

## Letter on Music Ministry

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The U.S. bishops recently reminded the faithful:

All pastoral musicians—professional or volunteer, full-time or part-time, director or choir member, cantor or instrumentalist—exercise a genuine liturgical ministry. The community of the faithful has a right to expect that this service will be provided competently. Pastoral musicians should receive appropriate formation that is based on their baptismal call to discipleship; that grounds them in a love for and knowledge of Scripture, Catholic teaching, liturgy, and music; and that equips them with the musical, liturgical, and pastoral skills to serve the Church at prayer. Preparation for music ministry should include appropriate human formation, spiritual formation, intellectual formation, and pastoral formation.<sup>1</sup>

To ensure competent musical service and to make a beginning towards providing formation in “Catholic teaching, liturgy, and music,” I would like to examine key points from three documents: St. Pius X’s motu proprio *Tra le sollecitudini*, which Pope John Paul II called the “magna carta” of sacred music; Vatican II’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*; and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*.<sup>2</sup> In this way we can all build on the solid foundation of the Church’s teaching and the guidance of our shepherds.

The reason why these documents are important is that, as Catholics, we belong to a religion founded on obedience to authority—namely, to the teaching authority (Magisterium) of the Church—and these documents give voice to that Magisterium. As our Holy Father Pope Benedict has emphasized, our main attitude and mentality must always be what he terms “the hermeneutic of continuity,” meaning that how we act and think as Catholics today should be in continuity or harmony with all that has come before us in the great Tradition of the Church. Vatican II, especially, should be approached as a council that continued and deepened, rather than broke with or contradicted, our Tradition. We will see why this is so important to the question of liturgical music.

### *General Principles*

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<sup>1</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, nn. 50-51.

<sup>2</sup> This 2007 set of guidelines from the American bishops supersedes earlier publications on the subject. Although the USCCB document does not possess the authority of an instruction or encyclical issued by the Pope or by a Roman Congregation, it helpfully emphasizes forgotten points made by Vatican II.

Pope St. Pius X states that sacred music “participates in the general scope of the liturgy, which is the glory of God and the sanctification and edification of the faithful.” The purpose of such music is “to add greater efficacy to the [liturgical] text, in order that through it the faithful may be more easily moved to devotion and better disposed for the reception of the fruits of grace belonging to the celebration of the most holy Mysteries.” As a result, “sacred music should possess, in the highest degree, the qualities proper to the liturgy, and in particular *holiness* and *goodness of form*, which will spontaneously produce the final quality of *universality*”—qualities “to be found, in the highest degree, in Gregorian chant, which is, consequently, the chant proper to the Roman Church.” The pope concludes:

On these grounds Gregorian chant has always been regarded as the supreme model for sacred music, so that it is fully legitimate to lay down the following rule: the more closely a composition for church approaches in its movement, inspiration, and savor the Gregorian form, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes; and the more out of harmony it is with that supreme model, the less worthy it is of the temple. The ancient traditional Gregorian chant must, therefore, in a large measure be restored to the functions of public worship. . . .<sup>3</sup>

The Second Vatican Council strongly reaffirmed this teaching of Pope Pius X, saying, for example, that “the Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given **pride of place in liturgical services**.”<sup>4</sup> The bishops of the United States recently reiterated several of these points. Citing the words just quoted, they write:

Gregorian chant is uniquely the Church’s own music. Chant is a living connection with our forebears in the faith, the traditional music of the Roman rite, a sign of communion with the universal Church, a bond of unity across cultures, a means for diverse communities to participate together in song, and a summons to contemplative participation in the Liturgy.<sup>5</sup>

The bishops remind pastors and the faithful that the use of the people’s own language does not, and was never meant to, rule out some continuing use of the Church’s own mother language:

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<sup>3</sup> *Tra le sollecitudini*, nn. 1-3.

<sup>4</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 116. What exactly is meant by “other things being equal, it should be given pride of place”? Scholars looking to the authoritative Latin text of Vatican II have unpacked the meaning of this sentence as follows: “The Church declares as her own, because she formally recognizes it, Gregorian chant as belonging to her as her distinctive music in order that, other factors taken into consideration in such a way they they don’t rule this out, it preserves the governing eminent place in liturgical actions.” The Latin text: *Ecclesia cantum gregorianum agnoscit ut liturgiae romanae proprium: qui ideo in actionibus liturgicis, ceteris paribus, principem locum obtineat.*

<sup>5</sup> *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, n. 72.

