



Music in Liturgy: Principles & Practice

Music is a vital part of liturgy, especially the weekly Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. Below is a snapshot of principles and practical considerations to assist those involved in music ministry prepare and lead liturgical song in parishes and schools. For comprehensive formation for liturgical musicians, we recommend the *Liturgy Brisbane Learn & Discover* online course [Music Ministry in the Liturgy](#)

[Music] is a necessary or integral part of the sacred liturgy.

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL) #112

Among the many signs and symbols used by the Church to celebrate its faith, music is of pre-eminent importance ... it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy. The quality of joy and enthusiasm which music adds to community worship cannot be gained in any other way.

Music in Catholic Worship (MCW) #23

Singing is one of the main ways that the Assembly fully and actively participates in liturgy.

Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship (STL) #26

Liturgical Music

- encourages a sense of unity through shared communal song
- provides a sense of joy and celebration
- accompanies liturgical actions
- enables communal "shouts of joy" which highlight liturgical highpoints

Choosing Music for Liturgy: Singable & Suitable

Choose music that:

... fosters maximum participation of the gathered assembly. (STL #122)

serve(s) the needs of the Liturgy. (STL #125)

Liturgical music must be

- Singable by the assembly
- Suitable for the liturgy

Principle of Progressive Solemnity

Which parts of the Mass should we sing?

Preference should be given to those [parts] that are of greater importance. (STL #115)

Group I

(Always sung)

- **Dialogues** between priest and people (*relies on a singing presider*)
e.g. “The Lord be with you.” “And with your spirit.”
- **Acclamations** Highlight the most important parts (*Gospel & Eucharistic Prayer*)
 - Gospel Acclamation**
 - Holy, Holy, Holy**
 - Memorial Acclamation (Mystery of Faith)**
 - Amen**
- **Responsorial Psalm** By definition, a psalm is a song.
At least the people’s response should be sung.
- **Antiphons/Processionals** **Gathering Song**
Communion Song

Group II

(Should be sung)

- **Hymns & Repeated Responses**
 - Lord Have Mercy** (*Kyrie*)
 - Glory to God** (*Gloria*) – not sung in Advent & Lent
 - Prayer of the Faithful Response** (*on more solemn occasions*)
 - Lord’s Prayer** (*on more solemn occasions*)
 - Lamb of God**

Group III

(May be sung)

- **Other Songs** Preparation of the Offerings (*Offertory*)
Song after Communion (*Song of Praise*)
Recessional/Sending Song (*usually sung*)

Sources:

General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) #40

Musicam Sacram (MS) #28-31

Sing to the Lord (STL) #115

Four Judgments: One Evaluation

Is this piece of music appropriate for use in this particular liturgy? (STL #126)

A: The Liturgical Judgment

Does this song, serve the needs of this liturgy and this particular part of this liturgy?

- Does the musical style and lyrical content of the song fit this celebration?
- Does it serve the liturgical needs of the various parts of the ritual?
- e.g. *Does it fill the requirements for a Gathering Song or a Communion Song?*
- Does the song support the season, scripture readings, feast day or particular theme?
- Does the musical style/genre support the ritual action?

“It is not sufficient . . . that these songs be simply ‘Eucharistic’; they must be in keeping with the parts of the Mass, with the feast, or with the liturgical season.” (MS # 36)

B: The Musical Judgment

Is this composition technically, aesthetically, and expressively worthy? (STL # 134)

- Is this “good” music? Does it make musical sense? Does it have “artistic merit?”
- Is it suitable for sacred use? Does the musical style support the ritual action?
- Is the music within the capabilities of the Assembly? - Is it too high, too low, too difficult?

No kind of sacred music is prohibited from liturgical actions ... as long as it corresponds to the spirit of the liturgical celebration itself and the nature of its individual parts.” (MS #9)

The Church has consistently recognized and freely welcomed the use of various styles of music as an aid to liturgical worship. (STL #136)

C: The Pastoral Judgment

[The pastoral judgment] takes into consideration the actual community gathered to celebrate in a particular place at a particular time.

Does a musical composition promote the sanctification of the members of the liturgical assembly by drawing them closer to the holy mysteries being celebrated?

