

Towards the Future – Singing the Mass

*A keynote-address to the Southeastern Liturgical Music Symposium
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I would like to begin by saying how very pleased I am to be with you today and as someone whose own journey has been associated with music-making, I find myself very much at home with musicians and welcome the time that we have together.

Like many speakers, I feel that I need to begin with something of a disclaimer – one website advertising this symposium recently described ICEL as being ‘responsible for the new translation’. With the best will in the world, I don’t think we can claim that to be true. ICEL is a joint commission of eleven Episcopal Conferences and is therefore essentially a group of eleven Bishops who undertake to present draft translations of liturgical texts to their respective conferences for comment, amendment and approval. As such, it becomes the work of many hands, as conferences are free to consult as widely as they wish in considering texts in the various stages of their evolution.

As you well know, the final stage of the process lies with the *Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments*, who retain the right to make radical amendments to the text as they see fit, even at the final stage of the process. I suppose we can say that in this way, it is very much a work of the Church.

In speaking to you today, I would like to briefly explore with you some of the implications of receiving the new translation of the Missal, with particular consideration of its possible impact on liturgical music. Obviously, I don’t have to explain to you that music is integral to the liturgy, but perhaps we find ourselves at a good moment to be able to reassess how this principle has been applied in the liturgy we have experienced thus far and how it could be applied to our liturgy in the future?

We are currently in the season of summer schools and symposia which seek to deepen knowledge and understanding of what we are doing when we celebrate the liturgy. It is always interesting to identify the different models or concepts of the liturgy that are expressed in a series of intense seminars and workshops held all around the country. In one place, renowned for the excellence of its scholarship and the significance of its influence on all who celebrate the liturgy in English, a key-note speaker offered the following definition by way of an introduction to a course:

The readings from scripture and the prayers of Mass make up the given, largely un-changing liturgy of the Church. The homily, hymns, and songs are the creative, changing elements by which we interpret the liturgy, suggesting some possible meanings of faith for 21st century believers. We will look at hymns and songs that may help contemporary worshippers integrate the Sunday prayers and readings into their weekday lives.

I think this definition would be considered as largely uncontroversial, as it reflects an approach to the liturgy that has been relatively widespread in the years since Vatican II. I want to use it, however, as a spring-board to ask some rather big questions. For instance, is it helpful? Is it accurate as an assessment of the way we should approach the complex and intimate relationship between music and the other elements which make up the liturgy of the Mass? Is music really exclusively a creative response to the 'un-changing liturgy of the Church' or does it in some way form part of the 'given' aspect of liturgy which we receive from the Church? I would suggest that these are questions which come more naturally into focus as we prepare to receive the new translation.

We stand now at the threshold of the introduction of a new translation of the Roman Missal, an event of unparalleled significance in the forty years since the introduction of the first English translation¹ of the *Missale Romanum* in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. While the transition from one translation to another is qualitatively less dramatic than the introduction of a new Rite of Mass, I think it is fair to deduce that the current translation has not only shaped our liturgical experience over the past forty years, it has also generated a common culture of liturgical music. For this reason, we are well placed to consider seriously what has been achieved and how things could be improved for the future.

I am sure that many of you here today were among the first to recognize that a change of translation, a change which implies a difference of style, register and content, would have considerable implications for our liturgical music. I am sure it will have occurred to you that it would not just be a matter of adapting our current settings and songs to the new texts, rather in the way that one might alter an old and well-loved garment to meet the demands of an increasing or decreasing waist-line! But rather, the new texts would quite naturally inspire new music which responds more directly to the character of the texts themselves, reflecting in an original way their patterns of accentuation, their cadence and their phrasing. Is it too much to hope that this might be a wonderful opportunity for reassessing the current repertoire of liturgical music in the light of our rich musical patrimony and like the good housekeeper being able to bring out of the store treasures both new and old?²