The use of the vernacular is the norm in most liturgical celebrations in the dioceses of the United States “for the sake of a better comprehension of the mystery being celebrated.” However, care should be taken to foster the role of Latin in the Liturgy, particularly in liturgical song. Pastors should ensure “that the faithful may also be able to say or to sing together *in Latin* those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them” (Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*). **They should be able to sing these parts of the Mass proper to them, at least according to the simpler melodies.**<sup>6</sup>

As if to emphasize the seriousness of this conciliar desideratum, the U.S. bishops repeat and clarify:

The Second Vatican Council directed that the faithful be able to sing parts of the Ordinary of the Mass together *in Latin*. **In many worshiping communities in the United States, fulfilling this directive will mean introducing Latin chant to worshipers who perhaps have not sung it before.** While prudence, pastoral sensitivity, and reasonable time for progress are encouraged to achieve this end, **every effort in this regard is laudable and highly encouraged.**

Each worshiping community in the United States, including all age groups and all ethnic groups, should, at a minimum, learn Kyrie XVI, Sanctus XVIII, and Agnus Dei XVIII, all of which are typically included in congregational worship aids. More difficult chants, such as Gloria VIII and settings of the Credo and Pater Noster, might be learned after the easier chants have been mastered.<sup>7</sup>

This, together with Pope Pius X’s teaching on the qualities of authentically sacred music, is the reason why we will be moving more and more to chant Masses, away from the metrical settings currently in use. (Incidentally, note that the particular chants indicated by the U.S. Bishops—Kyrie XVI, Sanctus XVIII, and Agnus Dei XVIII, as well as Gloria VIII and the Pater Noster—are all found in many standard hymnals.)

In his *motu proprio*, St. Pius X explains that the Church welcomes new music when it is in harmony with the spirit of the liturgy:

The Church has always recognized and favored the progress of the arts, admitting to the service of religion everything good and beautiful discovered by genius in the course of ages—always, however, with due regard to the liturgical laws. Consequently modern music is also admitted to the Church, since it, too, furnishes compositions of such excellence, sobriety, and gravity, that they are in no way unworthy of the liturgical functions. Still, since modern music has risen mainly to serve secular uses, greater care must be taken with regard to it, in order that the musical compositions of modern style which are admitted in the Church **may contain nothing secular, be free from reminiscences of motifs adopted in the theaters,**

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 61.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75.

**and be not fashioned—even in their external forms—after the manner of secular pieces.**<sup>8</sup>

The U.S. bishops agree with Pius X's assessment of modern compositions:

The musical judgment [that must be undertaken by musicians] asks whether this composition has **the necessary aesthetic qualities that can bear the weight of the mysteries** celebrated in the Liturgy. It asks the question: Is this composition technically, aesthetically, and expressively worthy? This judgment requires musical competence. **Only artistically sound music will be effective and endure over time.** To admit to the Liturgy the cheap, the trite, or the musical cliché often found in secular popular songs is to cheapen the Liturgy, to expose it to ridicule, and to invite failure.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Structure of the Mass*

In recent decades, the purpose of music ministry has often been reduced to merely leading or providing music *at* Mass. But according to the Church's teaching, the highest purpose is *singing the Mass itself*. The choice of the music is not left entirely up to the musicians, but is determined, rather, by the liturgy itself—by the Church's worship tradition and the cycle of feasts and seasons. Put simply, the Mass has its own intrinsic structure as a communal prayer, and—although many do not know this—it comes “ready-made” with its own texts and music.

The basic structure of the Roman Rite of Mass is as follows:<sup>10</sup>

*Entrance antiphon*<sup>11</sup>  
KYRIE  
GLORIA  
*Gradual*<sup>12</sup>  
*Alleluia with verse*  
CREDO  
*Offertory antiphon*  
SANCTUS  
AGNUS DEI  
*Communion antiphon*

The items in small caps are called the “Ordinary of the Mass.” They are the fixed and unchanging part. The items in italics are called the “Propers of the Mass.” They change

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<sup>8</sup> *Tra le sollecitudini*, n. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, nn. 134-35.

<sup>10</sup> This diagram applies equally to both the Novus Ordo and the Tridentine Masses, i.e., the ordinary and the extraordinary forms of the Roman Rite.

<sup>11</sup> This is sometimes referred to as the “Introit,” which is simply Latin for “Entrance.”

<sup>12</sup> It is permissible to substitute a responsorial psalm for the Gradual; in most places this is the practice.

from week to week and are appointed in the liturgical books such as the *Roman Missal* and the *Roman Gradual*.

**NB: The primary responsibility of cantors and choir at Mass is to sing *these texts*—the texts of the Ordinary and the texts of the Propers—using the Church’s very own music, plainchant, or music that possesses the same qualities.** These texts, and the music that goes with them, are part of the very fabric of the Mass; they are not add-ons. When we sing them, we are singing the Mass itself. In contrast, *other* music (for example, a hymn or an instrumental meditation) is an add-on. Of course, this doesn’t mean there’s never a place for such music; it means that it should hold a secondary place to the music proper to the liturgy.

