

# MUSIC AT MASS DURING THE RETURN TO PUBLIC CELEBRATIONS

## Some Pastoral Considerations

Given that it is recommended that public celebrations of the Sacred Liturgy during this time of pandemic **not exceed forty-five minutes**, pastors and pastoral musicians will need to determine which rites of the Mass will incorporate music. Additionally, the temporary suspension of congregational singing, in order to avoid increased breath droplets in the air, will also affect musical choices and priorities. Our congregations are being asked to follow the prescriptions of St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians: “Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:19).

Is there a “priority” given by the Church to be considered when choosing which parts of the Mass to sing? In 1967, the Congregation for the Sacred Rites for the Holy See issued an instruction, *Musicam Sacram* (“Sacred Music”), which, although issued before the revised Missal of Pope St. Paul VI was issued, contains principles which apply equally to the present Order of Mass.

One of those principles is the “degrees of importance” assigned to the different sung parts of the Mass. These degrees of importance reflect not only musical priorities, as it were, but also ecclesial, and especially participatory, elements of the nature and purpose of the Liturgy, namely, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, “the glory of God, and the sanctification of the faithful” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 112)

Granted, while the Order of Mass is the same in every parish, nevertheless, legitimate pastoral practices at times differ from parish to parish. Given what is “usually” sung in “many” parishes, the following “degrees of importance” can be gleaned from *Musicam Sacram* (29-31) as they apply to the present-day Missal:

- 1. The dialogues between the priest and people and the prayers (i.e., the collect, the prayer over the offerings, and the prayer after communion).** While not always sung in most parishes, these moments of the Mass are prioritized musically by the Church due to their sacramental character, especially the complementarity between the priest and the congregation, and the sacrificial character of the Eucharist.

**2. The Ordinary of the Mass: The Lord, Have Mercy, Glory to God, Holy, Mystery of Faith, Great Amen, and Lamb of God.** These of course are the constitutive, unchanging parts of the Sunday Mass outside of Advent and Lent, and form the core of the acclamations of praise and thanksgiving rendered by the People of God in the Sacred Liturgy.

Finally, and this sometimes comes as a bit of a surprise to pastoral musicians themselves, are the following:

**3. The Entrance, Communion and Offertory chants or songs (in that order).** These parts fulfill both a functional purpose, the accompaniment of the great processions during the Mass, as well as a spiritual value, the articulation of the prayers and praises of the Church in psalmody and poetry. Interestingly enough, the recessional song is not a recognized part of Mass according to the books even though it is common, if unnecessary, pastoral practice.

**4. What about the Responsorial Psalm and the Acclamation and Verse before the Gospel?** Indeed, these are both normative sung parts of the Mass, and are included in the third category of importance by the Church in *Musicam Sacram*. They deserve special consideration during this time of pandemic, when congregational singing has been temporarily suspended by the Archbishop to increase the safety of all in attendance at Mass.

Because there is to be no congregational singing for the time being and until it can be restored to the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy in a manner which does not increase the likelihood of possible contagion, it is suggested that the Responsorial Psalm be recited, since the response to be made by the congregation is essential. Likewise, at the Gospel, the Alleluia might simply be sung once before the verse and then again after it, as the repeat of the Alleluia is specific to the sung participation of the congregation. In any case, the integrity of the texts themselves should be preserved.

An additional word about the Ordinary of the Mass: because the congregation will be limited for a time to interior participation of any sung texts, musical choices which favor more direct and succinct melodies set to the liturgical texts should be considered. These would include through-sung settings of the texts (since responses would not be made by the congregation) as well as settings which do not repeat texts for artistic effect.

An example of a musical ordo for Mass during this time of pandemic and limited return to public celebrations of the Sacred Liturgy, based on the above considerations, might look like this (not taking into account the dialogues and prayers of category one):

- Entrance Chant or Song – sung by cantor
- Lord, Have Mercy – recited
- Glory to God – sung (through-composed setting) by cantor or recited by all
- Responsorial Psalm – recited, led by the reader from the ambo
- Gospel Acclamation – Alleluia sung once by the cantor, who then chants the verse and then repeats the Alleluia
- Offertory – silent or instrumental
- Holy, Mystery of Faith, Great Amen – sung by cantor to simpler settings
- Lamb of God – recited
- Communion Chant or Song – sung by cantor
- Recessional – instrumental (which would be especially helpful in case additional instructions to the congregation be required as they depart)

This is, of course, merely one possible schema. Prudent decisions made by pastoral musicians under the direction of the parish pastor will be most effective in serving the particular needs of each respective community.

With the present suspension of congregational singing, one might question the presence of the cantor at Mass, since the ministry of cantor is dedicated to leading the congregation—the Liturgy’s principal music ministers—in their sung participation in the Mass. This is an excellent question, especially as cantors are not to be seen as “soloists” during the Sacred Liturgy (except of course when chanting those parts proper to them).

There are fundamentally two options at play here: 1) to not assign a cantor and accompanist to Mass because congregational singing is presently suspended (the Mass then being entirely spoken); or 2) to have a cantor and accompanist serve the Mass to bring some level of pastoral musical accompaniment to the celebration of the Liturgy—with the people participating only interiorly—even though such a practice is an extraordinary application of sacred music to the Mass. Again, prudent decisions made by pastoral musicians under the direction of the parish pastor will be most effective in serving the particular needs of each respective community.

That God may be glorified, and the faithful sanctified.

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