

Antiphons Ahead: Preparing for Singing the Mass

by Father Eric Roush

Previously we whisked through an overview of how the “four-hymn sandwich” landed at Catholic Mass, with the competing views as to implementing the Second Vatican Council’s plan for sacred music: singing *at* Mass vs. *singing the Mass*. If you missed that bulletin insert it’s available on the parish website, please check it out. Now we turn to the singing of antiphons in the Mass instead of hymns, as well as the principles which Vatican II imparts to guide us in our decisions on liturgical music.

But first, what exactly are “antiphons”? We’re probably more familiar with these than we might realize. An antiphon consists of sung verses and a repeated refrain, both of which are taken from Sacred Scripture. Generally, the congregation sings the Scriptural refrain and then a verse is usually sung by a smaller section of the congregation—like a choir or a cantor. Then we go back and sing the refrain.

If you think that sounds a lot like the Responsorial Psalm we’ve been singing every week, you’re correct! But they’re not exactly the same thing. There are two real differences between the responsorial psalm and an antiphon. The first is that the responsorial psalm is taken, not coincidentally, from the Book of Psalms; whereas an antiphon can come from any section of Scripture. The second difference is that the Responsorial Psalm should be sung in its entirety because it is a part of the Liturgy of the Word, whereas the antiphon may be completed whenever the liturgical action itself is completed, like when the priest arrives at his chair concluding the entrance procession.

This brings us to the principles guiding our decisions on music in the Mass. According to the Second Vatican Council, the music ought to accompany and serve the liturgy.¹ This is one reason why the “four-hymn sandwich” that we mentioned in the last bulletin insert is not particularly suited to the Mass, even though we’re accustomed to it. Instinctively this makes sense when we pause to ponder it. How many times have we groaned about the entrance hymn taking too long? The four-hymn approach comes from our Christian brothers and sisters who gather for praise and worship, which is good, but it isn’t the incomparable Holy Mass. Thus the strikingly different decisions we as Catholics make for liturgical music.



¹ See *Instruction on Sacred Music* no. 11; *Constitution on Sacred Liturgy* no. 112

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The first principle guiding our use of sacred music is that the liturgical action is what is most important, not necessarily the music accompanying it.² The actions of the Mass are all supremely important, infused with symbolism that unveils the truth and goodness of our faith through beauty. The liturgy is trying to communicate something with the entrance procession, the offertory procession, and the preparation of the altar. Sacred music should capture and clarify what these parts of the Mass are accomplishing, not obscure or overshadow them. While allowances are given for singing hymns in place of the proper antiphons,³ the Church states unequivocally that this is an exception and not the rule. Singing the antiphons is preferable to the singing of hymns, regardless of how familiar we may be with them.⁴

A second principle guiding our decisions on music at Mass is the pecking order of things that should be sung. The Church teaches that the most important things to sing are the dialogues between the people and the priest (i.e., “The Lord be with you”; “And with your spirit”) as well as the acclamations (i.e., “Holy, Holy Holy”; the Great Amen; the Lord’s Prayer).⁵ Even if everything else is simply said, these parts should be sung at every Mass. The next thing in this order that should be sung if anything else is sung are the antiphons: Entrance, Offertory, and Communion. These are high up on the list “because they are the very voice of God speaking to us in the Scriptures”.⁶ It’s not until the bottom of the list that hymns are even mentioned. They fall far short of fitting the majesty of the Mass because of the principles discussed above.

Antiphons are ahead, coming to Holy Trinity this Advent. However, the last thing we want is for anyone to be surprised. The changes we make will be small, step-by-step, and quite incremental. Knowing what is going on in our parish celebration of the Mass will help us achieve the full, active, and conscious participation of all the faithful called for by the Second Vatican Council.⁷ Next week a more specific “game plan” will be in the bulletin for how we hope to accomplish this move from singing at Mass to *singing the Mass*.

² See *Instruction on Sacred Music* no. 6

³ See *Instruction on Sacred Music* no. 32

⁴ See *Instruction on Sacred Music* no. 33

⁵ See *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* no. 40, *Instruction on Sacred Music* nos. 7, 16

⁶ See *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* no. 117

⁷ See *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* no. 14.