

Music at Mass

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The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (**GIRM**) is the set of instructions that governs the celebration of the Eucharist. It was updated in 2001, as a result of reflection on the 40 years of experience since Vatican II, and came into force in Canada with the coming of the new translation of the missal.

Perhaps one of the most interesting and least known contributions of the new GIRM is its reflection on the role of singing in the liturgy. It offers a genuine theology of music at mass, with insights into the role of the choir, the ministry of the cantor, and the meaning of various chants in the liturgy.

The **GIRM** places the singing of the assembly at the very centre of its reflection. All musical choices are at the service of helping the assembly to sing. In this short article, I offer some commentary on the three major moments of singing and on the closing moments of the mass.

The Entrance Chant

When the people are gathered, and as the Priest enters with the Deacon and ministers, the Entrance Chant begins. Its purpose is to:

1. open the celebration,
2. foster the unity of those who have been gathered,
3. introduce their thoughts to the mystery of the liturgical time or festivity, and
4. accompany the procession of the Priest and ministers.

This chant is sung

1. alternately by the choir and the people or
2. similarly by a cantor and the people, or
3. entirely by the people,
4. or by the choir alone.

In the dioceses of Canada the Entrance Chant may be chosen from among the following:

1. the antiphon with its Psalm from the Graduale Romanum or the Graduale Simplex,
or
2. another chant that is suited to the sacred action, the day, or the time of year, and whose text has been approved by the Conference of Bishops of Canada.

The Entrance chant's most important function is to open the celebration. Thus, the singing of the assembly is the genuine beginning of the mass (as opposed to the priest's sign of the cross) This beginning has the further ritual purpose of fostering unity and focusing attention. Only as a function of all these things does it accompany the procession.

How to foster unity and focus attention?

The manner of singing proposed by the GIRM offers some significant clues: the preferred manner is call and response (i.e. dialogue) between choir/cantor and assembly. This use of dialogue singing creates a dynamic of ritual interaction that brings participants together into one body; dialogical singing is also more engaging and dramatic while being easy on the people, since they need only remember a refrain or response, which also allows them to be attentive to what is going on. This dynamic of practical community building and fostering attentiveness can also be achieved by having the entire group sing together, but then attention ought to be paid to how the musical quality of the chant awakens feelings of presence and joy. Only as a last resort ought the choir to sing alone, and even then the musical selection ought to foster unity and focus attention rather than promoting the passivity of the assembly.

The **GIRM** mentions here the Graduale Romanum and the Graduale Simplex; these are collections of antiphons for the Church year which are to be used with seasonal psalms. The entrance and communion antiphons we see in our missals come from the Graduale Romanum. This focus reflects the GIRM's overall concern for singing TEXTS. This can provide a helpful clue for the selection of appropriate music. The idea is to choose music not according to a unifying "theme" for the whole liturgy, but to express the various texts of the liturgy. For example:

1. when trying to find an appropriate processional chant to open the liturgy, and assuming that one is not looking to sing the antiphon with a seasonal psalm, one might ask: does this antiphon text remind me of a hymn, or are its images reminiscent of a particular song?
2. rather than think of how all the songs express the same theme, think of reproducing the way in which the collect, antiphons, scripture texts and so on "bounce off" each other with contrasting or complementary images and musical ideas.

The Offertory Chant

The procession bringing the gifts is accompanied by the Offertory Chant, which continues at least until the gifts have been placed on the altar. The norms on the manner of singing are the same as for the Entrance Chant. Singing may always accompany the rite at the Offertory, even when there is no procession with the gifts.

The question to ask here is: what is the mystery to which the thoughts of the assembly ought to be introduced, even as the song fosters their unity and opens a new time in the celebration? The mystery in question is that of the Eucharist about to be celebrated.

So a chant or hymn that helps people focus on the mystery of the Eucharist as meal and sacrifice of thanksgiving, and opens the people up to offering themselves to God with the gifts, in light of the Word's proclamation in this liturgy, is most appropriate here.

Note that the **GIRM** refers back to the manner of singing outlined for the Entrance Chant: first in order of preference, dialogue between assembly and cantor/choir, then people as one, and lastly choir alone.

At Communion Time

While the Priest is receiving the Sacrament, the Communion Chant is begun, its purpose being

1. to express the spiritual union of the communicants by means of the unity of their voices,
2. to show gladness of heart, and
3. to bring out more clearly the “communitarian” character of the procession to receive the Eucharist.

The singing is prolonged for as long as the Sacrament is being administered to the faithful. However, if there is to be a hymn after Communion, the Communion Chant should be ended in a timely manner.

Care should be taken that singers, too, can receive Communion with ease.

In the dioceses of Canada singing at Communion may be chosen from among the following: the antiphon from the Graduale Romanum, with or without the Psalm, or the antiphon with Psalm from the Graduale Simplex, or some other suitable liturgical chant approved by the Conference of Bishops of Canada.

This is sung either

- a. by the choir alone or
- b. by the choir or a cantor with the people.

Notice the shift in the purpose and role of singing during the communion procession.

Notice also that this is the only place where the choir is given preference over the assembly as the main ministers of singing, although the most important purpose is still to express the union of the communicants by the unity of their voices.

Notice, finally, that the singing is tightly linked to the procession, and should end when the procession ends. A second chant or hymn is envisaged as a possibility, but as we see below, it has a different purpose and should be clearly separated from the processional chant by a short time of silence.

When the distribution of Communion is over, if appropriate, the Priest and faithful pray quietly for some time. If desired, a Psalm or other canticle of praise or a hymn may also be sung by the whole congregation.

The psalm or canticle of praise is a time for the assembly to give thanks WITH ONE VOICE, as is indicated by the reference to the whole congregation. Keep in mind the importance given to silence in the liturgy; there needn't always be a thanksgiving after communion, and certainly, people should have the opportunity to pray silently between the communion processional and the thanksgiving chant.

At the End of the Mass

To the Concluding Rites belong the following:

- a) brief announcements, should they be necessary;
- b) the Priest's Greeting and Blessing, which on certain days and occasions is expanded and expressed by the Prayer over the People or another more solemn formula;
- c) the Dismissal of the people by the Deacon or the Priest, so that each may go back to doing good works, praising and blessing God;
- d) the kissing of the altar by the Priest and the Deacon, followed by a profound bow to the altar by the Priest, the Deacon, and the other ministers.

There is no rubric for a song of sending forth; in Canada, the custom has been to have such a song, and the suggestion is that this song should be in the spirit of the dismissal over the people: "going out to do good works, praising and blessing God." The song should be short and should end just as the procession leaves the Church proper. This ensures that the energy of the dismissal and sending out is not lost. Alternatively, this would be a good time to feature an organ piece or a more complex choir pieces, something that is energetic and helps people go forth in the spirit of the dismissal.