In light of this important principle, the question arises: Exactly how *are* we to sing the Propers and the Ordinary? We look for answers to the Church’s official guide to celebrating the Mass, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (latest edition 2002).

### *The Propers of the Mass*

Instead of speaking of an “opening hymn” or a “gathering hymn,” the *General Instruction* speaks of an “Entrance chant”:

After the people have gathered, the Entrance chant begins as the priest enters with the deacon and the ministers . . .

The singing at this time is done either alternately by the choir and the people or in a similar way by the cantor and the people, or entirely by the people, or by the choir alone. In the dioceses of the United States of America there are four options for the Entrance chant: (1) the antiphon from the *Roman Missal* or the Psalm from the *Roman Gradual* as set to music there or in another musical setting; (2) the seasonal antiphon and Psalm of the *Simple Gradual*; (3) a song from another collection of psalms and antiphons, approved by the Conference of Bishops or the diocesan Bishop, including psalms arranged in responsorial or metrical forms; (4) a suitable liturgical song similarly approved by the Conference of Bishops or the diocesan Bishop.<sup>13</sup>

Commentators on this passage agree that the *General Instruction* is setting forth the four options not as equals but in order of preference. First is the best case scenario: we sing the antiphon actually appointed in the missal for that day (note that this is what the priest and people are to *recite* when there is no music, as occurs at the parish daily Mass); second, a seasonal antiphon that serves a similar liturgical purpose; third, a different psalm or antiphon; and finally, in last place, some other song. The other three are to be preferred, wherever possible, to hymns; and if hymns are chosen, they must be “suitable” and “liturgical.”<sup>14</sup>

Ideally, then, the choir or cantors should sing the Entrance chant itself, in a responsorial fashion for the sake of involving the people. Responsorial chants are in fact

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<sup>13</sup> *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, nn. 47-48.

<sup>14</sup> In other words, they should be suitable in their text for the liturgical feast or season, and suitable in their musical style by possessing the qualities of holiness, good artistic form, and universality.

some of the most ancient music of the Church and have always been the “backbone” of her music for Mass. Some excellent resources for English chant are available, particularly Paul F. Ford’s *By Flowing Waters* and Fr. Samuel Weber’s settings.<sup>15</sup>

In most parishes, the Responsorial Psalm and the Alleluia are already being sung with the correct texts, so we will move on to the remaining Propers. (It may be pointed out, however, that settings of the Psalms and the Alleluias of a quality superior to that found in most hymnals or standard packages are available for free online, from, e.g., the Chabanel Psalm project.)

As to what are usually called the “Offertory hymn” and the “Communion hymn,” the *General Instruction* is, once again, quite clear:

The procession bringing the gifts is accompanied by the Offertory chant, which continues at least until the gifts have been placed on the altar. The norms on the manner of singing are the same as for the Entrance chant.<sup>16</sup>

While the priest is receiving the Sacrament, the Communion chant is begun. Its purpose is to express the communicants’ union in spirit by means of the unity of their voices, to show joy of heart, and to highlight more clearly the “communitarian” nature of the procession to receive Communion. The singing is continued for as long as the Sacrament is being administered to the faithful. If, however, there is to be a hymn after Communion, the Communion chant should be ended in a timely manner.<sup>17</sup>

Here, too, we see that ideally the cantor and/or choir should render the Propers of the Mass, that is, the Offertory antiphon and the Communion antiphon given in one of the approved sources. For most parish situations, simpler English chants, accompanied by organ, are likely to be the most useful. After the antiphons have been sung, the choir, time and circumstances permitting, may sing a “suitable liturgical song” at either Offertory or Communion. Traditionally this was seen as a fitting time for a choral piece such as a motet or four-part hymn, to help people prepare meditatively for the unbloody sacrifice of the altar or give thanks for “the divine, holy, pure, immortal, heavenly, life-giving, and awesome Mysteries of Christ” (St. John Chrysostom).

Now, while it is certainly true that the use of proper antiphons is the ideal towards which we must strive, we have seen that the Church permits, as a lesser good, the use of “suitable liturgical” songs in place of proper chants. As the *General Instruction* implies, there is every reason to exercise vigilance in regard to the liturgical suitability of hymns. Ultimately it is the responsibility of bishops and pastors to see that any music chosen is well suited to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Choirs may begin to phase in the Propers by way of the Entrance chant, even if they continue to substitute hymns at Offertory, Communion, and recessional time. Over

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<sup>15</sup> See <http://archstl.org/worship/page/institute-sacred-music>.

