



PASTORAL LETTER ON SACRED MUSIC IN DIVINE WORSHIP

“Sing to the LORD a New Song”

of the Archbishop of Portland in Oregon
the Most Reverend Alexander K. Sample

to the Priests, Deacons, Religious,
Musicians and Faithful of the Archdiocese

ABBREVIATIONS

ALH	Archdiocesan Liturgical Handbook , Archdiocese of Portland, 2018
CDWDS	Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments.
CCT	Pope St. John Paul II, Chirograph for the Centenary of <i>Tra Le Sollecitudini</i> , 2003
CIC	Codex Iuris Canonici (Code of Canon Law) , 1983
DC	Pope Pius XI, Divini Cultus , 1928.
GIRM	General Instruction of the Roman Missal , 2002 (US English edition 2011).
MD	Pope Pius XII, Mediator Dei , 1947
MS	SCR, Instruction Musicam Sacram , 1967.
MSD	Pope Pius XII, Musicae Sacrae Disciplina , 1955.
RS	CDWDS, Instruction Redemptionis Sacramentum , 2004.
SC	Second Vatican Council, Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium , 1963.
SCR	Sacred Congregation for Rites
SCSE	Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation Sacramentum Caritatis (Sanctissima Eucaristia) , 2007.
STTL	USCCB, Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship , 2007.
TLS	Pope St. Pius X, Motu Proprio Tra Le Sollecitudini , 1903.
USCCB	United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (formerly NCCB/USCC).



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INTRODUCTION

Shortly before I was appointed to the Archdiocese of Portland, I issued a pastoral letter in my previous Diocese of Marquette concerning sacred music. The letter contained certain considerations that I believe can be beneficial to the Archdiocese of Portland since it highlighted some of the perennial truths regarding the Church’s teaching on sacred music. After recently reflecting on the principles and concepts it contained, I decided that a similar letter to the clergy and faithful of the Archdiocese of Portland would be opportune. I make no apology for largely basing this letter on my previous one since the values and ideas it promoted are both universal and enduring and are as valid today as they were then.

While the [Archdiocesan Liturgical Handbook](#) contains much of this information in a summary form, I thought it would be useful to write this pastoral letter to give our pastors and musicians a more detailed reference text for formation purposes and as a complement to the Archdiocesan Liturgical Handbook.

In any discussion of the *ars celebrandi* (the art of celebrating) as it relates to the Holy Mass, perhaps nothing is more important or has a greater impact than the place of sacred music. In the *ars celebrandi*, liturgical song has a pre-eminent place. St. Augustine rightly says in a famous sermon that *“the new man sings a new song. Singing is an expression of joy and, if we consider the matter, an expression of love.”*¹

¹ *Sermo* 34, 1: Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 38, 210.

Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that: “*The People of God assembled for the liturgy sing the praises of God. In the course of her two-thousand-year history, the Church has created, and still creates, music and songs which represent a rich patrimony of faith and love. This heritage must not be lost.*”² The beauty, dignity and prayerfulness of the Mass depend to a large extent on the music that accompanies the liturgical action. The Holy Mass must be truly beautiful, the very best we can offer to God, reflecting his own perfect beauty and goodness.

Pope Francis summarizes the current situation and calls for renewal:

*Certainly the meeting with modernity and the introduction of speech in the Liturgy has given rise to many issues: of language, form and musical genre. At times a certain mediocrity, superficiality and banality have prevailed, to the detriment of the beauty and intensity of liturgical celebrations. For this reason, the various key figures in this sphere, musicians, composers, conductors and choristers of the scholae cantorum, with liturgical coordinators, can make a precious contribution to the renewal, especially in qualitative terms, of sacred music and of liturgical chant. In order to foster this development, an appropriate musical formation must be promoted, even of those who are preparing to become priests, in a dialogue with the musical trends of our time, with the inclusion of different cultural areas and with an ecumenical approach.*³

Because the place of sacred music is so important, I am issuing this pastoral letter on the nature, purpose and quality of sacred music. This is an important discussion to have, since so often the music selected for Mass is reduced to a matter of subjective “taste,” i.e. what style of music appeals to this or that person or group, as if there were no objective principles to be followed. There are indeed objective principles worthy of study and proper implementation, as will be shown.

At the outset, it must be acknowledged that pastoral musicians have labored long and hard in the wake of the Second Vatican Council to help accomplish the Council’s goals as it concerns the renewal of the Sacred Liturgy, especially the Mass. Indeed, many have made it their lives’ work to provide music for the Sacred Liturgy. The Church, including both clergy and laity, is grateful beyond words for their dedication and service. It must also be said that the principles and practical applications which follow will come as a real change in focus and direction for many of these same dedicated musicians. What is attempted here is a faithful presentation of what the Church has taught as it regards sacred music from the time before the Council, at the Council itself, and in the implementation of the Council’s thought in subsequent years. Although much of what follows may contravene the formation that many have experienced over recent years, this is in no way to be interpreted as a criticism of those dedicated church musicians who have offered their service with a generous heart and with good will.

² SCSE 42.

³ Address to participants of the International Conference on Sacred Music, Vatican City, 4 March 2017.

Change can be difficult, but this can also be an exciting time of rediscovering the spirit of the liturgy and exploring new horizons of sacred music. Through education and formation, the Archdiocese will attempt to provide all the support, encouragement and assistance it can to musicians in implementing the Church's vision and norms for sacred music.

