

Why Should We Have Music at All Masses?

Cultural traditions influence how people celebrate various events in their lives, major and minor, joyful and mournful. Such traditions also influence the extent to which music and song are used at celebrations. In many parts of the world, any type of communal gathering invariably includes music and song. But unlike people of some other nations, many Americans do not sing publicly except at birthday celebrations. It is becoming more and more common at sporting events to find the national anthem being sung by a soloist rather than by all present as was common several decades ago. As a result, liturgical music and congregational singing may seem unnecessary and even distracting to many at Mass. Yet, there are Catholics whose cultural background leads them to be very comfortable with public singing, for example, those of German, Polish, or African-American heritages, and parishes associated with such ethnic groups are often well-known for music-filled liturgies.

Since its initial publication in 1969, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) has encouraged singing at Mass (cf. 2002 GIRM n. 40, “great importance should be attached to the use of singing in the celebration of Mass”), thereby reiterating the advice found in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL) of the Second Vatican Council (cf. n. 113, “Liturgical action is given a more noble form when sacred rites are solemnized in song”). The GIRM emphasizes the long tradition of song in liturgical celebrations by referring to St. Augustine’s words, “Singing is for lovers” and an ancient proverb, “One who sings well prays twice” (2002 GIRM, n. 39).

Those who have participated in a Eucharist celebrated in an Eastern Catholic Church learn that Catholics in other parts of the world may sing virtually every word of the liturgy, including the scriptural readings, and this is done at every liturgy, Sunday or weekday. A proper religious “celebration,” according to our scriptural heritage, means that we should “shout joyfully to the Lord, . . . come before him with

joyful song” (Ps 100:1-2) and “sing a new song to the Lord” (Ps 149:11).

Reiterating the CSL, “Music in Catholic Worship” (MCW), a 1972 statement of the US Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, reminds us that “music is of preeminent importance” in liturgical celebrations, and that “it forms a necessary or integral part” of the liturgy (n. 23, cf. CS n. 112). Since music is “integral” to the liturgy, liturgical documents presuppose the presence of music at more solemn celebrations.

The references to singing during Mass found in various documents must always be interpreted in light of the foundational vision of the Mass as a joyful celebration, by the people of God, of God’s love, particularly as shown in the paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection. Decisions about where to include music at Mass and how much music to include should never be made apart from this foundational vision of what the Mass ultimately is.



The revised 2002 GIRM gives added encouragement to including music and singing at Mass, particularly at all festive liturgies. A new sentence recommends, “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” (2002 GIRM, n. 40). This exhortation is consistent with a long tradition of including music at religious rites, primarily because such rites are always “celebrations” of the people of God rather than merely the private prayer of the priest celebrant.

Communities that have not included music at every Sunday Mass may need to re-evaluate their practices after prayerful reflection on pertinent texts in both the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy and the GIRM (both old and revised versions). There are various related issues that cannot be overlooked, for example, the necessity of having song-leaders and musicians, and of offering them appropriate compensation for their services. Other issues that may affect decisions related to liturgical music include the number in

attendance and the time of the Mass. It could be that questions about music at Masses may lead to a reflection about broader issues related to the number and schedule of weekend Masses.

The Eucharist is “the center of the whole Christian life” (2002 GIRM, n. 16). Because the Eucharist is so central, it behooves us to celebrate it appropriately, especially on Sundays and major feasts. We gather at Mass to express and nourish our faith (cf. MCW, n.1, 2002 GIRM n. 20). Joyful celebrations of the Eucharist, with music and song, can only help build up the faith of those assembled as they give thanks and praise to a loving God (cf. MCW, n.6).

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Liturgical Catechesis on the Eucharist

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