

WHAT DOES THE CHURCH SAY ABOUT MUSIC IN THE LITURGY?

In 1903, Pope St. Pius X issued an instruction on sacred music. In it he states that the “active participation of the faithful...in the most holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church” is the “foremost and indispensable source...of the Christian spirit.” The Pope goes on to state that music is a major contributor to active participation in the liturgy – that the more closely music supports the liturgical action, the deeper the participation of all. The connection between music and our participation in the liturgy had never before then been pointed out so clearly, and this insight of St. Pius X quickly became an important inspiration for the 20th century liturgical reforms that reached their culmination with Vatican II.

CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY (*SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM*)

In 1963, the Second Vatican Council issued the first of its major documents, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. In the sixth of its seven chapters, entitled *Sacred Music*, it states that the “musical tradition of the Church...forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy.” Echoing Pius X, the *Constitution on the Liturgy* describes how music serves the liturgy, stating it “adds delight to prayer, fosters unity of minds, [and] confers greater solemnity upon the sacred rites.”

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* further states that the inherited tradition of liturgical music should be preserved and fostered while, at the same time, composers and poets are encouraged to produce new sacred music that makes use of the faithful’s own cultural traditions. The pipe organ is praised as particularly suited to the liturgy, but the use of other instruments which can contribute to prayer are welcomed as well. In all cases, the overriding aim of liturgical music is that “the whole body of the faithful may be able to contribute that active participation which is rightly theirs.”

INSTRUCTION: *MUSICAM SACRAM* (1967)

Following Vatican II, the Holy See issued the instruction *Musicam sacram* which describes in specific terms how the broad ideals of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* were to be put into effect. Between 1963 and the early 1970s, the Mass, the other sacraments, and the Liturgy of the Hours were all undergoing revision to clarify their most essential elements and make possible more effective participation in them.

In addition to praising Gregorian chant, *Musicam sacram* states that “sacred popular music” may be considered “liturgical.” This is crucial to the understanding we have of song in our liturgy today. The songs we sing, at the Entrance or at the Communion of the Mass for example, are not just songs we occupy ourselves with while the liturgy is taking place. They are the liturgy itself, and serve specific functions within the liturgical action. Songs must therefore be chosen and led wisely so that they achieve their true purpose in the voices and hearts of the all the faithful who gather to celebrate together. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* states in detail the purpose of each of the larger musical elements.

GENERAL INSTRUCTION OF THE ROMAN MISSAL

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) provides the detailed instructions for celebrating the Mass. It accompanied the revision of the Mass issued in 1970 and has been updated several times, most recently for the U.S. in 2010. The GIRM affirms the great value of singing; it emphasizes that songs must be chosen that all can sing and derive spiritual benefit from: “Great importance should ... be attached to the use of singing in the celebration of the Mass, with due consideration for the culture of peoples and abilities of each liturgical assembly.” (GIRM §40)

The Entrance Chant*

The GIRM states of the song at the Entrance: “Its purpose is to open the celebration, foster the unity of those who have been gathered, introduce their thoughts to the mystery of the liturgical time or festivity, and accompany the procession of the Priest and ministers.” (GIRM §47) The GIRM states that the song may be taken from one of the official liturgical chant collections, or may be “another liturgical chant that is suited to the sacred action, the day, or the time of year.”

The Communion Chant*

The GIRM says the purpose of the Communion song is: “to express the spiritual union of the communicants by means of the unity of their voices, to show gladness of heart, and to bring out more clearly the ‘communitarian’ character of the procession to receive the Eucharist.” (GIRM §86) Like the Entrance Chant, the Communion Chant can be chosen from an official chant collection or it can be another suitable liturgical song.

The close connection between the Communion song and the Communion procession is shown by the GIRM's precise indication of when the song begins and ends: "While the Priest is receiving the Sacrament, the Communion Chant is begun...The singing is prolonged for as long as the Sacrament is being administered to the faithful." (GIRM §86)

*Although the official English translation of the GIRM uses the word "chant," the underlying Latin term "cantus" means "song" generally, and though *cantus* can include "chant" (just as "song" can) it does not itself carry the specific style implication of the English word "chant."

SING TO THE LORD: MUSIC IN DIVINE WORSHIP*

In 2007, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*. These guidelines for liturgical celebrations in the U.S. are not only based on the Church documents like the *Constitution on the Liturgy* and the GIRM, but also on the forty-five years of musical development and experience with participatory liturgy that had taken place since Vatican II.

Sing to the Lord begins with a lyrical reflection on liturgical music, entitled "Why We Sing," whose second paragraph runs thus:

A cry from deep within our being, music is a way for God to lead us to the realm of higher things. As St. Augustine says, "Singing is for the one who loves." Music is therefore a sign of God's love for us and of our love for him. In this sense, it is very personal. But unless music sounds, it is not music, and whenever it sounds, it is accessible to others. By its very nature song has both an individual and a communal dimension. Thus, it is no wonder that singing together in church expresses so well the sacramental presence of God to his people.

**Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* is available from the USCCB at <http://store.usccb.org/sing-to-the-lord-p/7-022.htm> and from online book retailers.