Maybe the greatest challenge that lies before us is the invitation once again to sing the Mass rather than merely to sing at Mass. This echoes the injunctions of the Council Fathers in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* and reflects our deeply held instinct that the majority of the texts contained in the Missal can and in many cases should be sung. This means not only the congregational acclamations of the Order of Mass, but also the orations, the chants in response to the readings, the Eucharistic prayer and the antiphons which accompany the Entrance, the Offertory and the Communion processions. These proper texts are usually replaced by hymns or songs that have little relationship to the texts proposed by the Missal or the *Graduale Romanum* and as such a whole element of the liturgy of the day is lost or consigned to oblivion. For the most part, they exist only as spoken texts. We are much the poorer for this, as these texts (which are often either Scriptural or a gloss on the Biblical

¹ 1973

² cf Matt.13,52

text) represent the Church's own reading and meditation on the Scriptures. As chants, they are a sort of musical *lectio divina* pointing us towards the riches expressed in that day's liturgy. For this reason, I believe that it is seriously deficient to consider that planning music for the liturgy ever begins with a blank sheet: there are texts given for every Mass in the Missal and these texts are intended for singing.

Initially, even if you agree with this assertion, you may feel there is a dearth of suitable material available. This is something of a 'chicken and egg' situation. Praxis has governed the development of our resources of liturgical music and for the most part, composers and publishers have neglected the provision or adaptation of musical settings of these proper texts. Despite this, a brief trawl of the internet produces a surprisingly wide variety of styles of settings of the proper texts which range from simple chants that can be sung without accompaniment to choral settings for mixed voices. Some are obviously adaptations of Gregorian Chant or are indebted to that musical language, others are more contemporary in feel. In addition, I know of a number of initiatives which seek to provide simple chants in English for the texts of the Proper of the Mass, chants which are specifically destined for parish use. Of course, there is nothing to stop us singing Latin chants in a predominantly English liturgical celebration. The presence in the Missal of Latin and English versions of some chants, embodies this principle. I think it is reasonable to expect that the quality and quantity of material available will continue to increase as we grow in our knowledge and experience of using the new texts.

Chant is proper to the Roman Liturgy, whether it is celebrated in Latin or in vernacular languages. This is a fact established in all of the major documents which treat music in the liturgy from the time of the Council onwards. Why has there been such a universal loss of experience of the chant? I am personally convinced that part of the reason why we lost our chant tradition so easily was that so few people understood the intrinsic link between the chant and the liturgical text. Chant is not merely words set to music; in its simplest forms it is essentially *cantillation* – it arises from the text as a heightened manner of proclaiming the text. In this, the Church continues the Jewish tradition of a sung proclamation of the Scriptures. For that reason, it preserves the primacy of the text as distinct from other forms of music that have a tendency to impose a structure and a form rather than receiving one. The most obvious example of this would be the signing of the psalms – a simple tone is sufficiently flexible to allow for natural expression prompted by speech rhythms, whereas metrical settings can have a tendency to dragoon the text into pre-determined shapes.

The present situation of neglect of these proper chants is due both to the liturgical culture which prevailed before the Council and the practices which were universally accepted upon the introduction of the revised liturgy. Contrary to the suggestion of some who currently champion the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite, the musical repertoire of the Catholic community at the time of the revision of the liturgy, was not predominantly Gregorian Chant or the jewels of sixteenth century polyphony. Low Mass with vernacular hymns was standard fare for most parishes with High Mass or Sung Mass reserved for only the greatest occasions and for most Catholics was something of a rarity outside of cathedrals or religious communities.

I mention this in order to emphasize that the practice of singing the Mass was lost to us a long time ago. It is true that the most commonly sung setting of the Ordinary of the Mass prior to Vatican II was the *Missa de Angelis* with *Credo III*, but these soon gave way to a multiplicity of Mass settings which may have been locally composed and remained largely unknown beyond a particular parish. Publishers extend this phenomenon by creating a national repertoire by default. I am personally very aware of this as I travel in my present work and I often find myself at a celebration of Mass in English at which none of the music used is remotely familiar to me. This is a strangely alienating experience that does little to engender a sense of the universality of the Church, but rather limits its parameters to that which is national or parochial. Does this necessarily need to be the pattern for the future, or can we and should we look to see a change? I think it is worth considering that discussions which focus ideas about a common repertoire on a national or international level may be more appropriate now than at any stage during the past forty years.

