

*Dispelling eight myths about church music*

**Myth 1. When it comes to music, there's no debating taste**

Many people think that the choice of music for Mass is just up to the pastor and his musicians. Some parishes have more traditional music, others more contemporary. Many parishes have a little bit of everything under the sun.

Most Catholics know that there are laws which govern church structure and worship, but many are not aware that the popes often have set down rules for what music is admissible in church worship.

In 1967 the Vatican issued *Musicae Sacram* as the musical legislation binding in the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council.

Music for the Mass is not arbitrary. Certain texts are designed by their very nature to be sung, such as the Alleluia. Others, although they may be recited, lend themselves to congregational or choral singing, such as the responses and the ordinary texts of the Mass like the gloria.

The church does not issue blacklists stating that certain songs are prohibited, but she does offer

*Sacred Music and singing are integral parts to the Sacred Roman Catholic Liturgy we affectionately call The Mass. The documents of the Church actually call for the Mass to be sung, not just for some singing at Mass. The type of music and the lyrics to be sung are also specified by the liturgical books. All are called to participate. Participation is sometimes by actively singing and sometimes by actively listening and allowing yourself to be carried away by the transcendent beauty of the Sacred Liturgy and its Sacred Music.*

general principles in her liturgical documents. While the treasury of sacred music is broad indeed, what is sung at Mass must be consistent not with the tastes of liturgy planners, but with the celebration itself. Bishops and pastors may rule that certain selections are inappropriate based on their content, associations, or irrelevance. Music at Mass is not based on what we like, but on what is appropriate for the celebration.

**Myth 2. Music at Mass is just a nice addition; it's not like it's necessary or anything.**

Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy calls sacred music an integral part of the liturgy. It is not an embellishment unrelated to the rites. The verb "to sing" is one of the most frequently used words in the Bible. Christian liturgy in ancient times was always sung.

In the Eastern Churches today the entire eucharistic liturgy is sung. "Saying" Mass became popular around the Middle Ages when private Masses multiplied, such that a distinction was made even ceremonially between a Low Mass with no music or hymns and a Sung Mass where the actual texts of the Mass were set to music.

Vatican II provides for the principle of progressive solemnity. Depending

*Beautiful choirs can at times lead the congregations in singing and at other times invite the congregation to an interior participation through listening and contemplation. This photo is of a choir singing during Mass at Notre Dame in Paris, France*

on various situations, more or less of the Mass may be accompanied by music. A cathedral on Easter Sunday should be different than a private Mass on a weekday. But the church's preference is always for sung liturgy. He who sings prays twice, said St. Augustine, and the church's prayer has inspired some of the most beautiful art and music in history.

### **Myth 3. Choirs are only there to support congregational singing.**

In the early church, the faithful sang much of the Mass. There were, however, certain melodies and texts that developed over time that some found difficult to sing.

Choirs, or *scholae cantorum*, were developed with trained singers who not only supported congregational singing, but also performed some pieces on their own. Europe saw the development of famous choir schools and Catholic education has always included the teaching of music in its curricula. The advent of part-singing made choirs even more necessary to the Mass.

Choirs can be beneficial in leading the faithful in song, but they also can have their own role apart from the congregation. Active participation does not mean that everyone has to do the same things at the same time; it implies an

interior participation by listening and contemplation as much as engaging in following the Mass and observing ritual gestures.

Paid professional cantors and choirs have been a part of the Catholic musical tradition for many centuries and continue to inspire Christians in their worship beyond what is accessible to the ordinary pew-singer. Vatican II explicitly urges the development of such choirs and musical education in schools.

#### **Myth 4. We are supposed to sing four hymns at Mass.**

Catholics in the United States have become used to singing a hymn at the entrance, at the offertory, during Communion and at the recessional at Sunday Mass. This “four-hymn sandwich” actually harkens back to pre-Vatican II days in which congregations who could not pull off Latin music were allowed to sing English hymns at Low Masses.

When English was allowed in the Mass and the rite of Mass changed, many parishes continued this practice, albeit often with different music. While hymns are allowed at Mass, they are not actually what the church asks for during those times.

The missal, the large book from which the priest reads the prayers at

Mass, provides short scriptural sentences called antiphons for the entrance and communion. In the church's legislation on sacred music, these antiphons have pride of place for singing in the Mass. The antiphons are intimately connected with the other prayers of each Sunday's Mass. The church allows for substitutions with other appropriate songs, but they should be modeled in character after those antiphons.

