What We Sing at Mass

The Principle of Progressive Solemnity

Music should be considered a normal and ordinary part of the Church’s liturgical life. However, the use of music in the Liturgy is always governed by the principle of progressive solemnity.

Progressive solemnity means that between the solemn, fuller form of liturgical celebration, in which everything that demands singing is in fact sung, and the simplest form, in which singing is not used, there can be various degrees according to the greater or lesser place allotted to singing.

Progressive solemnity includes not only the nature and style of the music, but how many and which parts of the rite are to be sung. For example, greater feasts such as Easter Sunday or Pentecost might suggest a chanted Gospel, but a recited Gospel might be more appropriate for Ordinary Time. Musical selections and the use of additional instruments reflect the season of the liturgical year or feast that is being celebrated.

Solemnities and feasts invite more solemnity. Certain musical selections are more capable of expressing this solemnity, adding an extraordinary richness to these special celebrations. Such solemnity should never be allowed to devolve to an empty display of ceremony. The most solemn musical expressions retain their primary responsibility of engaging human hearts in the mystery of Christ that is being celebrated on a particular occasion by the Church.

At other times, the liturgical season calls for a certain musical restraint. In Advent, for example, musical instruments should be used with moderation and should not anticipate the full joy of the Nativity of the Lord. In Lent, musical instruments should be used only to support the singing of the gathered assembly.

The Parts to Be Sung

Singing by the gathered assembly and ministers is important at all celebrations. Not every part that can be sung should necessarily be sung at every celebration; rather, preference should be given to those [parts] that are of greater importance.
a. Dialogues and Acclamations

Among the parts to be sung, preference should be given especially to those to be sung by the priest or the deacon or the lector, with the people responding, or by the priest and people together. This includes dialogues such as God, come to my assistance. Lord make haste to help me in the Office, or The Lord be with you. And also with you in the Mass. The dialogues of the Liturgy are fundamental because they are not simply outward signs of communal celebration but foster and bring about communion between priest and people.

By their nature, they are short and uncomplicated and easily invite active participation by the entire assembly. Every effort should therefore be made to introduce or strengthen as a normative practice the singing of the dialogues between the priest, deacon, or lector and the people. Even the priest with very limited singing ability is capable of chanting The Lord be with you on a single pitch.

The acclamations of the Eucharistic Liturgy and other rites arise from the whole gathered assembly as assents to God’s Word and action. The Eucharistic acclamations include the Gospel Acclamation, the Sanctus, the Memorial Acclamation, and the Great Amen. They are appropriately sung at any Mass, including daily Mass and any Mass with a smaller congregation. Ideally, the people should know the acclamations by heart and should be able to sing them readily, even without accompaniment.

b. Antiphons and Psalms

The psalms are poems of praise that are meant, whenever possible, to be sung. The Psalter is the basic songbook of the Liturgy. Tertullian witnesses to this when he says that in the assemblies of the Christians, the Scriptures are read, the psalms are sung, sermons are preached. Psalms have a prominent place in every Office of the Liturgy of the Hours.

The Responsorial Psalm in the Liturgy of the Word of the Mass and of other rites holds great liturgical and pastoral importance, because it fosters meditation on the word of God. The Entrance and Communion chants with their psalm verses serve to accompany the two most important processions of the Mass: the entrance procession, by which the Mass begins, and the Communion procession, by which the faithful approach the altar to receive Holy Communion. Participation in song on the part of the assembly is commended during both of these important processions, as the People of God gather at the beginning of Mass and as the faithful approach the holy altar to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord.

c. Refrains and Repeated Responses

The Liturgy also has texts of a litanic character that may be sung as appropriate. These include the Kyrie and Agnus Dei of the Mass, the response to the Prayer of the Faithful at Mass or the intercessions at Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, and the Litany of the Saints in various rites.
**d. Hymns**

A hymn is sung at each Office of the Liturgy of the Hours, which is the original place for strophic hymnody in the Liturgy. At Mass, in addition to the *Gloria* and a small number of strophic hymns in the *Roman Missal* and *Graduale Romanum*, congregational hymns of a particular nation or group that have been judged appropriate by the competent authorities mentioned in the GIRM, nos. 48, 74, and 87, may be admitted to the Sacred Liturgy. Church legislation today permits as an option the use of vernacular hymns at the Entrance, Preparation of the Gifts, Communion, and Recessional. Because these popular hymns are fulfilling a properly liturgical role, it is especially important that they be appropriate to the liturgical action. In accord with an uninterrupted history of nearly five centuries, nothing prevents the use of some congregational hymns coming from other Christian traditions, provided that their texts are in conformity with Catholic teaching and they are appropriate to the Catholic Liturgy.

At daily Mass, the above priorities should be followed as much as possible, in this order: dialogues and acclamations (Gospel Acclamation, *Sanctus*, Memorial Acclamation, Amen); litanies (*Kyrie*, *Agnus Dei*); Responsorial Psalm, perhaps in a simple chanted setting; and finally, a hymn or even two on more important days. Even when musical accompaniment is not possible, every attempt should be made to sing the acclamations and dialogues.

Proper antiphons from the liturgical books are to be esteemed and used especially because they are the very voice of God speaking to us in the Scriptures. Here, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them. And such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigor, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life. The Christian faithful are to be led to an ever deeper appreciation of the psalms as the voice of Christ and the voice of his Church at prayer.

**Reflection Questions:**

1. How does the principle of progressive solemnity assist us to know and appreciate the great feasts of the Church Year?

2. Does a ranking of the parts of the Mass to be sung, with some more important to do so over others, also have a value beyond singing during the course of the Sacred Liturgy?

3. How is the singing of the Word God as part of the processional chants of the Mass help to participate more fully in those parts of the celebration?
Prayer:

God our Father,
look upon us with love.
You redeem us and make us your children in Christ.
Give us true freedom
and bring us to the inheritance you promised.

We ask this through our Lord
Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.