1. SOME HISTORY AND THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF SACRED MUSIC

Questions concerning the place of music in divine worship can be traced back to the earliest days of the Church. At around the time of the Edict of Milan (313 a.d.) and the legalization of Christianity, the question of the inclusion of music in sacred worship was raised and much debated. Did it have a place at all in the Church's worship? Since the psalms, part of Sacred Scripture, were meant to be sung, music was seen, ultimately, to be part of the very integrity of the Word of God. Furthermore, since Christian worship was moored to the Sacred Scriptures, music was seen as necessarily worthy of being preserved and fostered in the public worship of the Church.

Therefore, in the tradition of all the Apostolic Churches, sacred music has been considered integral to the Sacred Liturgy. This means that the music proper to the Mass is not merely an addendum to worship, i.e. something external added on to the form and structure of the Mass. Rather, sacred music is an essential element of worship itself. It is an art form which takes its life and purpose from the Sacred Liturgy and is part of its very structure.

The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as sacred song united to the words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy⁴ (emphasis added).

This understanding would preclude the common notion that we take the Mass and simply “tack on” four songs (the opening hymn, offertory hymn, communion hymn and recessional hymn), along with the sung ordinary of the Mass (Gloria, Sanctus, etc.). We must come to see that, since sacred music is integral to the Mass, the role of sacred music is to help us sing and pray the texts of the Mass itself, not just ornament it.

With this understanding of the essential nature of sacred music, what might be said of its purpose?

Sacred music, being a complementary part of the solemn liturgy, participates in the general scope of the liturgy, which is the glory of God and the sanctification and edification of the faithful.⁵

⁴ SC 112.

⁵ TLS I:1.

The following statement from the Second Vatican Council in 1963 is drawn from the Motu Proprio, *Tra Le Sollecitudini* of Pope St. Pius X of 1903, quoted above:

*Accordingly, the Sacred Council, keeping to the norms and precepts of ecclesiastical tradition and discipline, and having regard to the purpose of sacred music, which is the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful, decrees as follows...*⁶ (emphasis added).

The Church solemnly teaches us, then, that the very purpose of sacred music is twofold: the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful. This understanding of the essential nature and purpose of sacred music must direct and inform everything else that is said about it. This essential nature and purpose will also have important and serious implications regarding its proper place within our divine worship.

2. THE QUALITIES OF SACRED MUSIC

With a proper understanding of the nature and purpose of sacred music and its relationship to the Holy Mass, it is necessary to next discuss the essential *qualities* of sacred music. These qualities are not arbitrary or subjective. Rather they objectively flow from the essential nature and purpose of sacred music itself.

Church teaching emphasizes that the music proper to the Sacred Liturgy possesses three qualities: sanctity, beauty and universality. Only music which possesses all three of these qualities is worthy of Holy Mass.

*Sacred music should consequently possess, in the highest degree, the qualities proper to the liturgy, and in particular sanctity and goodness of form, which will spontaneously produce the final quality of universality.*⁷

a. The Sanctity of Sacred Music

Turning once again to the teaching of Pope St. Pius X, which has had a significant impact on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in this regard, we read:

*[Sacred music] must be holy, and must, therefore, exclude all profanity not only in itself, but in the manner in which it is presented by those who execute it.*⁸

Vatican II emphasized the sanctity of sacred music in these terms:

*(S)acred music is to be considered the more holy in proportion as it is more closely connected with the liturgical action, whether it adds delight to prayer, fosters unity of minds, or confers greater solemnity upon the sacred rites.*⁹

⁶ SC 112.

⁷ TLS I:2.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ SC 112.

b. The Intrinsic Beauty (Artistic Goodness) of Sacred Music

Since everything associated with the Mass must be beautiful, reflecting the infinite beauty and goodness of the God we worship, this applies in a special way to the music which forms an essential and integral part of our divine worship. In the words of Pope Francis:

*Liturgical and sacred music can be a powerful instrument of evangelization, because it gives people a glimpse of the beauty of heaven.*¹⁰

Pope Benedict XVI states:

*Certainly, the beauty of our celebrations can never be sufficiently cultivated, fostered and refined, for nothing can be too beautiful for God, Who is Himself infinite Beauty. Yet our earthly liturgies will never be more than a pale reflection of the liturgy celebrated in the Jerusalem on high, the goal of our pilgrimage on earth. May our own celebrations nonetheless resemble that liturgy as closely as possible and grant us a foretaste of it!*¹¹

Pope St. Pius X spoke of the artistic value of sacred music, another way of considering its intrinsic beauty:

*[Sacred music] must be true art, for otherwise it will be impossible for it to exercise on the minds of those who listen to it that efficacy which the Church aims at obtaining in admitting into her liturgy the art of musical sounds.*¹²

c. The Universality of Sacred Music

Finally, the third essential quality of sacred music must be considered, i.e. its universality. This quality means that any composition of sacred music, even one which reflects the unique culture of a particular region, would still be easily recognized as having a sacred character. The quality of holiness, in other words, is a universal principle that transcends culture.

*While every nation is permitted to admit into its ecclesiastical compositions those special forms which may be said to constitute its native music, still these forms must be subordinate in such a manner to the general character of sacred music, that nobody of any nation may receive an impression other than good on hearing them.*¹³

This articulation of the essential qualities of sacred music is necessary because there is often a lack of understanding or confusion as to what music is proper to the Mass and worthy of its inclusion in divine worship. Not every form or style of music is capable of being rendered suitable for the Mass.

