

# Sing to the Lord: Guidelines for Sung Worship

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**O**n November 14, 2007, the Latin Church members of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops approved the document *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (STL). This set of guidelines is “designed to provide direction to those preparing for the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy according to the current liturgical books . . .” *Sing to the Lord* is rich in detail, offering practical guidelines for using music in celebrating Mass, the other sacraments, various rites, and devotions. The full text is available online at <http://www.usccb.org/liturgy/SingToTheLord.pdf>. Keep in mind, though that the details express some general principles that guide the celebration of sung Roman Catholic liturgy in the United States, and all of us should be familiar with those general principles, since we’re all involved in singing the liturgy.

**Christianity Was Born Singing.** “God has bestowed upon his people the gift of song,” the bishops say, and “God, the giver of song, is present whenever his people sing his praises” (STL, 1). Recognizing that the gift of song is rooted deep in human nature, the Jewish people chanted and sang their praise and petition, and the early Church made singing a key element of its liturgy. Centuries of singing have taught us that “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” (STL, 5).

**Roman Catholic Liturgy Is Sung.** We sing the liturgy because internal participation of mind and heart, expressed in and strengthened by external participation through all our senses, is both our right and our duty by reason of our baptism (see the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14). Singing is one of the best ways to express both kinds of participation, because authentic song emerges from authentic faith and our love for God: Singing is something that lovers do, St. Augustine tells us.

Each member of the liturgical assembly joins the singing in a particular way, according to that person’s role and responsibilities, from the bishop (STL, 16), the priest celebrant (STL, 18–19), and the deacon (STL, 23), through the ministers of liturgical music (STL, 22–23; 28–47) and, indeed, every member of the assembly. “Singing is one of the primary ways that the assembly of the faithful participates actively in the Liturgy” (STL, 26).

**Progressive Solemnity.** While the liturgy of the Roman

Catholic Church is a sung act of worship, not everything needs to be sung. The Latin Church has embraced a principle called “progressive solemnity,” which “includes not only the nature and style of the music, but how many and which parts of the rite are to be sung” (STL, 112). So while “music should be considered a normal and ordinary part of the Church’s liturgical life” (STL, 110), the use of music in worship is governed by a number of factors, from the ability of the local congregation and the availability of trained musical leaders to the time of day and the liturgical season or solemnity of the feast being celebrated.

Participation in sung worship is built up step by step. At the basic level—the kinds of things which should be sung most (if not all) of the time—are dialogues and acclamations (STL, 115a). Next come antiphons and psalms, refrains and repeated responses, and then hymns (STL, 115b–117). More elaborate musical forms and a wider use of instruments during the liturgy are included once these building blocks are in place.

**Formation for Sung Worship.** While the Church was born singing, its members have to learn the “language” of liturgical song, just as children have to learn the languages of speech and appropriate behavior. The whole assembly should learn musical basics, since “the whole assembly is actively involved in the music of the Liturgy” (STL, 48). But those in leadership positions should be formed for their roles as disciples, liturgical ministers, and ministers of sung worship (STL, 49–53). Catholic schools have a special role to play in this formation (STL, 54–56).

**A More Diverse Song.** As the cultural diversity of the Catholic Church in the United States increases, we need to find ways both to preserve the heritage of liturgical musical created in Western Europe—especially Gregorian chant using Latin texts—and at the same time recognize, foster, and celebrate “the rich cultural and ethnic heritage of the many peoples of our country” (STL, 57, 61–66). This is not an easy task, but it is an integral part of our affirmation and embrace of the musical nature of our shared liturgy. It is the liturgy itself that has set us on this road and made our current cultural diversity part of the pilgrim journey of the Catholic Church in the United States. As the bishops remind us, quoting St. Augustine once more, we are pilgrims on the way to the fullness of worship in the kingdom of God. Therefore, “you should sing as wayfarers do—sing but continue your journey. Do not grow tired, but sing with joy!”