Is it capable of expressing the faith that God has planted in their hearts and summoned them to celebrate? (STL #130)

- Can the assembly sing this song? • Does it resonate with their age and their culture?
- Does it help this community to consciously & actively pray together?

Does the music in this celebration allow **these** people to express **their** faith in **this** place, in **this** age, in **this** culture? (MCW #39)

C: The Textual/Theological Judgment

[Lyrics] must always be in conformity with Catholic doctrine [and] should be drawn chiefly from scripture and liturgical sources and must always be true to Catholic teaching. (CSL #121)

- Does the text have artistic and poetic merit? Is it worthy of liturgical use?

lex orandi, lex credendi – as we pray, so we believe

We come to believe what we repeatedly pray & sing – our songs must be theologically sound.

The four judgments must be considered together to make a final evaluation.

Choosing Music for Mass

1. Acclamations (*always sung*) & Mass Setting

- Published Mass settings usually contain all or most acclamations & responses for Mass.
- Ideally, choose these parts from the same Mass setting.
- Must be “singable” for the whole assembly.

Gospel Acclamation

- The Gospel Acclamation may be from a different Mass setting to the other parts.
- It contains “Alleluias” in the refrain **except** in Lent.
- In Lent, choose a Lenten Acclamation e.g. “*Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ ...*”
- The *Book of the Gospels* may be processed to the ambo during the sung acclamation.

Acclamations for the Eucharistic Prayer: *Holy Holy Holy, Memorial Acc/Mystery of Faith, Amen*

- These should be from the same Mass setting forming a single musical unit.
- If one of the *Eucharistic Prayers for Masses with Children* is chosen, (*recommended for primary school & “Family-focused” Parish Masses*), choose a Mass setting that contains the extra acclamations included:
Glory to God in the highest, We praise you, Jesus has given.

Other Mass Parts will also usually be included in the chosen Mass setting:

Lord Have Mercy, Glory to God (Gloria), Lamb of God

2. Responsorial Psalm Setting

It is preferable that the responsorial Psalm be sung, at least as far as the people’s response is concerned. (GIRM #61)

- Preferably the whole psalm is sung with a Cantor or Choir singing the verses.
- **At least the people’s response should be sung** even if the verses are read.
- The response must be easily sung by the whole assembly.
- The psalm is part of the Liturgy of the Word and must be from scripture.
- Another song or hymn should not be substituted for the psalm.

[It is not] lawful to substitute other, non-biblical texts for the readings and responsorial Psalm, which contain the word of God. (GIRM #57)

Common or Seasonal Psalms

[So] that the people may be able to sing the Psalm response more readily, texts of some responses & psalms have been chosen for the various seasons of the year ... These may be used in place of the text corresponding to the reading whenever the Psalm is sung. (GIRM #61)

- An appropriate Seasonal Psalm may be chosen and used at every Mass in the season.
(See appendix below for a list of Common/Seasonal Psalms.)

Leading Psalms

1. Play response as introduction	2. Cantor sings response
3. All sing response together	4. Cantor sings verses – all respond

Psalm Numbers Due to differences in the Hebrew & Greek arrangement of the Book of Psalms the psalm numbers differ e.g. Ps 23 (The Lord is my shepherd) is listed as Ps 22 in the Lectionary. **Always check that the psalm text matches what is expected.**

3. Gathering & Communion Songs (*always sung*)

Gathering Song

The choice of Gathering song is crucial as it sets the tone for the celebration that follows. If the assembly can't participate here it can be very difficult to engage them afterwards.

The purpose of the Gathering song is to

- open the celebration
- **foster the unity** of those who have been gathered
- **introduce their thoughts to** the mystery of the **liturgical season or festivity**
- and accompany the procession of the priest and ministers. (*GIRM #47*)

To foster unity, the assembly must be able to joyfully participate in the song.

- Does the assembly know the song and can they sing it?
- Is it vibrant, and engaging?
- Does it use language of "unity" – *we, us, our* rather than *I, me, my*?
- Does it highlight the particular season or feast?
- Do the lyrics fit the action? e.g. singing of "being sent out" makes no sense here.

