

Liturgical Q & A:

The Importance of Music at Every Mass

Question: In the old days, we didn't have music at every Mass. Why is it important to have music at every Mass?

Response: In our post-Vatican II Church, a Mass without singing is like a solar system without the sun. Before Vatican II, there were two kinds of masses: "low" Masses, in which the ordinary parts (like the *Gloria* and the *Sanctus*), as well as the "proper" parts (like the Opening Prayer) were recited; and "high" Masses, in which these parts were sung. In those days, if you sang one such part of the Mass, you had to sing all of them. That is not the rule today, but certain parts of the Eucharist should preferably be sung.

"In choosing the parts actually to be sung, however, preference must be given to those that are of greater importance and especially to those to be sung by the priest or the deacon or the reader, with the people responding, [like the *Holy, Holy; Memorial Acclamation* and *Great Amen*] or by the priest and people together [like the *Gathering Song*]."

So says the revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. (#40) On weekdays it is not always necessary to sing all the parts that can or should be sung, but singing the *Gospel Acclamation* and the acclamations to the Eucharistic Prayer is more important than singing anything else. The revised *General Instruction* reminds us that "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.**" (no. 40) "Quiet" Masses on these major feast days contradict this provision in the *General Instruction*.

Why is liturgical singing so important? One reason: singing well is praying twice, as Saint Augustine is believed to have said. Singing is not something tacked on to our

worship, a kind of decoration to make our liturgies more beautiful or inspiring. Singing **is** prayer; singing is a basic ingredient of liturgical prayer, not an optional luxury. Singing is of the essence of liturgy. We learn our theology, our Christian faith, by singing it, just as children learn their ABC's by singing them. Another reason: when we fell strongly about something, we sing. Singing has the power to transcend mere words in communicating our feelings. And so, when we fell strongly about something, we sing. Witness national anthems, love songs, or even singing commercials. Can you imagine thousands of veterans at a convention standing and reciting "The Star-Spangled Banner"? Or can you imagine your friends reciting the "Happy Birthday" song to you on your birthday? Remember how the Blessed Virgin Mary sang when she learned that she was to become the Mother of our God: "My soul gives glory to the Lord."



The hymns we sing are "praises to God with singing," as Saint Augustine called them. In our singing we make melody to the Lord, in

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words and tunes hallowed by centuries of use, in words and tunes from our time. But we also sing to one another: as we sing together, we profess our faith, we express our hopes that God's plan for this world be realized, we rededicate ourselves to loving care for one another. Thus our hymns have a social as well as a divine direction.

Singing shows that liturgy is something we do together; singing makes us part of a communal action that is older and larger than ourselves, for all cultures have expressed prayer through singing. The liturgical assembly's singing is an action of which each of us is a necessary part. But sometimes singing at parish Masses runs the risk of becoming something that a few people --- organists and pianists; instrumentalists, cantors and choirs --- do for us. Yet singing is what we, the many, should do ourselves, by ourselves and for ourselves. Certainly we welcome the assistance in our sung prayer that our musicians provide, but their singing cannot be a substitute for our own. Of course we do not have equal God-given abilities when it comes to singing. But whatever our abilities, God rejoices in them and so should we in our liturgical singing. After all, we dare to join our voices with those of the angels, but

they have never protested such boldness on our part, so far as anyone knows.

The songs we sing for God, the music we make, are the outward expression of inner love. This is the answer to questions like: "Why is singing important at Mass?" or "Do we have to sing?" or the assertion, "I don't have a good voice, so I don't sing." Our singing expresses our love for the God who sings because of us, as the prophet Zephaniah says: God "will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love; he will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals" (Zeph. 3: 17-18). Every day we live is a rehearsal for singing God's praise in eternity. For music is the only art of heaven come down to earth, the only art of earth that we take to heaven.

So, please, let us practice this heavenly and earthly art of singing in our liturgies. Let us not be passive observers or listeners. A minimum in this regard would be to open the worship aid or songbook to the hymns, try to follow along, and join in singing as you feel comfortable in doing so. And as you do, you might hear the echo of God's song of wondrous love for you.

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Liturgical Catechesis on the Eucharist

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