

How Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it.

Singing the Liturgy



Office of
Evangelization and Worship

It has often been said of Roman Catholics that, in comparison to other religious bodies, they are reluctant to sing in church. Indeed, some years ago a Catholic author, Thomas Day, wrote a book on that very topic: *Why Catholics Can't Sing*. We did not come out of those pages looking or sounding very good, unfortunately.

It is true, not all of us are very emotionally expressive when we sing our liturgy. Perhaps that is because we don't like the way we sound, or, for so many centuries, other folks did our singing for us: choirs or soloists.

But this is not true for the entire history of our Church. For thousands of years the Church has been singing. Indeed, some would say ever since the moment of resurrection of Christ.

The Vatican II *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* tells us that our musical tradition "is of inestimable value, greater than any other art...because sacred song is closely bound to the (prayer) text" (CSL 112). We sing what we pray, or as Saint Augustine put it so eloquently, "when we sing we pray twice."

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) also stresses the importance of song when it insists that when we sing we recognize ourselves all the better as a praying community. We do all this together, no matter how we may sound! We support one another with our voices. There is always room for soloists, of course, but not when the assembly is singing in unison!

So, how do we know what to sing? There is a guideline for this called "progressive solemnity." This simply means that some parts of the Mass are more important than others and therefore they should be sung.

Which parts? First of all, the Church tells us that the Gospel Acclamation (Alleluia) and the acclamations within the Eucharistic prayer are most important because these parts of the Mass proclaim Christ's presence in word and sacrament. These acclamations should be sung at every Mass (even on weekdays).

Ranking next in solemnity are two processional hymns: The Gathering Song and the Communion Song. These are particularly important because the Gathering Song helps to bond us as a community at the very beginning of the liturgy. The Communion Song helps us to recognize our union with Christ and with one another as we approach the altar.



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Following next in solemnity is the Responsorial Psalm. It is a sung response to the words of scriptures that have just been proclaimed. The psalm changes at each Mass to accommodate the accompanying scripture passage. To simplify things, many communities choose to sing a seasonal hymn which accentuates that particular season of the liturgical year being celebrated.

Further down the list are so-called “ordinary chants,” such as the Gloria, the Lord’s Prayer, the Lamb of God and the Profession of Faith. These may or may not be sung, depending on the solemnity of the Mass and the nature of the liturgical season.

Finally, there are supplementary songs or hymns which are sung at various times in the liturgy: During the preparation of the gifts, a song of praise *after* communion and a recessional song as the assembly is sent forth from the church in mission. These are considered of lesser importance and may or may not be sung depending on the custom of the individual community.

Finally, it should be stressed that Catholics do not so much sing songs *at* Mass as they sing *the* Mass. What is of ultimate importance is that our singing gives voice to our desire to pray and worship our God as a community. In all this, of course, we have the model of Jesus on the night of the Last Supper when he and his disciples sang a psalm as they left the upper room and made their way to the Mount of Olives.