

# Catholic

## UPDATE

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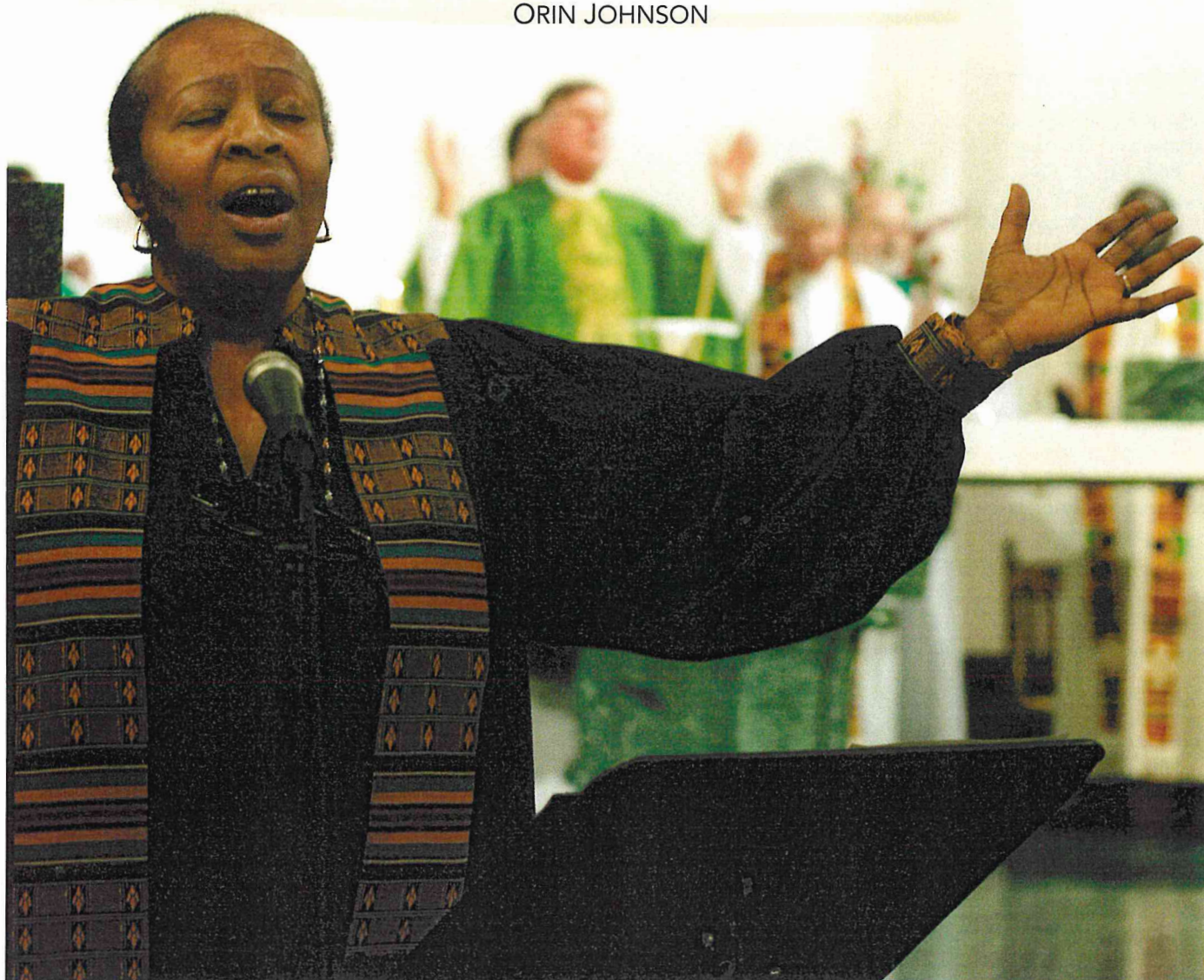
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## Liturgical Music

### Sing Well, Pray Twice

ORIN JOHNSON





If there's one aspect of our liturgical worship that evokes the strongest opinions from the people in the pews, it would be the music we use for prayer. The amount of music—from “sing everything” to “sing nothing”—and the languages, styles, and instrumentations of that music—chant, hymns, organ, guitar, and even, on occasion, a “polka Mass” (“Yes, really,” says this born-and-raised Minnesotan)—all can provoke reactions, from glee to dread, from comfort to disgust, from profound prayer to, well, the opposite of prayer.

From time to time it's worth retreating from examining just the nitty-gritty details of our musical worship to ponder why our liturgical expressions are so wedded to music, and what is it that our Church in the United States and internationally has to say about what our music should and could be. Allow me to offer, then, an exceedingly brief romp through time: first, musings on why music is so inextricably linked to our public prayer life, and then what today's Church says about liturgical music and its implementation.