I would suggest that ours has essentially become a predominantly Low Mass culture with music increasingly seen as incidental rather than integral to our liturgical celebration. In all honesty, I would also have to acknowledge that we clergy have often not helped in this regard when we have refused to sing those parts of the Mass which of their nature should be sung, at least in celebrations of greater solemnity. We cannot claim to have a sung liturgy if the priest doesn't sing any element of the orations and the antiphons of the proper are not sung. This is true no matter how many timpani and trumpets are employed. Regardless of the quantity of musical overlay, the underlying impression remains basically that of a said Mass with music added. In this respect, it is not only our lay people who face the challenge of a changing liturgical culture. As those responsible for liturgical music in your communities, you will all have to work hard with your priests to build their confidence in this respect. In conversation with one diocesan bishop recently, he admitted to me that he had never sung anything on his own in public, not even 'Happy birthday'! In addressing such cases, psychology is just as important as musical knowledge. When I worked as a répétiteur in an opera company in London many years ago, it was just as important to communicate to singers a sense of self-confidence in what they had to sing as it was to teach them the notes!

Apart from an encouragement to sing the orations, the preface and on occasion the Eucharistic prayer, the new edition of the Missal will also evidence the Church's invitation to proclaim the readings of the Liturgy of the Word in song. This can be particularly effective if used sparingly at solemn celebrations. It also extends the ministry of lector or reader to those who can sing in addition to those who read well. I recently took part in a study day on the new texts for a group of men in formation for the permanent diaconate. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that in the said diocese, formation included instruction in singing the Gospel and the orations. Our study day ended with sung Evening Prayer in which the group of about 40 men seemed quite at home singing the psalms and other elements of the office. Patterns of formation will need to change to encompass a different musical expectation.

On a practical level, there is already a considerable number of resources aimed at preparation of the musical elements of the Missal which are almost ready for publication. Although I appreciate the enthusiasm and sometimes the impatience of musicians eager to have this material freely available at the earliest possible stage, the continuing evolution of these texts, even into the final stages of their preparation, makes it very unwise to release musical settings before the definitive version of the text has been established by the Holy See and communicated to our Bishops' Conferences. Such texts as have been released to date are always designated as draft texts which still may be subject to amendment. I realize what a difficulty this represents for composers and liturgical musicians. It is a situation brought about by the collaborative manner in which these texts are produced in a complex process of many stages which is ultimately controlled by the Holy See.

Consideration of liturgical music resources brings me to a more controversial point: musical repertoire has for practical purposes largely been controlled by the publishers of liturgical music and while this is unavoidable, for a whole variety of pragmatic reasons, it has rather reinforced the perception that I cited at the outset of this address: that music is exclusively part of the creative element in liturgy rather than part of that which is 'given'. Perhaps this is a good moment for reassessing some of the criteria that govern the selection of music for publication? While I would personally advocate and endorse a rediscovery of our chant tradition, I would want to stress that the recovery of the singing of the proper texts of the Missal is not necessarily to be equated solely with this one musical genre but would also potentially admit a variety of different styles. In the same way, the Church permits a variety of legitimate interpretations of the liturgical norms which result in celebrations of diverse character. The unity of the Roman Rite today is essentially a textual unity rather than a ritual uniformity – we use the same proper texts when we celebrate the liturgy.

It is my sincere hope that the occasion of a new translation of the Missal will be an opportunity for a reappraisal of many of the elements of our liturgical experience. The liturgy is the point of contact for the greatest number of our Catholic people, it is not only a window to heaven, but also the Church's shop-window in a largely unbelieving world. If we are to draw many more to the hope that we hold, I believe that our experience of the mystery which is 'ever ancient, ever new' must effectively convey the spiritual realities that we celebrate in all their richness and depth, both to the Catholics of our own time and those yet to come.

I want to thank you for all you do in the service of your communities. Your work is an essential aspect of the way the Church in every generation announces the mystery of Christ. In the words of Psalm 46, my encouragement to you is 'psallite sapienter' – 'sing wisely', immersing yourselves in a tradition that is older than Christianity itself, a tradition by which the Song of the Church arises in every place as a thing of beauty and truth. We need both beauty and truth and our liturgical song can be a vehicle for them both. Thank you for honoring me with your attention.