¹⁰ Audience with International Choirs, Vatican City, 24 November 2018.

¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI Address to priests at the Cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris, 13 September 2008.

¹² TLS I:2.

¹³ Ibid.

One often gets the impression that, as long as the written text of the music or song speaks about God, then it qualifies as “sacred music.” Given what has been articulated here, this is clearly not the case. As an example, the *Gloria* of the Mass set to a Polka beat or in the style of rock music is not sacred music. Why not? Because such styles of music, as delightful as they might be for the dance hall or a concert, do not possess all three of the intrinsic qualities of sanctity, artistic goodness (beauty) and universality proper to sacred music. While Catholics rightly expect genuine sacred music in all its forms to have spiritual and emotional impact, there is a necessary divide between that and what generally we call entertainment.

3. THE TREASURY OF SACRED MUSIC IN THE CHURCH

The treasury of sacred music in the Church is indeed vast and spans many centuries, from the earliest development of chant down to our own day. But it must be born in mind that any music which forms part of this treasury, whether ancient or modern, must possess the essential qualities mentioned above and must have the true nature and purpose of sacred music as understood by the Church.

An examination of the different forms of sacred music held as a treasure by the Church is in order at this point.

a. Gregorian Chant

Any discussion of the different forms of sacred music must start with Gregorian chant. The Second Vatican Council, taking a lead from Pope St. Pius X, articulated that Gregorian chant should enjoy a *pride of place* in the Roman liturgy. Every official liturgical document and every teaching of the popes since then has reiterated this important principle. Here again are the words of Pope St. Pius X:

*Gregorian chant has always been regarded as the supreme model for sacred music, so that it is fully legitimate to lay down the following rule: the more closely a composition for church approaches in its movement, inspiration and savor the Gregorian form, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes; and the more out of harmony it is with that supreme model, the less worthy it is of the temple.*¹⁴

As regards the faithful’s participation in sacred chant, Pope Pius XI had the following to say:

*In order that the faithful may more actively participate in divine worship, let them be led once more to sing the Gregorian chant, so far as it belongs to them to take part in it.*¹⁵

These themes of Pope St. Pius X and Pope Pius XI were actively taken up by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council:

¹⁴ TLS II:3.

¹⁵ DC IX.

*(S)teps should be taken so that the faithful may also be able to say or to sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them.*¹⁶

*The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy. Therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services.*¹⁷

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal, in setting out the norms for the celebration of Holy Mass reiterates this last point of the Council:

*The main place should be given, all things being equal, to Gregorian chant, as being proper to the Roman liturgy.*¹⁸

One of the great Popes of our time, St. John Paul II, made the teaching of Pope St. Pius X his own:

*With regard to compositions of liturgical music, I make my own the “general rule” that St Pius X formulated in these words: ‘The more closely a composition for the Church approaches in its movement, inspiration and savor the Gregorian melodic form, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes; and the more out of harmony it is with that supreme model, the less worthy it is of the temple.’ It is not, of course, a question of imitating Gregorian chant but rather of ensuring that new compositions are imbued with the same spirit that inspired and little by little came to shape it.*¹⁹

Pope Benedict XVI, has made known his own teaching on the importance of Gregorian chant to the Sacred Liturgy:

*(W)hile respecting various styles and different and highly praiseworthy traditions, I desire, in accordance with the request advanced by the Synod Fathers, that Gregorian chant be suitably esteemed and employed as the chant proper to the Roman liturgy.*²⁰

The U.S. Bishops’ document on sacred music, *Sing to the Lord*, also reminded the Church in the United States of the importance and *pride of place* enjoyed by Gregorian chant. Some practical suggestions are given in that document for the implementation of this principle.²¹

Given all of this strong teaching from the Popes, the Second Vatican Council, and the U.S. Bishops, how is it that this ideal concerning Gregorian chant has not been realized in the Church? Far from enjoying a *pride of place* in the Church’s Sacred Liturgy, one rarely if ever hears Gregorian chant.

¹⁶ SC 54.

¹⁷ SC 116.

¹⁸ GIRM 41.

¹⁹ CCT 12.

²⁰ SCSE 42.

²¹ STTL 72-80.

This is a situation which must be rectified. It will require great effort and serious catechesis for the clergy and faithful, but Gregorian chant must be introduced more widely as a normal part of the Mass. Some practical steps toward this are outlined in the Guidelines section of this pastoral letter.

b. Other Sacred Music of the Church

As regards the sacred music which is appropriate for liturgical worship, next in importance to Gregorian chant is the vast repertoire of sacred polyphony, old and new, Eastern and Western. In the words of Vatican II:

(O)ther kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, are by no means excluded from liturgical celebrations, so long as they accord with the spirit of the liturgical action²² (emphasis added). The treasure of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with great care. Choirs must be diligently promoted.²³

(Sacred polyphony is composed in a particular musical form and is most often associated with the Renaissance and composers such as Palestrina, Victoria, Tallis, Allegri and the like.)

Also a part of the Church's musical treasury is the vast body of popular sacred music. In the context of the Sacred Liturgy, the term "popular" does not signify the so-called "pop culture" but comes from the Latin *populus*, people. Popular sacred music includes hymnody, psalmody, vernacular Mass settings, many of the Latin chant Mass settings, and other forms of sacred music suited to the musical abilities of the people.