### Music in the Scriptures

Music has always been part of what it means to be a person of faith. Have a Bible handy? Look to Psalm 104, which tells of singing praise to God. See Paul's Letters to the Colossians (3:16) and the Ephesians (5:19), where he urges those communities to sing to God with gratitude in their hearts. Psalm 130 is a quintessential lament. Psalm 19's petition and prayer is boldly beautiful. Christ and the apostles made music part of their community and faith lives, singing a hymn at the end of the Last Supper before journeying to the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:30).

Because music is integral to the human experience and to our expressions of our faith, music is then integral to our liturgies, where humanity and faith come together in harmony as a corporate act of worship before God. It's not just that we sing *at* Mass; Mass *itself* is meant to be sung.

### The Next 1,000 Years

Music continued to develop and remain an integral part of the human faith and worship experiences. Two brief, memorable examples include the maxim attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo (384–450), “The one who sings well prays twice.” He means that music amplifies the words of prayer which it carries. While sung text often is loud, here *amplification* means profundity, deep meaning, perhaps efficacy. But what if you think you don't “sing well”? Well, that's only your opinion about your own voice. You may sing

better than you think you do! And, regardless, God gave you your musical voice, and he only asks you to offer it back as a sacred, sacrificial offering. So, as Psalms 98 and 100 tell us, go ahead, make a joyful noise!

Another major example of music enhancing worship began about a century after Augustine. We are told that a dove visited Pope St. Gregory the Great (540–604) and began singing beautiful melodies into his ear, which he then transcribed and shared with the Church. Over time, this musical form developed and became Gregorian chant, the predominant music of Catholic liturgy. In fact, Gregorian chant was the sung music of our faith for more than 1,000 years. Chants are probably still part of your worship experience, including when you chant a *Sanctus*, *Agnus Dei*, or *Ave Maria*. Some parishes incorporate even more Gregorian chant into their worship.

### The Council of Trent's Impact on Music

One reason Gregorian chant was the exclusive sung prayer of the Church for so long is found by examining the Council of Trent (1545–1563), from which the Tridentine Liturgy (“Latin Mass”) gets its name. This council was a reaction to the reforms called for at the time by Martin Luther and others. Centuries later, the Church embraced some of these ideas. At the time, the Church essentially had two options: become a reformed Church or “circle the wagons” to defend itself. Choosing the latter, the Church sought to unify and codify nearly all aspects of the faith, including the liturgy.

For hundreds of years before Trent, the Church's liturgies were fluid and varied from place to place. “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” is an expression that comes from the time when the Church had several valid

(and beautiful) rites, each a bit different, depending on the place. In Rome, then, one did as the Romans did liturgically, while other churches used their own rites.

But the Council of Trent essentially declared, with very few exceptions, that the Roman Rite was the one and only rite to be used in the Catholic Church everywhere. With that, the music accompanying that rite, Gregorian chant, was also locked into place for centuries.

### Experimentation Sows Seeds of Change

By the late 1800s and into the next century, rumblings of liturgical experimentation were already occurring. Especially in western Europe and in the US in places like St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, the faithful were experimenting with adapting the liturgy in ways that are familiar to us today: the celebrant facing the assembly while at the altar, using popular hymns in the liturgy, and



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translating parts of the Mass into the vernacular—for which there was precedent. When the Christian liturgy reached Rome in the earliest years of the Church, its language was Greek. Romans asked that the liturgy be translated into Latin so they could understand it and participate in it. And that's what happened.

The reasoning makes sense. Our Catholic liturgy exists for the glorification of God and the sanctification of the people, so the people ought to, by baptismal right, understand it and participate in it. *Liturgy* comes from *leitourgia*, a Greek word that literally translates as “public service.” Popularly, liturgy is understood as “the work of the people.”

### **Vatican II— Reformation of the Liturgy**

When Pope St. John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council that became known as Vatican II (1962–1965), one principal activity was reforming the liturgy and all its components, including liturgical music. The council set about this task first, recognizing the liturgy as paramount to the Catholic faith. Still today, the first document promulgated by the council—the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), or SC—is the foundational document guiding our worship, much in the same way the United States Constitution shapes and guides our government and society. To read Vatican II documents online, visit [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/index.htm](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm).

