

Bulletin Insert Three: Antiphons and Hymns in Mass

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Last week, we talked about the various views of how the Second Vatican Council should be implemented at the parish level. If you missed this, it is available online and we invite you to check it out. This week we want to discuss the use of antiphons in the Mass instead of hymns, as well as the principles which the Second Vatican Council gave us in order to guide us in our decisions with music at Mass.

But first, what are antiphons? Most of us are more familiar with these than we might realize. An antiphon consists of verses and a repeated refrain both of which are taken from



King David Composing Psalms

Sacred Scripture. Generally, the congregation sings the Scriptural refrain and then a verse is usually sung by a smaller section of the congregation—like a choir or a cantor. Then we go back and sing the refrain.

If you think I am describing the responsorial psalm, you would be close. There are only two real differences between the responsorial psalm and an antiphon. The first is that the responsorial psalm is usually taken from the Book of Psalms, whereas an antiphon can come from any section of Scripture. The second is that the Responsorial Psalm should be sung in its entirety because it is a part of the Liturgy of the Word, whereas the antiphon may be completed whenever the liturgical action itself is completed.

This brings us to one of the principles which guide music in the Mass. According to the Second Vatican Council, the music ought to accompany and serve the liturgy.¹ This is one reason why the Protestant “four-hymn” model that we mentioned in the last bulletin insert is not particularly suited to the Mass, even though that is what we have become accustomed to experiencing. But I think that we already instinctively know this. How many times have we bemoaned that the entrance hymn is taking too long, but for some reason, we keep singing the verses? That is because, for the Protestant hymn model, the hymn is of primary importance, not the Mass. This is strikingly different from another

¹ See *Instruction on Sacred Music* no. 11; *Constitution on Sacred Liturgy* no. 112

principle of Catholic music which states that the liturgical action is what is most important, not necessarily the music accompanying it.² The actions of the Mass are all supremely important. The liturgy is trying to communicate something with the entrance procession, the offertory procession, and at the preparation of the altar. Music should highlight what these parts of the Mass are accomplishing, rather than making those parts of the Mass take longer than is necessary. While there are some allowances for hymns to be used in place of these antiphons,³ the Church agrees that this is not to be the norm, but the singing of the antiphons is preferable to the singing of hymns, regardless of their familiarity.⁴



Pope Francis Offering the Chalice

A second principle which should guide us is that there is a hierarchy of things that should be sung. The Church teaches that the most important things to sing are the dialogues between the people and the priest and the acclamations.⁵ If nothing else, these should be sung at every Mass. The next thing that should be sung if anything else is sung is the antiphons. These are viewed as so high up on the list “because they are the very voice of God speaking to us in the Scriptures”.⁶ It’s not until we get to the bottom of the list that hymns are even mentioned as being a part of what we should sing at the Mass. But they are not viewed as ideal because of the principles we have discussed above.

It begs the question: if hymns are not theoretically ideal (hence their being final on the list), nor are they all that practical (one of my first conversations in Coldwater was a complaint about how long a song takes at Mass), then why not be open to these antiphons and other changes? Next week, we want to let you in on the “game plan”. The last thing we want is for anyone to be surprised. We want you to know what is going on in your parish. The changes we make will be small and very incremental. Our hope is that, by knowing what to expect, we can feel safe enough to make these changes. **God bless!**

² See *Instruction on Sacred Music* no. 6

³ See *Instruction on Sacred Music* no. 32

⁴ See *Instruction on Sacred Music* no. 33

⁵ See *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* no. 40, *Instruction on Sacred Music* nos. 7, 16

⁶ See *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* no. 117