The Meaning of the Mass: Part Six
by Fr. Brian Mahoney

The earliest witness to an entrance song in the Roman liturgy occurs in the sixth century. But it can be surmised that the use of some sort of music was part of the celebration even before that time. The earliest choice for the song was the chanting of an appropriate psalm. The choice of psalm was dictated by the feast or season in which the celebration occurred. The psalm would be chosen to help the people contemplate and be aware of the theological basis for the particular celebration being commemorated. During the times when the celebration concerned the whole mystery of salvation in Christ, different psalms could be chosen that reflected a general sense of praise and thanksgiving.

The psalm was chanted by the whole congregation as the entrance procession took place through the church, and was completed when the ministers arrived at their destinations. The entrance song, therefore, had a practical aspect to it; in a sense it acted as traveling music to accompany the procession. This was particularly important in cathedral settings because the procession of the ministers through the church could take time. It also allowed the people to be connected to the procession through their participation in the chanting of the psalm. They did not simply watch the procession, but joined in the procession through the song. The whole of the assembly joining together in song also helped foster a sense of unity since they were united together in one action.

Over time this entrance chant, or song, shrunk to essentially a short phrase from the psalms, or scripture, and became the entrance antiphon. This occurred for various reasons, but the most important influence was probably the shrinking of the procession. In the early centuries the procession took place through the church, but in later times the priest would enter from the sacristy which was usually situated right next to the sanctuary. This change in the amount of time it took to process to the sanctuary negated the need for a lengthy chant. However, after the Second Vatican Council and the reform of the liturgy, the importance of the procession was reestablished, and so a true entrance chant or song was again needed. The entrance song is intended, as in the past, to help the faithful understand the mystery being celebrated, foster their unity through a common action, and simply accompany the procession of ministers to their proper places in the church.

Therefore, music is to be understood as an integral element, and holds a prominent place, within the celebration of the Mass. The importance of music to the liturgy needs to be actively sustained by a strong level of participation by the people, well-chosen musical selections, and a competent performance of the music chosen. Therefore, it is important to understand not simply what is good music, but rather what is good liturgical music. This distinction is at the heart of the proper place of music in the celebration of Mass. It is ultimately about helping the people of God to achieve full, active, and conscious participation, and through that participation, leading them into a fuller sense of worship of God. Music, as part of the liturgy, is meant to play a role in the sanctification of the faithful as they lift up their voices in worship of God.