Music in the Sacred Liturgy

I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
Psalm 104:33

Music is a gift from God, and the capacity to make music dwells within each human person. Music is also – simultaneously – an individual and communal activity. It is music’s communal nature that makes it an ideal art form for use in Divine Worship. The primary animator of this art form in the liturgy is the assembly. At certain times the priest, the deacon, the choir, the musicians, the psalmist, and the cantor have specific roles of their own, but it is the assembly that participates in every moment of the liturgical celebration.

Rooted In Scripture

Sacred scripture is rich in musical imagery. The Old Testament provides numerous examples of the worship of God through music, and as an expression of thanksgiving to God during important moments in salvation history. In the New Testament, the Gospels of Matthew and Mark tell of Jesus singing a hymn after the Last Supper before going to the Mount of Olives on Holy Thursday (Mt 26:30, Mk 14:26).

Additionally, St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians acclaimed the importance of singing “Hymns, Psalms and Spiritual Canticles” in gratitude to God (Eph 5:19).

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium, states that “the musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art” (SC, 112). As sacred song unites with the power of the Word, sacred music “forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy” (SC 2, 112). The Second Vatican Council also envisioned that all of the faithful take an active role in participating in the sacred liturgy: “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy” (SC, 14).

Music As Participation

When it comes to liturgical music, it is desired by the Church that this participation be expressed in two forms: internal and external participation. Liturgical participation should be “above all internal, in the sense that by it the faithful join their mind to what they pronounce or hear and cooperate with heavenly grace. It must be external also, such as to show the internal participation by gestures and bodily attitudes, by the acclamations, responses and singing” (Musicam Sacram: Instruction on the Liturgy, 1967, 15).

When considering the types of music used in Sacred Liturgy, and when one considers the myriad of tastes and preferences of those in the assembly, it is easy to see why agreeing on appropriate music can be cumbersome. Traditionally, “the Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as especially suited to the Roman liturgy” (SC, 116). Gregorian chant is a tangible expression of the universality of the Church and its rich musical-liturgical patrimony. Still, the musical repertoire of the liturgy is in a constant state of growth and
Not every song is worthy to be sung at Mass and on this topic, there is sure to be further discussion. But when liturgical music is based on biblical faith, theologically appropriate, and creates a higher form of proclamation, all are called to sing out in love of the Creator and in response to God’s love made flesh in Christ.

(Parts of this article were adapted from the work of Fr. Paul Turner and we appreciate his willingness to share his knowledge with us).

To learn more about the upcoming revisions to the liturgical norms in the Diocese of Bridgeport, visit www.formationreimagined.org. Meetings will be held throughout November for those who wish to learn more.