

Document issued by the USCCB *
in January of 1968:
“The place of music in Eucharistic celebrations”

Music's Place In Mass Cited

Washington (NC) -- “Music, more than any other resource, makes a celebration of the liturgy an attractive human experience,” according to a statement issued by the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The statement, “The Place of Music in Eucharistic celebrations,” was drawn up after study by the Music Advisory Board and submitted to the Bishops’ Committee, which approved it and “recommends it for consideration by all.”

The purpose of the statement is to offer guidelines on whether, in the particular circumstances of the individual celebration, this or that part may or should be sung. The statement offers criteria, including some concrete applications to the celebration of Mass, but notes that “no set or rigid pattern can be proposed.”

The amount of singing will vary according to the circumstances, the statement says, since “music serves the expression of faith.”

In the application of principles to the celebration of the Eucharist, the statement says the best places to sing are: at the “Holy Holy Holy,” the Amen at the conclusion of the Eucharistic prayer, the Communion song, and the responsorial psalm following the lessons.

Other places to sing are: Entrance and Dismissal, “Lord have mercy,” “Glory to God,” Lord’s Prayer, and Offertory song.

“Music in worship is a functional sign,” the statement says. “It has a ministerial role. It must always serve the expression of

Here the issues are whether the music interprets the text correctly and makes it more meaningful, whether the form of the text is respected, and whether the piece of music is appropriate to the feast for which it is intended and its specific role in the liturgy.

The pastoral judgment “is the judgment that must be made in this particular situation, in these concrete circumstances,” the statement continues. “A musician may say, for instance, that Gregorian Chant is good music. His musical judgment really says nothing about whether and how it is to be used in this celebration. The signs of the celebration must be accepted and received as meaningful. They must, by reason of the materials used, open up to the genuinely human faith experience.”

The statement says the pastoral judgment should be aided by sociological studies of the people who make up the congregation, to determine how differences in age, culture and education influence the way in which faith is meaningfully expressed.

“No set of rubrics or regulations of itself will ever achieve a truly pastoral celebration of the sacramental rites,” the statement notes. “Such regulations must always be applied with a pastoral concern for the given worshipping community.”

Moreover, there is a further problem: “It is the problem of faith itself. The liturgy by its nature normally presupposes a minimum of biblical culture and a fairly solid

commitment of living faith. Often enough these conditions are not present. The assembly or many of its members are still in need of evangelization.”

In this case, the statement says, “the liturgy, which is not meant to be a tool of evangelization, is forced into a missionary role” and the music problem becomes “complex.” Sometimes certain songs normally called for in the “climate of faith,” like psalms and religious songs, “may create problems rather than solve them.”

The concluding portion of the statement makes recommendation for carrying out the various elements of the two parts of the Mass -- the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

In regard to celebration of the service of the word, it notes that, in the United States, the hearing of God’s word seems a more meaningful and stirring experience when the lessons are read rather than sung.

* Nomenclature Note:

The USCCB formely was called the “NCCB” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops). Then as now, the USCCB had a “Liturgy Department” which nominally is run by bishops, but seems to be run—in fact—by the Secretariat (and staff).