
- Know the liturgy**
 Pastoral musicians need to understand the meaning, structure and flow of liturgy to enable them to support liturgical transitions and climaxes, and in choosing suitable hymns, if these are to be sung.
- Understand your role**
 The primary function as a cantor, choir leader or accompanist is to encourage the assembly to sing. Music leaders are not performers, and yet they need to know their music and be prepared as if they were.
- Enhance assembly singing, don't replace it**
 Choirs can be a tremendous asset to assembly singing. While there are times for choirs to sing alone, for example at the preparation of the gifts, their main function is to serve the assembly by joining with them in song, not performing or singing the assembly's music for them.
- Select music that is both "old" and "new"**
 While musicians may get tired of doing "the same old songs", it is important to remember that strong assembly singing is born out of familiarity with what the people know. Help them feel good about their ability to sing by choosing music they know. Introduce new music slowly, and repeat it for several weekends or over a liturgical season.
- Step back from the microphone**
 A gesture of invitation is all the assembly needs to enter into sung prayer, so during familiar songs, musicians need to step away from the microphone and let the assembly hear itself sing.
- Unify your repertoire**
 The entire repertoire of songs, hymns and acclamations should be familiar to the whole parish. Someone who regularly attends the vigil Mass will then be able to participate in the music at the 10.30am Sunday Mass.
- Celebrate the seasons of the year**
 The liturgical year is rich in its power to move and transform us. Become familiar with the celebrations of the seasons of the Church year. Select music that

speaks of the season and is simple enough for an assembly to learn easily. This will help to nourish a spirituality rooted in Church feasts and seasons.

- **Honour “Progressive Solemnity”**

The more solemn or special the celebration, the more sung or “involved” the liturgy will be. Compare a weekday with a Sunday liturgy, or the Easter Vigil with the Second Sunday of Lent.

- **Respect silences**

Participation in liturgy occurs by word, action, posture, gesture and silence. The proper place of silence must not be neglected, and musicians need to resist the temptation to cover every moment with music.

- **Know that it’s more than four songs**

Liturgists are clear about the primary focus for liturgical music (see What needs to be sung?). A strong singing assembly is well versed in at least a few different Mass settings. When planning and introducing new music, spend as much time on the Mass settings as on new hymns for the gathering, preparation, communion and closing songs.

- **Be adventurous**

Occasionally, try a new musical style. Musical instruments could be added to settings, voices alternated in hymns or the music sung unaccompanied (a capella).

A Checklist

In preparation, have you considered:

- the scriptures for this Sunday or celebration
- the liturgical action
- the liturgical season
- the attitude of praise and thanksgiving
- the repertoire of the assembly
- the capabilities of the music ministers
- the instruments available
- the solemnity of the occasion
- the availability of printed musical resources
- copyright permission

In review, consider: have you helped the whole assembly to pray in song?

Basic Music Resources:

Vatican II. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium) Chapter VI, 1963.

ICEL. Musicam Sacram. An Instruction of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, 1967.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal, final text with application for Australia, St Paul’s Publications, 2012.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).
Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship, 2007.
USCCB. Music in Catholic Worship, 1972.
USCCB. Liturgical Music Today, 1982.

Further Reading:

Reid, H. Preparing Music for Celebration. Canada: E.J. Dwyer, 1996.

Worship Department, Diocese of Green Bay. Guidelines and Resources for Musicians. www.gbdioc.org

Musical Selection Suggestions:

Diocese of Wollongong:
www.liturgydow.org.au/suggestions.html

Living Liturgy, Diocese of Sale:
www.sale.catholic.org.au/liturgy/living-liturgy.html

National Association of Pastoral Musicians (USA)
www.npm.org/Planning/index.html

Setting the Tone, Contemporary Music Ideas for Liturgy:
<http://voicesasone.com/blog/>

The Sunday Website of Saint Louis University:
<http://liturgy.slu.edu>

Other Resources (via subscription):

Celebration Magazine:
<http://celebrationpublications.org/index>

The Summit: <http://www.cam.org.au/evangelisation/Resources/The-Summit-Liturgical-Journal>

Pastoral Liturgy: University of Notre Dame, Perth

Liturgy Help: <http://public.liturgyhelp.com.au/>

