

CATHOLIC CHURCH OF EASTERN MONTANA DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

How we Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it. Song and Silence #8

is singing in unison!

Song: It has been said of Roman Catholics that, in comparison to other religious bodies, they are reluctant to sing in church. Indeed, some years ago a Catholic author, Thomas Day, wrote a book on that very topic: *Why Catholics Can't Sing*. We did not come out of those pages looking or sounding very good, unfortunately.

It is true, not all of us are very emotionally expressive when we sing our liturgy. Perhaps it is because we don't like the way we sound, or that, for many centuries, other people did our singing for us: choirs or soloists. But this is not true for the entire history of our Church. For many hundreds of years the Church has been singing. Indeed, some would say ever since the moment of the resurrection of Christ.

The Vatican II *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* tells us that our musical tradition "is of inestimable value, greater than any other art...because sacred song is closely bound to the (prayer) text" (CSL 112). We sing what we pray, or as Saint Augustine put it so eloquently, "when we sing we pray twice."

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) stresses the importance of song when it insists that when we sing we recognize ourselves all the better as a praying community. We do all this together, no matter how we may sound! We support one another with our voices. There is always room for

soloists, of course, but not when the assembly

So, how do we know what to sing? There is a guideline called "progressive solemnity." This simply means that some parts of the Mass are more important than others and, therefore, they should be sung.

Which parts? First of all, the Church tells us that the Gospel Acclamation (Alleluia) and the acclamations within the Eucharistic prayer are most important because these parts of the Mass proclaim Christ's presence in word and sacrament. These acclamations should be sung at every Mass (even on weekdays).

Ranking next in solemnity are two processional hymns: The Gathering Song and the Communion Song. These are particularly important because the Gathering Song helps to bond us as a community at the very beginning of the liturgy. The Communion Song helps us to recognize our union with Christ and with one another as we approach the altar.

Following next in solemnity is the Responsorial Psalm. It is a sung response to the words of scriptures that have just been proclaimed. The psalm changes at each Mass to accommodate the accompanying scripture passage or to reflect the liturgical season.

Further down the list are so-called "ordinary chants," such as the Gloria, the Lord's Prayer, the Lamb of God and the Profession of Faith. These may or may not be sung, depending on the solemnity of the Mass and the nature of the liturgical season.

Finally, there are supplementary songs or hymns which are sung at various times in the liturgy: During the preparation of the gifts, a song of praise *after* communion and a recessional song as the assembly is sent forth in mission. These are of lesser importance and may or may not be sung depending on the custom of the individual community.

Finally, it is stressed that Catholics do not so much sing songs *at* Mass as they sing *the* Mass. What is of ultimate importance is that our singing gives voice to our desire to pray and worship our God as a community. In all this, of course, we have the model of Jesus on the night of the Last Supper when he and his disciples sang a psalm as they left the upper room and made their way to the Mount of Olives.

Silence: While music and song are important, so, too, is silence. A complaint some Catholics have about the post Vatican II liturgy is that it is noisy, it does not afford them sufficient (or any) time for silent prayer. It is true, especially in ecclesial communities that are small and where most people know one another as neighbors, there is often conversation, greeting or song rehearsal going on before Mass begins. This can truly be a source of distraction to those who simply want a few moments of quiet before or after mass in order to talk to their God. There is already an excess of physical and emotional noise in our lives. Of all the places in our world where one ought to be able to experience the silence of the sacred, our churches ought to be foremost.

Having said that, however, we need to add that our liturgy, by its very nature and framework, does actually include and demand certain moments of silence to be kept by the assembly. It is often only in stillness and silence that we are able to hear God's voice. Silence, therefore, is an integral part of every liturgy. It is called "sacred" for it is in this sort of silence that we are able to meet our God. What are these moments of silence we are invited to keep in the liturgy?

The Penitential Rite: Following the opening greeting at the beginning of Mass, the presider invites each member of the assembly to call to

mind our sins and reflect on our need for repentance. We need these few moments to put aside the distractions of the world from which we have just come and also to admit our unworthiness to enter God's presence.

The Collects (Opening Prayer, Prayer Over the Gifts, Post-Communion Prayer): Several times during the Mass, the presider introduces a prayer with the invitation, "Let us pray." He then pauses for a few moments so that each of us, individually and as a community can have the opportunity to "collect" ourselves - body, mind and spirit - and add our own intention to that of the presider. He then "collects" all our individual prayers into the one prayer which he says aloud.

The Liturgy of the Word: Once each of the scripture lessons, the Gospel or the homily has been proclaimed, we are given a few moments to "let the words sink in", or to take in more deeply what we have just heard.

After the Communion Procession: The last of the designated times for silence during Mass is after all have received Communion. As people are receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, we are asked to symbolize our unity as a Christian assembly by singing together the Communion song. When **all** have received Communion, we have time to make our personal thanksgiving and to reflect on how we will return to the world to bring God's good news to all whom we may meet.

It is obvious that the liturgy provides us times not only for "personal silence", but especially the opportunity to pray together as a Christian assembly in "Sacred Silence."

Prior to the Beginning of the Liturgy: A few minutes of quiet provide time for members of the assembly to become settled and move away from the business of daily life into an emotional and spiritual space where they meet God in Word and Sacrament.