Religious singing by the people is to be intelligently fostered so that in devotions and sacred exercises, as also during liturgical services, the voices of the faithful may ring out according to the norms and requirements of the rubrics.²⁴

The musical treasury of the Church includes not only sacred music indebted to European musical culture but also the sacred music native to other nations and peoples, which has organically developed in the context of the Latin Rite. In a community with vital social and historical ties to a specific culture, it can be most fitting that the sacred music tradition of that culture be a part of its worship when, under the guidance of the Church, it can be organically integrated into the context of Catholic worship.

In certain parts of the world, especially mission lands, there are peoples who have their own musical traditions, and these play a great part in their religious and social life. For this reason due importance is to be attached to their music, and a suitable place is to be given to it, not only in

²² SC 116; GIRM 41.

²³ SC 114.

²⁴ SC 118.

*forming their attitude toward religion, but also in adapting worship to their native genius.*²⁵

It is important to note here that when we speak of the sacred music of a particular culture, we are indeed speaking of music that is considered truly “sacred” within a culture. This principle is not applicable to subcultures within a given society that have no connection with a religious or spiritual culture.

c. Secular Music

The Church recognizes an objective difference between sacred music and secular music. Despite the Church’s norms, the idea persists among some that the lyrics alone determine whether a song is sacred or secular, while the music is exempt from any liturgical criteria and may be of any style. This erroneous idea, which was alluded to earlier, is not supported by the Church’s norms.

This does not mean that more modern compositions are not to be admitted into the Mass. However, such compositions must meet the essential and objective criteria for what constitutes sacred music. Following are some useful citations illustrating this point. First, Pope Pius XII before the Second Vatican Council:

*It cannot be said that modern music and singing should be entirely excluded from Catholic worship. For, if they are not profane nor unbecoming to the sacredness of the place and function, and do not spring from a desire of achieving extraordinary and unusual effects, then our churches must admit them since they can contribute in no small way to the splendor of the sacred ceremonies, can lift the mind to higher things and foster true devotion of soul.*²⁶

An exhortation from the Council itself:

*Let (composers) produce compositions which have the qualities proper to genuine sacred music.*²⁷

From St. John Paul II:

*Today, the meaning of the category “sacred music” has been broadened to include repertoires that cannot be part of the celebration without violating the spirit and norms of the liturgy itself. Not all the expressions of music are able to express adequately the mystery grasped in the fullness of the Church’s faith. Consequently, not all forms of music can be considered suitable for liturgical celebrations.*²⁸

From Pope Benedict XVI:

As far as the liturgy is concerned, we cannot say that one song is as good as another. Generic improvisation or the introduction of musical genres which fail to respect the meaning of the liturgy

²⁵ SC 119.

²⁶ MD 193.

²⁷ SC 121.

²⁸ CCT 4.

*should be avoided. As an element of the liturgy, song should be well integrated into the overall celebration. Consequently everything - texts, music, execution - ought to correspond to the meaning of the mystery being celebrated, the structure of the rite and the liturgical seasons.*²⁹

These reflections on the nature, purpose, qualities and treasury of sacred music in the Church's liturgy present serious challenges in our own day as we seek to renew the Mass in a way that respects, fosters and promotes the true nature of the Mass itself. It will not be easy and will take time and patience. But it must be done if we are to achieve a genuine *ars celebrandi* in the Mass. The practical guidelines regarding sacred music in this pastoral letter will help move us in the right direction.

GUIDELINES FOR THE ARCHDIOCESE OF PORTLAND

The following guidelines are intended to direct the development of a deeper understanding of the place of sacred music within the liturgy of the Mass and to implement the fundamental principles outlined in this pastoral letter. They are to be integrated into the life of the parishes, missions and schools of the Archdiocese of Portland. They are also applicable to all weddings and funerals in the Archdiocese, even if celebrated outside of Mass. Although the implementation of these guidelines may take some time and catechesis, these guidelines are to be considered normative within the Archdiocese of Portland under the authority of the diocesan bishop, to whom is entrusted the responsibility to moderate, promote and guard the entire liturgical life of the local Church.³⁰

1. GENERAL STANDARDS

a. *Participatio Actuosa* (Active Participation)

Those responsible for sacred music in the Mass must foster and enable the *participatio actuosa* (active participation) of all the faithful; all should have the opportunity to participate fully and consciously in the sacred action of the Mass. This does not mean that everyone present must sing everything all the time; the sacred music of the Mass pertains to different participants in different ways depending on its structure and its position in the rite. The congregation should be encouraged and enabled to sing whenever appropriate, and when the singing is properly rendered by the cantor or choir alone, participate interiorly through engaged and prayerful silent reflection. Likewise, the musicians should be attentive and prayerfully engaged in the parts of the Mass which do not necessarily involve music, both for their own spiritual good and so as not to become a distraction to others. They should participate in the Mass, observing all the appropriate postures and gestures of the congregation to the fullest degree possible.

²⁹ SCSE 42.

³⁰ CIC cann. 835 §1, 838 §4.

Pope Francis recently encouraged musicians and singers to study and prepare so that they can accompany the liturgy well, and not be tempted to draw attention to themselves: “*Please, do not be a ‘prima donna.’*” he said. Liturgical musicians, he continued, should be “*animators of the song of the whole assembly,*” not replace it.³¹

Again Pope Francis; “*Active and conscious participation in the liturgy constitutes being able to ‘enter deeply’ into the mystery of God made present in the Eucharist: thanks in particular to the religious silence and musicality of language with which the Lord speaks to us.*”³²

b. Formation and Compensation

Pastors should see that musicians and those who direct them have opportunities for continuing education and authentic liturgical formation through agencies and events approved by the Archbishop. In accord with the Church’s teaching on economic justice, pastors are to ensure that those who direct sacred music in the parish receive just compensation for their time and skills, commensurate with their experience and level of training.