Some language in SC, promulgated on December 4, 1963, may be familiar to you in your lived experience. Responding, at last, to some of the concerns from centuries earlier and accounting for the liturgical experimentation of the previous decades, SC codified aspects of our worship in ways not known before. Paragraph 10 places the liturgy at the center of the faith, “the summit” to which we aim our lives and “the font” that gives our lived faith vitality and power. Paragraph 14 introduces the expression “fully conscious and active participation.” That means, across the whole of the liturgy, the faithful’s participation must be full (all the gathered faithful), conscious (aware), and active primarily through words, music, postures, and gestures, and through an active internal participation of the heart and soul.

While SC provides detail about the language (paragraph 36), style (116), and instrumentation (120) of liturgical music, it allows for far greater diversity of each than had been permitted. When detailing liturgical music itself and its functionality and purpose (30), SC leaves many particulars behind, choosing to discuss categories of liturgical music: acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, songs, as well as the importance of silence in the liturgy.

Through myriad documents that followed SC, when the Church speaks of liturgical music, it always refers to music in harmony with SC: assuming congregational participation; allowing for a diversity of language, style, and instrumentation; and speaking of music almost always in categorical ways.

## **DIG DEEPER**

The high place the liturgy holds in the Catholic Church and the importance of music to the liturgy are stated often in documents that guide the Church. For example:

“The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows.”

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,  
[*Sacrosanctum Concilium*], 10

“Obedient to Christ and to the Church, we gather in liturgical assembly, week after week. As our ancestors did, we find ourselves ‘singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in [our] hearts to God’ (Colossians 3:16). This common, sung expression of faith within liturgical celebrations strengthens our faith when it grows weak and draws us into the divinely inspired voice of the Church at prayer. Faith grows when it is well expressed in celebration. Good celebrations can foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken it. Good music ‘make[s] the liturgical prayers of the Christian community more alive and fervent so that everyone can praise and beseech the Triune God more powerfully, more intently and more effectively’ (Pope Pius XII’s encyclical *On Sacred Music [Musicae Sacrae Disciplina]*, 31).”

*Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*,  
US Conference of Catholic Bishops (2007)



### **Questions to Ponder**

*In what specific ways have you seen your faith expressed well at Mass—music, preaching, art, or ritual? How can you contribute to that expression more completely?*



## Liturgical Music in the United States

*Sing to the Lord (STTL)*, a book by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops that is also available online, often refers to SC and related documents that are laws of the Church.

The 2007 book's ninety-six informative pages offer a sound reason to craft the best possible worship experience, stating "faith grows when it is well expressed in celebration. Poor celebrations may weaken" the faith of the faithful, the bishops write.

*STTL*, echoing SC and later documents, provides details for US parishes. It cites philosophical and practical matters: when and why various officiants and the assembly sing; languages, styles, and instrumentations; guidelines for amplification and physical places for music ministers in sacred spaces; the process of choosing liturgical music for each celebration; the structure of Mass and other sacramental and liturgical celebrations; and more.

### Music and Progressive Solemnity

*STTL* specifies that the categories *acclamations*, *responses*, *psalmody*, *antiphons*, and *songs* help us understand the liturgy at Mass as sung prayer, especially when it is wedded to the concept of progressive solemnity.

- *Acclamations* are outbursts of assent and praise: "Amen! Alleluia!"
- *Responses* are congregational replies: "And with your spirit" or "Thanks be to God."
- *Psalmody* is the singing of psalms like the Responsorial Psalm at Mass.
- *Antiphons* are liturgical refrains from the *Roman Missal*.
- *Songs* (hymns) come from many sources, including Scripture (Mary's Magnificat), the *Missal* (Gloria), and appropriate music from any time period.

In addition, more music ought to be included during certain Masses, according to *STTL*, which says acclamations should always be sung, while responses may be sung at feasts for some saints. On Sundays and weekday solemnities like



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## Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (SC) is the foundational document guiding our worship.

All Saints' Day and the Immaculate Conception, psalmody, antiphons, and the Gloria may be sung. All categories may be sung at Easter and Christmas.

The bishops' hierarchy of liturgical music may not be in place in your parish. Generally hymns dominate the liturgical music landscape, while congregational responses are most often spoken, not sung.

### What Helps Your Congregation Worship?

That's a good question to pose and answer from time to time. Does English, Spanish, Latin, or any other language help your community worship God and enter into the liturgy? Does chant, folk music, or organ hymnody help?

Music is an integral element of the liturgy that helps it nourish and foster the faith. That quality, in conjunction with the fully conscious and active participation of the faithful, remains the aim of liturgical music for the glory of God and for our own sanctification.

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*Imprimi Potest:* Fr. Kevin Zubel, CSSR, Provincial, Denver Province, the Redemptorists

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