



## Music in the Sacred Liturgy

*I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.  
Psalm 104:33*

Music is a gift from God, and the capacity to make music dwells within each human person. Music is also – simultaneously – an individual *and* communal activity. It is music’s communal nature that makes it an ideal art form for use in Divine Worship. The primary animator of this art form in the liturgy is the assembly. At certain times the priest, the deacon, the choir, the musicians, the psalmist, and the cantor have specific roles of their own, but it is the assembly that participates in every moment of the liturgical celebration.

### Rooted In Scripture

Sacred scripture is rich in musical imagery. The Old Testament provides numerous examples of the worship of God through music, and as an expression of thanksgiving to God during important moments in salvation history. In the New Testament, the Gospels of Matthew and Mark tell of Jesus singing a hymn after the Last Supper before going to the Mount of Olives on Holy Thursday (Mt 26:30, Mk 14:26). Additionally, St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians acclaimed the importance of singing “Hymns, Psalms and Spiritual Canticles” in gratitude to God (Eph 5:19).

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, states that “the musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art” (SC, 112). As sacred song unites with the power of the Word, sacred music “forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy” (SC 2, 112). The Second Vatican Council also envisioned that *all of the faithful* take an active role in participating in the sacred liturgy: “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy” (SC, 14).

### Music As Participation

When it comes to liturgical music, it is desired by the Church that this participation be expressed in two forms: *internal* and *external* participation. Liturgical participation should be “above all internal, in the sense that by it the faithful join their mind to what they pronounce or hear and cooperate with heavenly grace. It must be external also, such as to show the internal participation by gestures and bodily attitudes, by the acclamations, responses and singing” (*Musicam Sacram: Instruction on the Liturgy*, 1967, 15).

When considering the types of music used in Sacred Liturgy, and when one considers the

myriad of tastes and preferences of those in the assembly, it is easy to see why agreeing on appropriate music can be cumbersome. Traditionally, “the Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as especially suited to the Roman liturgy” (SC, 116). Gregorian chant is a tangible expression of the universality of the Church and its rich musical-liturgical patrimony. Still, the musical repertoire of the liturgy is in a constant state of growth and





development. “The development of a repertory of vernacular music for the Liturgy over the past fifty years is a gift for which we are grateful and which we continue to promote. To rely only on the music of a single genre or style for the celebration of the Liturgy is to diminish the breadth and depth of our liturgical heritage and to risk the exclusion of the legitimate contributions of particular cultures and composers” (*Stewards of the Tradition: Fifty Years after Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2013, 3).

### Well Formed Leaders

The same considerations should be given to those who lead the music in liturgy. While the assembly is the primary music minister, those gathered for Mass often need guidance. Not everyone feels comfortable singing out, which is why the cantor plays a vital role, helping to sustain the assembly. The cantor may also lead the psalm at the ambo, assuming the same position as the reader of Scripture. A well-formed cantor is a gift to the community and should possess enough musical ability to execute their ministry without detracting from the solemnity of the Eucharistic celebration. The same is true for the choir: this group has the power to inspire the prayers of others, but only when this ministry is undertaken from a position of prayer and faithfulness to the text and the liturgical feast. Cantors and choir members are never performers. Rather, they are instruments through which the entire Eucharistic feast is lifted high for the glory of God.

### Music As Evangelization

Finally, sacred music itself can be used as a means of evangelization in the liturgy. When skillfully executed, it has the ability to express beauty and holiness. The psalms and canticles of the Old Testament are powerful examples of this beauty and holiness. As Pope Francis noted “sacred music and liturgical chant have the task of giving us a sense of the glory of God, of his beauty, of his holiness which wraps us in a ‘luminous cloud’” (*Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the International Conference on Sacred Music*, 4 March 2017).

Our singing is rooted in love. At least, it ought to be. We sing at Mass because of our love for God and God’s love for us. “Cantare amantis est”, says St. Augustine, singing belongs to one who loves. In our song, we come to the trinitarian interpretation of liturgical music. “The Holy Spirit is love, and it is this Holy Spirit who produces the singing (in us). It is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit who draws us into love for Christ and so leads to the Father” (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 142).

*Not every song is worthy to be sung at Mass and on this topic, there is sure to be further discussion. But when liturgical music is based on biblical faith, theologically appropriate, and creates a higher form of proclamation, all are called to sing out in love of the Creator and in response to God’s love made flesh in Christ.*

*(Parts of this article were adapted from the work of Fr. Paul Turner and we appreciate his willingness to share his knowledge with us).*

*To learn more about the upcoming revisions to the liturgical norms in the Diocese of Bridgeport, visit [www.formationreimagined.org](http://www.formationreimagined.org). Meetings will be held throughout November for those who wish to learn more.*