Pope Francis said that while liturgical music has often struggled to live up to the quality and beauty the mystery of the Eucharist requires, we can promote its renewal by investing in a solid musical education for clergy and laity.

c. Practice and Liturgical Discipline

As Pope Benedict XVI has stated, “*Nothing can be too beautiful for God.*” Musicians should take these words to heart, because it is they who bear much of the responsibility for bringing beauty to our liturgical celebrations. Pastors should encourage musicians to aspire to the highest levels of beauty in sacred music and to embrace with joy the work which this entails. We should always aim high to offer God the best and the most beautiful music of which we are capable. Whether paid or volunteer, those responsible for sacred music in the Mass every week should be committed to prior practice and rehearsal. Every hour of worship should represent at least two hours of structured preparation at a time and place apart from the congregation.

d. Knowledge of the Documents

Every pastor and music director has a serious responsibility to read and become familiar with the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of the Second Vatican Council and the Church’s teaching documents on the liturgy and sacred music. Musical decisions in the Mass should always be informed by knowledge of the principles and norms contained in these documents. These documents are listed in the abbreviations and are easily accessible on the Internet.

³¹ Audience with International Choirs, Vatican City, 24 November 2018.

³² Homily, Casa Santa Marta, 12 December 2013.

e. Preparation not Planning

It is important to keep in mind that we do not *plan* Holy Mass; the Church has already provided us with a plan. We *prepare* to celebrate the Mass. This is a subtle yet important distinction. The plan is found in the liturgical calendar and the official liturgical books: the Ordo, the Missal, the Lectionary and the *Graduale*. Our celebrations should faithfully carry out the Church's plan as far as we are able, according to the resources and talents of the community, formed by knowledge of the norms and Catholic worship tradition.

Let us remember the admonition of Pope Pius XII: "*It should hardly be necessary to add the warning that, when the means and talent available are unequal to the task, it is better to forego such attempts than to do something which would be unworthy of divine worship and sacred gatherings.*"³³

Preparation for the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy, and particularly for the selection of what is to be sung at the Sacred Liturgy is ultimately the responsibility of the pastor and of the priest who will celebrate the Mass.³⁴

f. What Should We Sing at Mass?

1] The liturgical books (the Missal, *Graduale* and Lectionary) envision that, as a rule, we *sing the Mass at Mass*, rather than *sing songs during Mass*. To truly sing the Mass as described below is the ideal and should be an overall priority for parish worship.

2] The sung parts of the Mass consist of the Ordinary, the Propers, the Orations and the Dialogues:

The **Ordinary** consists of the Mass parts which are the same every Sunday: *Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*. At times it is also appropriate to sing the *Credo*. Ordinarily these pertain to the congregation, although on occasion a skilled choir is permitted to sing a more challenging setting alone. They may be sung in Latin or the vernacular, in Gregorian settings or in other forms of sacred music.

The **Propers** are the parts which vary according to the calendar: *Entrance Chant, Responsorial Psalm, Alleluia* with its *Verse*, *Offertory Chant* and *Communion Chant*.

Entrance Chant, Offertory Chant and *Communion Chant*

As the name implies, these are the chants sung at the Entrance, preparation of the Gifts and Communion respectively. These are found in the *Graduale Romanum*, the Missal and the *Graduale Simplex*, and are intended to be sung in Latin or the vernacular. Using the texts and musical settings for these chants is the first and

³³ MSD 61.

³⁴ STTL 119; cf. GIRM 111, 352.

preferred option.³⁵ It is worth noting that many of the texts for these chants as they are found in the Roman Missal are relatively new, and new musical settings for them, in Latin and English, are even now being composed by church musicians.

Responsorial Psalm and the *Alleluia* with its *Verse*

These are the chants between the readings. The Responsorial Psalm with its response is normally taken from the Lectionary as assigned for that day. A “seasonal” Psalm with its response selected from the Lectionary may also be sung. A selection from the *Graduale Romanum* or the *Graduale Simplex* may also be used.³⁶ The *Alleluia Verse* is normally taken from the Lectionary itself or the *Graduale*. During Lent, the *Alleluia* is replaced by the *Verse* before the Gospel.³⁷

The **Orations and Dialogues** are the texts of the Collects and other presidential prayers, and those in which the celebrant and people address each other, for example the greeting and its response: “*The Lord be with you*” - “*And with your spirit*”. Musical notations for these dialogues are provided in the Missal and should be used.

g. What About Hymns?

1] Hymns are a musical form pertaining more properly to the Liturgy of the Hours, rather than the Mass. Hymn-singing at Mass originated in the custom of the people singing vernacular devotional hymns at Low Mass during the celebrant’s silent recitation of the Latin prayers. However, the current Missal as well as official liturgical documents envision a singing of the Mass as outlined above.

2] The Roman Missal assigns a few hymns to various Masses in the course of the liturgical calendar (for example, the Sequences for Easter and Pentecost, and the *Ubi caritas* and *Pange lingua* on Holy Thursday). However, the hymns and songs commonly sung at Mass every week at the Entrance, Preparation of the Gifts and Communion are not identified in the Missal. It is important to recognize that when we sing hymns at these moments during Mass, we are omitting some of the Mass chants, i.e. the Propers, as discussed above.

