



INSTITUTO NACIONAL HISPANO de LITURGIA

MUSIC IN DIVINE WORSHIP: WHY DO WE SING?

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The document was approved in November of 2007 and was published in the middle of 2008 under the title “Sing to the Lord: Music for In Divine Worship”. The authors were the bishops of the United States who, through the assigned Liturgy Committee of the Episcopal Conference, decided to revise the earlier documents which had regulated the role that liturgical music played in the United States y were known as “Music in Catholic Worship (1972) Liturgical Music Today (1982). We ask ourselves: why do we need a new document? In reality, this new revision responds to the necessity requiring periodic adaptation of the texts and instructions of the liturgical reform that deal with the subject of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy and *Musicam Sacram*, the first instruction offered by the Holy See regarding music in the liturgy, and even multiple instructions that were enunciated by the Episcopal Conference in this country as well as other parts of the world, the topic of liturgical music affecting the prayer experience of our Catholic assemblies.

The reaction to the changes proposed by the reform of 1963 which consisted of, after the use of the vernacular language and the posture of the priest celebrating Mass facing the assembly, the use of music throughout the Mass became a great challenge for the faithful. Some rejected this active form of participation in the music

and others accepted this with joy. It is necessary to remember that those first decades after the Council, many faithful questioned the consequences that these changes posed to the liturgy: the quality of the music, the translations of the texts to the vernacular language, is the hymn style the only acceptable genre?, should we use only guitars?, what happened to the use of organ music?, did Gregorian chant disappear? Our assemblies were crying out for catechetical orientation necessary to understand these changes that, apparently, took place within a very short amount of time. Because of this need, it was the desire of the Bishops to provide from that moment on the best catechesis possible on the topic of liturgical music.

In the document “Sing to the Lord”, the Bishops affirmed once again the principles enunciated in the first documents, but also provided a better method of comprehension of the relationship that exists between liturgical music, musicians, the assembly, and the leaders of our rites especially the celebrants. In the same manner, the Bishops presented in a clear fashion certain practical topics that affect the execution of the music in churches, as well as the spaces for choir and musicians, the necessity for good acoustics, the use of pre-recorded music, and the role of music within the celebration of the Sacraments of the Church and Liturgy of the Hours.

Our Song of Praise and Discipleship in the Church

The document is divided into five parts or sections and a conclusion. The first section presents why we sing as a church. The answer to that question assumes many forms: from the context provided in Sacred Scripture, to the use of signs and symbols in worship, the analysis of the spiritual elements of liturgical music, the active participation of the assembly, and the criteria enunciated by the reform of 1963. It is indisputable that this section apparently provides the primary intention of the liturgical reform which solicited a better distribution of the external signs which facilitated the faithful into a deeper life as disciples of the Lord Jesus, and in turn fulfill their vocations as agents of evangelization in contemporary society.

The document affirms and reiterates the criteria established previously in “Music in Catholic Worship” and “Liturgical Music Today”; and among others: the necessity for a sound theology in the composition of new texts proposed for use in liturgy, the criteria and judgments necessary during the selection process of musical repertoire for the assembly, the use of silence during the liturgy, the selection of instruments for the liturgy, and, in general, the quality of music in worship.

However, the Bishops explore in “Sing to the Lord” other aspects that were not developed in the previous documents; among others: the importance of Song when the ordained minister (bishop, priest or deacon) celebrates or assists the liturgical celebration, the necessity for those ministers to motivate the assembly in unity of Song;

the pastoral musician as a disciple; the use of music in other Sacraments and the necessity for good acoustics in the church; the music in Catholic schools, other rites of the Church and in Popular Piety; the impact of cultural music proper to the various multicultural assemblies in the Church and the country. More that “how” to use the liturgical music, the document focused on “why” we sing in worship and explored the spirituality that is born from liturgical music and which helps us deepen our personal and communal faith life.

Therefore, let us explore some of these criteria as “guiding principles” which are converted into key points in this document, even though they can never substitute those that have already been established in the previous documents, albeit, they complement them.

Music in Divine Worship: Guiding Principles

Some liturgists have commented that “Sing to the Lord” wanted to explore many topics and cover too many elements. I, on the other hand, believe that the document itself analyzed the key aspects of liturgical music in the Church; one must explore the basic criteria in each section to appreciate the development of the themes elaborated in the paragraphs of each section.

The first criteria or principle presented in the liturgical theology emphasizes the Pascal Mystery. Our music, a continuous song of praise, is heard inside and outside of the temple because it intones the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death (paragraph 7), come to fruition in His Death and Resurrection. This very basic principle,

that many overlook, defines the “why” we sing as a community that, in spite of suffering, persecution and pain, lift our voices to God in hope. This reality springs forth from the faith filled heart as disciples of Jesus Christ called on the day of our Baptism to evangelize our world.

It is from this theological principle that the Constitution on Sacred Liturgy enunciated in 1963: the active participation of all, especially of the assembly. This participation, explained in the document, cannot be only exterior, but interior, always in cooperation with God’s grace (paragraph 12). In fact, an authentic musical participation, with voices as with instruments, should lead the faithful to a deeper faith experience so that the Kingdom of justice and peace which the Gospel proclaims and the Pascal Mystery which we are invited to live will become evident in their lives. (Paragraph 9)