Communion Song

While the priest is receiving Communion, the Communion [song] is begun. Its purpose is to

- express the communicants' union in spirit by means of the unity of their voice
- to show joy of heart,
- to highlight ... the "communitarian" nature of the [Communion procession.] (*GIRM #86*)

The Communion song is about unity – uniting our voices in song to show our unity as the Body of Christ. It is a song of unity rather than of private adoration.

- Does the assembly know the song?
- Can they sing it (at least the chorus)?
- Does it use language of "unity" – *we, us, our* rather than *I, me, my*?
- Do the lyrics make it clear that this is no longer "bread and wine" but Jesus truly present in Body & Blood?
- Is this a Communion song rather than an "Offertory" song?

The entire Communion Procession is a time for united participation in song.

The time for silent prayer is after, not during Communion.

Hymns supporting the season, feast or scripture of the day may be sung during Communion however Communion songs will often be hymns of which are "Eucharistic" in nature, focusing on scriptures such as the Last Supper narrative, "one body, many parts," "we are the Body of Christ" or the "Bread of Life" scriptures from John's Gospel.

Ideally, one song would be sung throughout the Communion procession. If necessary, it may be extended by repeating some verses or adding instrumental interludes. If the assembly is large this may not always be practical and a second song may be required.

Spoken Entrance & Communion Antiphons

The Missal contains Entrance and Communion antiphons for every Mass.

However, these antiphons are only recited if there is no singing.

It is not appropriate to recite the antiphon and then sing the song.

(See MS #32, GIRM #48, GIRM #87)

4. Other songs

Other Mass Parts

If sung, select these from the chosen Mass setting (*above*):

Lord Have Mercy (*in the Penitential Act*)

Glory to God (Gloria) (*preferably sung*) *not on Advent or Lent*

Response to the Prayer of the Faithful petitions.

Lamb of God (*normally sung*)

Preparation of the Offerings

There are a number of options during the Preparation of the Offerings:

- A suitable song for the assembly to sing
- Instrumental music
- A “performance” piece by the choir or a soloist.
- Silence (*sometimes used during Lent*)

If a song is chosen it could be:

- A general song of praise
- A song which supports the liturgical season or feast
- A song which is inspired by the scripture readings
- An “offertory” song about “bread and wine”

Offertory songs and Communion songs are not interchangeable.

“Offertory” songs would sing of bringing “bread and wine” which **will become** Jesus for us. “*Eat this bread,*” “*This is my body*” or “*Do this in memory of me*” are Communion songs and are not suitable for Offertory.

Song after Communion

While it is much more important to sing **during** the Communion procession, a song may also be sung after Communion. following a brief period of silence.

When the distribution of Communion is finished ... the priest and faithful spend some time praying privately. If desired, a psalm or other canticle of praise or a hymn may also be sung by the entire congregation. (*GIRM #88*)

This song should be:

- sung by the whole assembly
- a song of praise OR
- a song which reflects themes of eucharist, the season or the scriptures.

Recessional/Sending Song

- A recessional song is not mentioned in the GIRM or other documents.
- Mass ends with the dismissal to go out and live the Good News.
- A Recessional song is usually sung but instrumental music could also be used.
- It may be seasonal, scriptural, or an inspiring song of mission and evangelisation.

APPENDIX

Common/Seasonal Psalms

To enable the psalm to be easily sung, these psalms can be substituted for the psalm of the day which appears in the Lectionary.

Season	Seasonal/Common Psalms
Advent	24/25: To you, O Lord, I lift my soul. (Show me your paths, O Lord) 84/85: Lord, show us your mercy and love.
Christmas Season	97/98: All the ends of the earth.
Lent	50/51: Be merciful, O Lord (Create a clean heart) 90/91: Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble. 129/130: With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.
Easter Season	117/118: This is the day that the Lord has made. 66/67: Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.
Ordinary Time	18/19: Lord, you have the words of everlasting life. 26/27: The Lord is my light and my salvation. 33/34: I will bless the Lord at all times (Taste and see) 62/63: My soul is thirsting for you. 94/95: If today you hear his voice 99/100: We are his people, the sheep of his flock. 102/103: The Lord is kind and merciful. 122/122: Let us go rejoicing. 144/145: I will praise your name forever.

**N.B. Many psalm numbers differ by one depending on the source of the translation.
Check that the text matches what is expected.**