3] Singing hymns in place of the Proper chants is permissible for pastoral reasons. The liturgical norms put the highest priority on singing the rite itself. We may never substitute other texts for the Ordinary parts of the Mass as described above. However, if it is not possible or practical to sing the Proper parts, we are referred to a secondary option: substituting music from a source other than the Missal, such as hymns from a hymnal.³⁸ These cannot be just any songs; they should be “liturgical”, i.e. based on liturgical texts or at least in some other way closely tied in

³⁵ GIRM 48, 74 and 87.

³⁶ Ibid. 61.

³⁷ Ibid. 63.

³⁸ GIRM 48, 74 and 87.

with the Mass or the season. They must also meet the requirements for what constitutes sacred music. Note that this substitution of hymns for the Propers applies only to the Entrance Chant, the Offertory Chant and the Communion Chant, and never to the Responsorial Psalm or the Gospel Verse.

2. SPECIFIC MUSICAL STANDARDS FOR PARISH MASSES

a. Singing the Mass

1] One parish celebration every Sunday should be a Sung Mass (*Missa cantata*), offered with consistency and with the greatest care and attention the community can give it. In the former traditional parlance, this may have been referred to as a High Mass. It could also be referred to as a Solemn Mass. A Sung Mass need not be elaborate; indeed, the principle of noble simplicity should guide it. Other Masses in the parish may include less singing and more recited parts, but the Sung Mass sets the pattern and the model for sacred music in the parish.

2] The current Missal sometimes refers to the “principal” Mass of a parish. This may be the appropriate choice for the celebration of the Sung Mass. Parishes whose only Mass of precept is on Saturday may make this a Sung Mass. Pastors who have the care of more than one parish may rotate the Sung Mass among them weekly or seasonally according to local circumstances.

3] The Church’s liturgy recognizes the principle of “degrees” or “progression” of solemnity, according to the liturgical calendar and the capabilities of the ministers of the Mass and the congregation. Singing plays a significant role in the application of this principle. In other words, on more solemn occasions, more of the Mass would be sung by the ministers and congregation and more elaborate music might be used. Also, the specific capabilities of a congregation and the ministers of the Mass might dictate which parts are sung, and whether simpler forms of sacred music would best fit the situation. These principles are explained in the Instruction on Music in the Liturgy (*Musicam Sacram*) following the Second Vatican Council. Particularly helpful in this regard are the progressive degrees of singing that should be employed in the celebration of Mass which are described there.³⁹ A very practical example of what is being said here would be the expectation that a daily ferial Mass with a small congregation and no musicians would employ much less singing than the Mass at Midnight for Christmas with full choir and organist. Then there are gradations of solemnity and singing in between.

4] It must also be recognized that some parishes and missions simply do not have the same pool of trained and qualified musicians as others. This does not mean that they should not also benefit from a prayerful and sung celebration of the Mass. It might mean that simpler forms of sacred music such as simple sacred

³⁹ MS 28.

plainchant and hymnody would best fit the occasion and the local situation. In small churches and congregations, more instruments and cantors singing into a microphone and amplified throughout the church is not the solution. Simple and basic forms of sacred music, done well and sung by the congregation can create a more solemn and beautiful celebration of the Mass. It is worth repeating that a Sung Mass need not be elaborate, and the principle of noble simplicity should guide it. In this way, the higher standards of sacred music called for in this pastoral letter need not mean that getting through Mass will be more difficult for the smaller parishes and missions of the Archdiocese.

b. Orations and Dialogues

For the Sung Mass, the celebrant should learn to sing, without instrumental accompaniment, the celebrant's chants for the orations and dialogues to the melodies given in the Roman Missal, with the responses sung by the faithful. There is the simple human reality that some priests are not gifted with the ability to sing, or at least to carry a melody. In these cases, it might be more desirable for the celebrant to chant *recto tono* (on the same note) the parts that belong to him.

c. The Ordinary

1] Every parish is asked to learn the English plainchant settings of the Ordinary, found in the Roman Missal, which should be given *pride of place*. Other settings are at the discretion of the parish, subject to the liturgical norms of the Church as outlined in this pastoral letter. Clergy should set an example by singing with the faithful wherever in the Mass this is appropriate.

2] Every parish and mission in the Archdiocese should establish to the best of its ability at least a minimum Gregorian repertoire of the chanted Ordinary sung by the people in Latin.⁴⁰ Mass VIII (*De Angelis*) and Mass XVIII (*Deus Genitor Alme*) are the most popular and accessible. Parishes capable of more than this are encouraged to build their chant repertoire beyond this minimum.⁴¹ (Interestingly enough, the melodies given in the Roman Missal itself for the *Sanctus* and the *Agnus Dei* in English and Latin are from Mass XVIII.)

3] Optimally at Mass the Ordinary should consist of one musically unified suite rather than mixing together parts of different settings.

d. The Propers

It is acknowledged that the singing of the Propers can present difficulties in parishes unaccustomed to singing the Mass as described above. However, there are parishes where the resources exist (or can be developed) to sing the Propers. The

⁴⁰ SC 54; GIRM 41.

