



Music

You have probably heard the request: “Can’t we just have a “quiet” Mass, one without music?” Maybe you asked it yourself! Before Vatican II, it was called a “low” Mass in contrast to the “high” Mass where the choir sang. That distinction is now gone. The revision of the liturgy following Vatican II recovered the understanding that liturgy is inherently musical and that it is the responsibility of the assembly to fully participate. That means singing to the extent we are able—even at daily Mass.

Why such emphasis on music? From the recovery of Gregorian chant in the 1800’s and from the time of Pius X’s papacy (1903-14) onward, the church has encouraged the participation of the assembly in song. There are at least four basic reasons: **First:** Music elevates the spoken word to a level of proclamation and celebration. Speaking the *Gloria* or the *Holy* is like speaking “Happy birthday to you!” rather than singing it. The force of the words is lost. Besides, the Gloria is a hymn and the Holy is a proclamation of adoration. Singing more deeply connects with the action we are performing than speaking **Second:** Singing brings a group together and forms a united identity. We witness the power of music to unite all the time, for instance, at a sports event when the fans jump up singing “We will rock you!” **Third:** Music can strengthen the meaning of words. Think of “Amazing Grace.” How does the tune support the sense of the words and reinforce them? **Fourth:** Music has the ability to communicate something beyond words. We say God is ineffable, that is, indescribable. Music has the ability to touch us on a level beyond words and helps communicate that which is inexpressible.

So, what should we sing at Mass? The basics include the Gospel Acclamation, the Holy,

Memorial Acclamation and the Amen, which should always be sung, even at daily Mass. In 1969 the Vatican put it this way: “[Liturgical] singing means singing the Mass, not just singing during Mass.” The U.S. Bishops further clarified this statement in “Sing to the Lord,” their 2008 guide on liturgical music. It sets two priorities: **acclamations and dialogues.** These days most parishes do well singing the acclamations listed above. But we may have forgotten about singing the dialogues between priest and people which were a part of Mass even after Vatican II. Although they may have fallen out of favor, the revised Missal of 2012 calls priests and people to value the dialogues as highly as the acclamations. The Missal is full of musical settings of the texts.

One way to incorporate sung dialogues is simply to sing the text on one note. “The Lord be with you.” It’s something everyone can do. It stretches out the words and elevates their importance while making participation in the response, “And with your spirit,” very easy.

What about all the other songs and hymns at Mass? They have a purpose too. They are to expand on the Scriptural themes of the day and remind us of the themes of the liturgical seasons.

Music touches our hearts and affects our spiritual awareness. It may revive a memory of loss, or love. This makes the work of the music director both easy and more difficult—easier because of the vast choices, more difficult because finding just the right text and tune to engage a specific assembly is a huge challenge.

So, what do you do if singing’s not your bag? Try mouthing the words and singing quietly, even on one note. See how that participation changes your experience of the Mass. Do you focus on the text more now? As you arrive at Mass, remember the saying attributed to Augustine: “One who sings, prays twice.” Give it a try.