Hymns are not a part of the Roman eucharistic liturgy; they belong more properly to the Liturgy of the Hours. The church prefers the antiphons drawn from the Bible to hymns composed by people.

#### **Myth 5. Vatican II abolished Latin in the Mass.**

Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy states, "The use of the Latin language is to be preserved." The council fathers commanded the use of Latin while allowing for some use of the vernacular.

The same document also calls for the faithful to be able to sing parts of the Mass together in Latin. Latin gives the church a universal language.

In an increasingly mobile culture of globalization, Catholics able to follow the Mass in Latin and in their

own tongue can actively participate in their church anywhere in the world. The use of Latin also frees us from being too narrow-minded and too centered on our own nation or culture; it connects us with our history and paves the way for our future.

The point of Latin is not to make the rites impossible to understand; it is to make real the universality of the church.

One can often see people at international Masses who can all make the Latin responses and sing some things together in Latin. A powerful experience of the church's unity is when we all sing with one voice the same words that Catholics have always sung at Mass.

#### **Myth 6. The church does not have her own hymnal.**

The Graduale Romanum is the official hymnal for the Roman rite. It contains Latin chants for the entrance, the Psalm and Gospel acclamation, the offertory and Communion, which are collectively called the Propers of the Mass, for every Mass of the year.

They also provide Latin chants for Lord have mercy, glory to God, the creed, holy holy holy and Lamb of God, collectively called the Ordinary of the Mass. Music at Mass should always refer to these texts.

What is called Gregorian chant is the music proper to the Roman rite and is the church's own composition. Much of the music sung since ancient times was gathered by Pope St. Gregory the Great in the sixth century, and the church has amplified the texts from time to time.

The monks of Solesmes have done several critical editions of this hymnal, including one which can be used for the reformed liturgy. Pastors and musicians may provide for other music at Mass, and even develop other hymnals, but Gregorian chant has, as Vatican II tells us, pride of place in the liturgy. The Graduale Romanum is an indispensable tool for the church musician.

### **Myth 7. Chant is too hard for people today to sing.**

There are two principal obstacles to chant today. Many people are no longer fluent enough in Latin to understand or even pronounce it properly, and even most musicians are unfamiliar with its notation.

Just as it takes practice and education to play an instrument well, it takes time and patience to learn the language and the markings of chant. There are resources for musicians to learn the chant properly, and teaching choirs and congregations chant may take time, but it will yield amazing results.

Many people sing things that are actually more difficult. Consistent effort will break down barriers and open up new possibilities for people to sing.

When Msgr. Martin Hellriegel became pastor of Holy Cross in St. Louis in the 1950s, nobody in his parish had ever heard chant. He started teaching the school children, and the adults were inspired to learn. Within a few years, his people knew several chant Masses and could sing out of the church's official hymnal, the Graduale Romanum.

Dedication and perseverance gave the people confidence that they could sing Gregorian chant and many people today still know from memory the music they learned in the parish.

### **Myth 8. Music is supposed to make me feel good at Mass.**

Music, especially at Mass, can be very powerful. The point of sacred music, though, is not to make us feel good. Sacred music accompanies the church's rites to bring us beyond our own

emotions and experiences to a transcendent experience of the divine.

The haunting beauty of the church's traditional funeral music, for example, stresses the mystery of death and the hope of the resurrection. It is far superior to singing a loved one's favorite radio tune as a memorial.

Because the Mass is an unbloody re-presentation of the one sacrifice of Calvary, music which is theatrical and which inspires us to the worldly or to the irreligious is inappropriate to the dignity of the liturgy.

The solemnity of the church's music need not be boring or saddening, however. Sacred music can be a powerful tool in helping us see beyond ourselves to heaven.

All liturgy is essentially a revelation of God to us. If the music at Mass reveals more about what we like and what makes us happy, it is doing us a disservice. If it brings us to true prayer and helps us contemplate the beauty of God's holiness and love, it can reveal God to us in amazing ways.

Father Smith is the parochial vicar at St. Francis by the Sea Church on Hilton Head Island and a member of the Church Music Association of America. He has directed chant scholas both in Italy and the United States.

*Article by  
Father Christopher Smith  
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