⁴¹ Cf. STTL 75.

pastors and musicians of these parishes are encouraged and challenged to work toward a restoration of the sung Propers in some form at the Sung Mass, according to the options which are described in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal. Resources for the sung Propers will be made available through catechesis that will be provided in the Archdiocese to help implement this directive.

e. Hymnody

1] Because they substitute for the sacred texts of the Propers, hymns and songs must be genuinely sacred music. Texts must be theocentric, i.e. centered on God, not on ourselves or the congregation. It is desirable that a hymn reflect the Proper text whose position it occupies, or the Scripture readings of the day. At the very least it should have some reference to the season or the feast. Its length should also be taken into account considering the moment of the Mass it will occupy, so that it does not require being cut short to fit the ritual action or be allowed to extend excessively beyond the same action.

2] It should be noted that the Missal makes no reference to a recessional hymn, making it an appropriate time for an instrumental (e.g. pipe organ) piece, or silence, especially during Lent.

3] Hymn and song texts must conform to the teachings and doctrines of the Church, especially with regard to the Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Any texts which promote teachings which are ambiguous or contrary to the Faith must be retired from the parish repertoire. It must be sadly acknowledged that some hymns in approved hymnals, music issues and missalettes do not reflect Catholic theology and should not be used. Musicians should be attentive to this point and think carefully about the selection of hymns, seeking guidance from the pastors of the Church when needed. With this in mind it follows that just because a particular piece is published in a Catholic hymnal or worship aid does not necessarily mean that the piece was intended to be sung at Holy Mass. Many publications contain songs which are intended for other liturgical celebrations or private use.

f. Respect for the Given Liturgical Texts

1] The texts of the Roman Missal and the Lectionary, and none others, constitute the official Mass in English. No one in the Archdiocese, including the Archbishop, has the authority to add to, subtract from or change the words of the Mass, either sung or recited.⁴² The only exceptions are when the Missal specifically gives an option, using expressions such as “in these or similar words.” This is to be strictly interpreted and observed.⁴³

⁴² Cf. SC 22; CIC 838; GIRM 24.

⁴³ Cf. RS 59, 62.

2] The English text of the Responsorial Psalm must be the translation provided in the Lectionary or in the Revised Grail Psalter. These are the only English translations of the Psalms approved for the Liturgy of the Word. The Responsorial Psalm may not be replaced with another song or a paraphrase of a psalm. The norms given in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* and the *Introduction to the Lectionary* are to be followed in choosing the Psalm and its antiphon.⁴⁴

3] The Gospel Acclamation is either “*Alleluia*” (without additional text added) or one of the Lenten acclamations found in the Lectionary. The Gospel verse is to be the proper text specified for the celebration.

4] Respect for the texts includes respect for the liturgical terminology of the Roman Missal. “Gathering” and “Sending” for example, are not liturgical terms; Holy Mass begins with the Introductory Rites and ends with the Concluding Rites.

g. Musical Instruments

1] The Church accords the pipe organ pride of place as the musical instrument most in harmony with the spirit of the Roman liturgy.

*In the Latin Church the pipe organ is to be held in high esteem, for it is the traditional musical instrument which adds a wonderful splendor to the Church’s ceremonies and powerfully lifts up man’s mind to God and to higher things.*⁴⁵

Unfortunately, the use of the pipe organ has diminished over the years since the Council, for many reasons, such as the lack of trained organists and the cost of purchase and upkeep. However, if the pipe organ is to come back to prominence in our sacred music, we must be willing to invest for the future. All parishes are encouraged to include the pipe organ in their sacred music repertoire. A parish seeking to purchase or replace an organ must first consult with the archdiocesan staff responsible for the Sacred Liturgy. Usually a parish will be required to engage the services of a qualified organ consultant, to provide informed advice to the pastor and finance committee. If an electronic or hybrid organ is purchased, it must be manufactured to the American Guild of Organists dimensional standards for its purchase to meet the approval of the Archdiocese.

2] Musical instruments other than the pipe organ must truly contribute to the sanctity and beauty of the Mass.

*(Other instruments may be admitted) only on condition that the instruments are suitable, or can be made suitable, for sacred use, accord with the dignity of the temple, and truly contribute to the edification of the faithful.*⁴⁶

⁴⁴ GIRM 61.

⁴⁵ SC 120.

⁴⁶ SC 120.

Musicam Sacram clearly states:

*In permitting and using musical instruments, the culture and traditions of individual peoples must be taken into account. However, those instruments which are, by common opinion and use, suitable for secular music only, are to be altogether prohibited from every liturgical celebration and from popular devotions.*⁴⁷

Pope St. John Paul II also expressed this principle in these words:

*Care must be taken, however, to ensure that instruments are suitable for sacred use, that they are fitting for the dignity of the Church and can accompany the singing of the faithful and serve to edify them.*⁴⁸

Those instruments, such as electric guitars, that are used in performing Rock Music, even Christian Rock are not suitable for accompaniment at Holy Mass. Moreover, although certain percussion instruments can sometimes enhance select pieces used at Holy Mass, the rock drum kit is never appropriate.

3] During Lent the use of the organ and other instruments is allowed only as necessary to support singing. After the *Gloria* of Holy Thursday until the *Gloria* of the Easter Vigil, all music is exclusively vocal. If observance of this discipline presents grave difficulties, an instrument may be used, but only in a minimal way to support the voices.

