

THE 20 NOVEMBER CLARIFICATION

Paragraph 48 of the American GIRM specifically requires that alternate texts replacing the Entrance Chant be approved by “the Conference of Bishops or the Diocesan Bishop.” In a 2012 book ¹, Fr. Paul Turner made the following assertion: ² **“No official approbation is required for hymns, songs, and acclamations written for the assembly.”** Fr. Turner went on to say:

The approval of local bishops in the third and fourth options can be formal, but commonly bishops have given at least tacit approval to the use of songs appearing in published worship aids, if not songs composed by local musicians.

This statement is explicitly contradicted by the GIRM, and clarification was requested from the Bishops’ Committee. Their response follows:

Msgr. Rick Hilgartner, Secretariat of Divine Worship (20 November 2012)

I know Paul Turner very well... he is a well-respected scholar and pastor. His point has to do with the local parish and the choice of music for a particular liturgical moment, **and he is correct**. As I have mentioned to you before, collections of hymns and songs (i.e., hymnals) must be approved for publication by the bishop of the place where they are published. But the “state of affairs” in regard to music for the liturgy in the United States is such that it would be **impossible** to review every piece of music that is composed for liturgical use... many directors of music compose their own psalm settings, and new pieces for choirs are written and published every year. The law gives Conferences of Bishops authority to restrict it, but the USCCB has given wider latitude, and the guidelines articulated in *Sing to the Lord* (2007) are given to guide composers in their composition and those who plan/prepare liturgy in the choice of music specifically because the Conference cannot review every single composition. While some might want greater or more strict oversight, it is **just not feasible** in the U.S., and the law allows for discretion on the part of the Conference of Bishops. To do otherwise would be **difficult**, because a single policy or strict repertoire cannot possibly anticipate the needs of a particular community (including the variety of cultures in our parishes—what languages, styles, or forms of music are appropriate) or the capability of local communities (what musical resources are present, what particular musicians are capable of playing/singing, what music an assembly knows). It’s really the principle of subsidiarity. Be thankful for this flexibility.

¹ *Let Us Pray: A Guide to the Rubrics of Sunday Mass, Updated to Conform with the Revised English Translation of The Roman Missal* (Copyright 2012 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, MN), page 35.

² Fr. Turner based his assertion on a 1996 document which is doubly defunct. First, the 1996 statement relied on another one from around 1969 *which expired and was superseded very quickly after it was issued*. Second, the 1996 statement he cites expired and was replaced by the new GIRM (circa 2002) and third edition of the Roman Missal (circa 2010). For Fr. Turner to cite such a document in 2012 is inexplicable.

ANALYSIS AND QUESTIONS

This clarification by the Secretariat of Divine Worship is difficult to understand, inasmuch as it explicitly contradicts the current GIRM. In essence, the Secretariat of Divine Worship seems to be saying there is a “5th Option,” as follows:

In the Dioceses of the United States of America, there are four options for the Entrance Chant: [...] (4) another liturgical chant that is suited to the sacred action, the day, or the time of year, similarly approved by the Conference of Bishops or the Diocesan Bishop; (5) any other alternate text and/or musical setting written by anyone which requires no approval so long as it does not appear in a collection.

QUESTION: Is it fully correct to understand that any song using any text can be sung at Mass (replacing the Entrance Chant) without approval so long as it does not appear inside a collection?

The vast majority of Catholic churches currently replace the Entrance Chant, Offertory Chant, and Communion Chant with an alternate text. Often, this text is written by a non-Catholic. Sometimes it is a “paraphrase” of Sacred Scripture, and sometimes it is not. According to this “5th Option” described in the *20 November Clarification* (see above), using an alternate text requires no approval unless it appears inside a collection. Therefore, my non-Catholic friend could compose an alternate text and this could lawfully be sung at Mass without any approval whatsoever, as long as he does not publish his alternate text inside a collection.

This seems quite problematic on a number of levels. For instance, imagine a situation wherein a parish sings a particular song for many years. No approval is needed, according to the “5th Option.” Then, let us assume the same song is added to a collection. According to the *20 November Clarification*, the parish must stop using that setting until the entire collection is approved by “the bishop in the diocese where the collection is published.” This process could take years, or it might never happen. People might become upset about this. What happens if the collection then goes out of print? Can the song once more be used? What about songs that are included in various different collections? Of what value is this “approval” if it is **automatically granted** for songs and hymns not yet published in a collection?

QUESTION: At what precise moment does an alternate text become “unapproved” once it is accepted for publication inside a collection? What happens if the process of publication is delayed for months or years? Furthermore, if an alternate text ceases to be part of a collection (for instance, if the collection goes out of print, or if the composer withdraws rights) does that alternate text once more become “approved,” as stated by Fr. Paul Turner and confirmed by the Secretariat of Divine Worship on 20 November?