

The New Roman Missal

Music in the liturgy

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By Sr. Ann Rehrauer

We know that the spoken words in the Mass will change on Nov. 27. Another area where we'll notice changes will be the sung texts of the Mass — especially the Gloria, the Holy Holy and the Memorial Acclamation during the Eucharistic Prayer. Familiar hymns won't change, but the liturgical music will be new.

In order to accommodate the new wording, musicians composed new settings for the Mass parts. A few, like Mary Haugen's Mass of Creation, could be adapted to fit the new words, so they'll sound pretty much the same. But most composers put the new words to new melodies.

Music is one aspect of our liturgy that we sometimes take for granted. We notice the music if we especially like or dislike the hymns chosen, or if the organist did a really good job that morning. We pay attention when we have to learn new hymns or as Mass settings change with the seasons. But whether we like the music or not, whether we take it for granted or appreciate it, music is an essential aspect of our worship.

“Religious music” can be any music with a religious theme. Today we use the term “liturgical music” to describe music that is connected to the liturgical action. It is the music “of the liturgy” — not just music “in the liturgy.” It is usually related to the liturgical season and takes its meaning from the part of the Mass where it is used.

Liturgical music adds solemnity to a celebration and adds depth to our prayer. It helps connect us to the holiness of God and it facilitates our union with each other. You know you are not alone when you are surrounded by the sound of beautiful, full voices. Most of us aren't comfortable singing alone because we don't have a solo voice or the confidence to lead or carry the melody ourselves. But no matter how limited our talents, we all sound good when we sing together.

In the Mass, we use four different kinds of music. The first is the hymn. We often begin Mass with an entrance song, a rather lively melody whose theme or focus is the liturgical season, the aspect of the paschal mystery we celebrate, or an expression of our unity and community. This helps prepare us to worship together. We also sing hymns during the Communion procession and as a recessional. The recessional hymn sends us forth with a sense of mission: to live what we have heard and celebrated. We might also sing a hymn during the preparation of the gifts or simply use instrumental music.

The second form of singing is the refrain or repeated response. During the penitential rite we often sing the “Lord Have Mercy” and before Communion, the “Lamb of God.” On more solemn occasions we might also sing the response to the general intercessions. The use of refrains is especially helpful when we are processing, because it’s easier to remember just the refrain without having to rely on the words or notes in the book.

The third musical form in the Mass is the antiphons and psalms. The responsorial psalm is part of Scripture and our response to the first reading. The silence after the reading and the psalm fosters meditation on God's word that has been proclaimed.

The final form is that of dialogue and acclamation. These are outward signs of the communal aspect of our worship. They foster and bring about communion between priest and people. The priest invites, “Lift up your hearts,” and we respond, “We lift them up to the Lord.” After the words of institution and consecration, we acclaim the mystery of faith: “When we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim your death until you come.”

The liturgy has its own rhythm of spoken text, action, song and silence. During these next weeks, as we prepare to use the new missal, we will start to learn some of the new musical settings so we’ll be ready to sing with full hearts and voices on Nov. 27.

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