

## WHAT DOES THE CHURCH SAY ABOUT THE MUSIC OF THE MASS?



*As a manifestation of the human spirit, music performs a function which is noble, unique, and irreplaceable. When it is truly beautiful and inspired, it speaks to us more than all the other arts of goodness, virtue, peace, of matters holy and divine. Not for nothing has it always been, and will it always be, an essential part of the liturgy.*

***Pope St. John Paul II, 1989***

Over the next several weeks, we will continue to highlight different aspects of sacred music in the liturgy, explaining what the Church teaches and how we at the Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul seek to embrace the Joy of Tradition in sacred music. We began the series last week by exploring what makes music sacred. This week we continue our discussion by pointing to Church teachings and how modern-day experience at Mass often differs from the Church's ideal.

**Are there rules for the music of the Mass?** Yes, the Church has given us official song books as well as rubrics and guidance for singing the Mass. The priest's Missal contains the chants to sing the Mass. The official song book for the choir and the people is the *Graduale Romanum*, which is filled with prayers and Scriptures set to Gregorian chant for each Sunday, feast day, and weekday through the Church year, to be sung at specific times during the Mass. These books were revised after Vatican II and remain the primary songs of the Church today. However, the Church has also allowed secondary options to augment the official music, and these lesser options have in practice become the norm in most parishes. Many do not realize that the songs contained in these books are still the Church's first choice for the liturgy.

**Didn't Vatican II encourage us to replace Gregorian chant with popular songs or hymns?** Contrary to popular belief, Vatican II actually promoted the continuation of the singing of the Church's treasury of Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony in Latin, while allowing new compositions in Latin or the people's native languages to complement these.

**What music choices does the Church allow for the Mass?** The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) provides the norms and rubrics for the celebration of the Mass, including the singing of each part and the use of instruments. In some cases the GIRM gives alternatives to the norm. For example, although the GIRM says that the Latin chant settings of the texts contained in the *Graduale*



*Romanum* are the Church's first choice to be sung at the Entrance, Offertory, and Communion, it allows - as alternatives - for these to be sung in a different melody or language; or for a different Psalm to be sung in their place; or, lastly, for a suitable liturgical hymn to be sung. For various reasons, including lack of understanding, experimentation, and limited musical resources, many parishes have chosen this lowest option as the standard practice, rather than an occasional alternative, and neglected the Church's ideal.

**What about the hymns that we know and love?** Something we do well at the basilica is the singing of traditional congregational hymns at our weekend Masses. We have choirs, cantors, and a magnificent pipe organ to support congregational singing. These hymns have become an important part of our expression of faith and our cultural tradition, and we intend to continue singing them in addition to the prescribed chants of the Mass. For example, we now sing a congregational hymn as a prelude prior to the Entrance procession, which is accompanied by the proper Entrance chant. However, it is important to understand, though it may come as a surprise to many, that congregational hymns are not the primary music of the liturgy. Just as all the faithful around the world are hearing the same Scripture readings on a given Sunday, the Church has given us certain prayers and Scriptures to be sung and heard around the world at each part of each Mass, and we do well to unite with this rich tradition.

**Is everyone expected to sing all these chants?** The Church does not ask everyone in the congregation to sing every part of the Mass. In the same way that certain parts are assigned to the priest and the deacon, while some parts are meant for the entire assembly, still other parts are assigned to the skilled choir, or *schola cantorum*, and this is laid out in the GIRM. The responses and acclamations - and often the Ordinary parts (which we will discuss in a future issue) - are sung by the entire assembly. However, the Church acknowledges that the elaborate chants in the *Graduale Romanum* that change for each Mass require the diligence of a skilled choir to sing them well.

**If I am not singing all the parts, how can I fully participate in the Mass, as called for by Vatican II?** The *participatio actuosa* (*active* - or perhaps more accurately translated - *actual* participation) of the faithful that was encouraged by Vatican II does not result primarily from the congregational singing of hymns, but from the interior experience of being engaged in all the parts of the Mass, including by listening and by sacred silence, when appropriate. For example, when a Scripture reading is recited by a single minister, all who are assembled participate by listening, following along, and meditating on the meaning imparted in the readings. Similarly, when the choir or cantor is singing the chants, you can follow the text in St. Isaac Jogues Missal, which has both the original Latin and the English translation.

---

In the next two issues, we will introduce the Entrance Rite and the Sung Ordinary parts of the Mass.

#### **Reference**

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM):

<http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/general-instruction-of-the-roman-missal/>



---

**THE BASILICA OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL**  
214 EAST 8<sup>TH</sup> STREET, CHATTANOOGA, TN