



The Revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal:*

Foundations

Part 2: The Sung Liturgy

“The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art.” These words from *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 112 express the importance the Church gives to music in the liturgy. The conciliar fathers go on: “The main reason for this preeminence is that, as sacred song closely bound to the text, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy.” Thus, when the Church speaks about music and the liturgy, she means the sung voice of the assembly raised in prayer. While other instruments have a place in the liturgy, the voice of the assembly is the primary instrument. Indeed, other instruments are to support the song of the assembly.

To say that music is integral to the liturgy is to say that music isn’t an ornament or decoration for the ritual texts and actions. The Church doesn’t call us to sing *at liturgy*. Rather, we are called to sing *the liturgy*. Many people may remember when the Church permitted the introduction of songs in the vernacular in four places in the Mass: at the entrance, during what was then called the offertory, at Communion, and after the dismissal. With the Council’s reminder that “a liturgical service takes on a nobler aspect when the rites are celebrated with singing, the sacred ministers take their parts in them, and the faithful participate actively” (*SC*, n. 113), the revised liturgy has replaced the so-called four-hymn Mass with a Mass where the ritual texts and prayers are sung.

Types of Liturgical Music

Following the lead of the 1967 Instruction *Musicae sacram* by the Congregation of Rites, the United States Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy published *Music in Catholic Worship* in 1972. *Music in Catholic Worship (MCW)* sets out a listing of sung ritual texts and provides an order of precedence when choosing what to sing at Mass.

- Acclamations: Gospel acclamation and its verse, the Holy, Holy, Memorial Acclamation, Great Amen, and the embolism to the Lord’s Prayer.
- Processional songs: the entrance song and the Communion song.
- Responsorial Psalm
- Ordinary chants: Lord, have mercy, Glory to God, Lord’s Prayer, Lamb of God, Profession of Faith.
- Supplemental songs: song during the Preparation of the Gifts, song after Communion, recessional song.

Because acclamations mark significant moments in the liturgy, *Music in Catholic Worship* notes that these “shouts of joy” should be “rhythmically strong, melodically appealing, and affirmative” (*MCW*, n. 53). Because the people should know the acclamations by heart, there is little reason not to sing them at every celebration of the Eucharist—even at daily Mass without any instrumental accompaniment.

At the moments when the community recognizes it is gathered by God at the beginning of Mass and when it receives the Body and Blood of Christ in Communion, the processional songs manifest the assembly's oneness in the Lord. While the song at the beginning of Mass accompanies the procession of ministers, it also serves as the first prayer text of the liturgy. Therefore, it should not necessarily end when the procession concludes. The song during the Communion procession begins when the priest receives Communion. It concludes shortly after the last person has received Communion and the assembly has been seated. Just as the one body of Christ shares in one loaf broken and one cup poured out, so should there be one song during the Communion procession. If the length of the procession demands it, the verses of the song can be repeated or expanded with instrumental interludes as needed.

The responsorial psalm is the response of God's people to the proclamation of the God's word in the first reading. God's word is used to respond to God's word. Therefore, the Church requires that the text for the psalm response must come from the psalter. "Songs or hymns may not be used in place of the Responsorial Psalm" (USCCB Adaptation to *GIRM*, n. 61). The responsorial psalm is proclaimed from the ambo, the place from which God's word is proclaimed. Even if the verses of the psalm cannot be sung, it is appropriate that the people's response be sung (*GIRM*, n. 61).

The ordinary chants have specific liturgical texts. Consisting of hymns (e.g., the Gloria), litanies (e.g., the Lamb of God), and proclamatory texts (e.g., the profession of faith), the ordinary chants have specific liturgical texts. Musical settings should generally provide for the participation of the faithful. Whether sung or spoken, these texts are required at Sunday

Masses, unless another liturgical ritual provides otherwise.

Supplementary songs have no specified text. As with all music used in the liturgy, these songs should draw their texts from Scripture and liturgical sources.

Ministers of Music

The assembly of the faithful, joined by Christ the Lord to himself, offer praise and thanks to God the Father in the Spirit. The assembly, then, is the primary minister of music. Nevertheless, members of the assembly who are gifted and have been trained are called forth to lead the assembly in its song. Cantors animate the assembly to fulfill its sung role by leading the faithful in song. The psalmist proclaims the sung responsorial psalm from the ambo. The choir or small ensemble provides a supporting role to the song of the assembly, and, on occasion, takes a leading role, always eschewing any appearance of a performance. Finally, instrumentalists support the voice of the singing assembly and other music ministers by playing the organ, piano, guitar, percussion, or other suitable instruments.



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