4] Pre-recorded music may not substitute for actual musicians during the Mass. All music in the Mass is to be sung and played by musicians who are physically present as worshipers. If an organist or other instrumentalist suitable for the celebration of Mass is not available, it is certainly in accord with the spirit of the Roman Rite to sing the Mass in unaccompanied plainchant.

h. Physical Presence

The physical location of the musicians in the church building is an important consideration. Musicians, singers, their instruments and equipment should never distract from the Sacred Liturgy by being visually or physically overwhelming. Except for cantors, and psalmists at the appropriate time, musicians and choirs should never be located in the sanctuary of a church. Furthermore, the space which is occupied by the choir and musicians should be clean and tidy, free from clutter and excessive equipment reflecting the sacredness of the role of music in the Sacred Liturgy.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ MS 63.

⁴⁸ CCT 14.

⁴⁹ Cf. STTL 100.

When not engaged in the direct exercise of their particular role, music ministers, like all ministers of the Liturgy, remain attentive members of the gathered assembly and should never constitute a distraction.⁵⁰ In summary, in those churches where the musicians are visible, they must strive not to draw attention to themselves whether by their speech and movements, the prominence of musical equipment, or by their clothing and appearance. The sanctuary, with its altar and tabernacle, should truly be the center toward which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns.⁵¹

The role of music is to serve the needs of the Liturgy and not to dominate it; it should not seek to entertain or draw attention to itself or the musicians. Over amplification and the impression of performance are two things that should always be avoided.⁵²

[Those] with any particular visible function in the celebration, including all categories of altar servers, readers, and musicians, must avoid the human temptation of drawing attention to themselves after the manner of public performers and will above all avoid provoking or soliciting by their words or manner any kind of applause.⁵³

i. Acoustics

Interior renovation of churches should take into account the acoustical environment of the Sacred Liturgy. An environment designed to destroy all noise or reverberation will also make vibrant congregational participation very difficult to achieve. Communal singing requires hard surfaces and resonant spaces that reflect, amplify, blend, and distribute sound waves so that the singers may hear each other. Any difficulties that this may pose for the intelligibility of the spoken word can be addressed through modern sound technology.

j. Silence

God is manifest both in the beauty of liturgical singing and in the power of silence. The Sacred Liturgy has its rhythm of texts, actions, chants, and silence. Silence in the liturgy allows the community to reflect on what it has heard and experienced, and to open its heart to the mystery celebrated. Ministers and pastoral musicians should take care that the rites unfold with the proper ebb and flow of sound and silence. The importance of silence in the liturgy cannot be overemphasized.⁵⁴ The notion that all moments of action, silence or inactivity in the liturgy should be filled with song or instrumental music is invalid.

⁵⁰ STTL 96.

⁵¹ Cf. GIRM 299, 314.

⁵² ALH 3.18.16.

⁵³ ALH 2.16.1.

⁵⁴ STTL 118.

3. ASSOCIATIONS OF CHURCH MUSICIANS

Association among church musicians in the Archdiocese of Portland is encouraged as a means of fostering the true spirit of the Sacred Liturgy as it regards sacred music. As an example, the National Association of Pastoral Musicians (NPM) has been active in the Archdiocese for many years. They, along with all church musicians, are encouraged to continue their service and immerse themselves in a careful study of this pastoral letter and the principles outlined herein. The formation of other church musician associations is also encouraged, provided they are committed to an authentic implementation of the Church's directives on the Sacred Liturgy and sacred music.

4. MUSICAL STANDARDS FOR ARCHDIOCESAN LITURGIES

While bishops, priests and deacons, each according to his proper rank, must consider the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy as their principal duty, this is true above all of the diocesan bishop. This is essential for the life of the particular Church, not only because communion with the bishop is required for the lawfulness of every celebration within his territory, but also because he himself is the celebrant *par excellence* within his diocese. These particular qualities of the celebration are evident above all when it takes place in the cathedral church, that is to say, the church where the bishop has his *cathedra* or episcopal seat, and the mother church of the whole diocese, recognized by the universal Church.⁵⁵

The musical standards of the Church are to be put into the fullest practice at the Chrism Mass, Ordinations and other liturgies which the Archbishop celebrates with the clergy and faithful of the Archdiocese, both in the cathedral church and elsewhere. Archdiocesan liturgies should be exemplary in their adherence to the Church's musical norms. In this way the bishops, priests and faithful may participate in the fullest liturgical model available in the Archdiocese.

⁵⁵ ALH 2.2.1, 2.2.2.

CONCLUSION

It is my sincere hope that this pastoral letter will be well received by the clergy and faithful of the Archdiocese of Portland, for the sake of an authentic renewal of the Sacred Liturgy according to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the mind of the Church. I am especially counting on our wonderful and dedicated church musicians to answer this call for renewal. May the renewal and reform of sacred music in the Archdiocese of Portland lead us together to a beautiful and worthy celebration of the sacred mysteries of the Holy Mass, for the glory of God and the sanctification of all the faithful.

I also hope that this pastoral letter will be a worthy companion to the [Archdiocesan Liturgical Handbook](#) as a guide to an elevated experience of the Sacred Liturgy for the faithful of the Archdiocese of Portland.

Once again, I entrust this great effort of renewal to the intercession of St. Cecilia, patroness of church musicians, and to our patroness the Blessed Virgin Mary, Immaculately Conceived. Let us all *Sing to the LORD a New Song!*

Given this day, 25 January 2019, the Conversion of St. Paul, at the Pastoral Center of the Archdiocese of Portland.

Sincerely yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Alexander K. Sample
Archbishop of Portland in Oregon