<sup>16</sup> *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, n. 74.

<sup>17</sup> *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, n. 86. The G.I.R.M. goes on to say that there are four options for the communion chant: (1) the antiphon from the *Roman Missal* or the *Roman Gradual*; (2) the seasonal antiphon of the *Simple Gradual*; (3) another psalm; (4) a suitable liturgical song approved by the bishops. These are the same four options that were mentioned in connection with the Entrance chant.

time, they might introduce other Propers as well as well-composed instrumental music. (See the attached PDF for a model of music for Advent Sunday I.)

### ***The Ordinary of the Mass***

We have seen that even after vernacular translations of the Mass were approved, the use of Gregorian chant was both expected and decreed.

Many do not realize that chant Masses exist in English as well as in Latin. While Latin should not be simply put aside—we have seen how Vatican II and other authoritative sources recommend the use of chant in the original languages for the Ordinary of the Mass (Greek for the Kyrie, Latin for the Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei)—the use of English chant is certainly permissible, particularly as a transitional step, because it, too, can embody the qualities of holiness, good artistic form, and universality. As a result, whenever Latin/Greek chants are not chosen, artfully crafted English chants are the next best choice.

Although some chants are available in modern musical notation, other chants utilize the old square-note neumes. Back in the 1950s, small children at Catholic grammar schools were taught to read the square notes, so this won't be a problem as long as we're child-like in our willingness to learn new things.

### ***Instrumental Music***

The Magisterium of the Church expresses a definite preference for the pipe organ, the “king of instruments,” which for over a thousand years has been the liturgical instrument *par excellence*. If solo instrumental music is desired as a meditation, or if songs are to be accompanied, preference should therefore always be given to the use of the church organ,<sup>18</sup> with the choir occupying the choir loft, if one is available. See the PDF attachment for examples of appropriate organ music that is easy to play, on manuals only (no pedals required).

### ***Practical Steps***

All around the world, Catholic faithful and clergy are making renewed efforts to bring the celebration of the Mass into conformity with the Church's heritage, directives, and teachings. The frequent example of beautiful divine worship given by our Holy Father is intended to move us in the same direction—the *authentic* application of Vatican II, which was not a rupture with the past but a pastoral council in continuity with the whole of our Catholic Tradition. For this reason, the music chosen for celebrations of the Eucharist at the parish, and the manner of executing it, need to be of consistently high quality, with seasonally and liturgically appropriate content, meeting the high standards put forth by the Church and reaffirmed by our bishops in *Sing to the Lord*.

Along these lines, consider this powerful word of exhortation from our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI:

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<sup>18</sup> See, inter alia, Pius X, *Tra le sollecitudini*, n. 15-19; Pius XI, *Divini Cultus*; Pius XII, *Musicae Sacrae*, nn. 58-59; Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 120; Benedict XVI, *Papal Address at the Basilica of Regensburg*.

In the *ars celebrandi* [art of celebrating], liturgical song has a preeminent place. Saint Augustine rightly says in a famous sermon that “the new man sings a new song. Singing is an expression of joy and, if we consider the matter, an expression of love.” The People of God assembled for the celebration sings the praises of God. In the course of her two-thousand-year history, the Church has created, and still creates, music and song which represent a rich patrimony of faith and love, a heritage that must not be lost. Certainly as far as the liturgy is concerned, we cannot say that one song is as good as another. Generic improvisation or the introduction of musical styles which fail to respect the meaning of the liturgy should be avoided. As an element of the liturgy, song should be well integrated into the overall celebration. Consequently **everything—in the text, in the melody, in the execution—ought to correspond to the meaning of the mystery being celebrated, the structure of the rite and the liturgical seasons.** Finally, while respecting various styles and various sufficiently laudable traditions, we desire, as was requested by the Synod Fathers, that Gregorian chant be suitably esteemed and employed as the chant proper to the Roman liturgy.<sup>19</sup>

To help everyone work towards the goals described in the preceding pages, a pastor or music director may supply, ahead of time, a “music guide” for each liturgical season that specifies some of the antiphons to be used, recommends other materials, and contains a list of suitable hymns from which a choice might be made. It is important to be proactive in implementing what the pope and the bishops of this country are asking of us.

Bear in mind, as well, that the new English translation of the *Roman Missal* (the sacramentary or prayerbook for the Mass) is scheduled to go into effect in Advent 2011, and we want to be prepared for that momentous transition not only by means of an ongoing catechesis from the pulpit and in the bulletin but also, and even more, through the truly sacred music that we cultivate with care and love. The attached PDF, for its part, shows a model line-up for Advent Sunday I.

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<sup>19</sup> Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007), n. 42; emphasis added.