

## Why We Sing

Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship was developed by the Music Subcommittee of the Committee on Divine Worship of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It was approved for publication by the full body of bishops at its November 2007 General Meeting and has been authorized for publication by the undersigned.

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1. God has bestowed upon his people the gift of song. God dwells within each human person, in the place where music takes its source. Indeed, God, the giver of song, is present whenever his people sing his praises.<sup>1</sup>

2. A cry from deep within our being, music is a way for God to lead us to the realm of higher things.<sup>2</sup> As St. Augustine says, “Singing is for the one who loves.”<sup>3</sup> Music is therefore a sign of God’s love for us and of our love for him. In this sense, it is very personal. But unless music sounds, it is not music, and whenever it sounds, it is accessible to others. By its very nature song has both an individual and a communal dimension. Thus, it is no wonder that singing together in church expresses so well the sacramental presence of God to his people.

3. Our ancestors reveled in this gift, sometimes with God’s urging. “Write out this song, then, for yourselves,” God said to Moses. “Teach it to the Israelites and have them recite it, so that this song may be a witness for me.”<sup>4</sup> The Chosen People, after they passed through the Red Sea, sang as one to the Lord.<sup>5</sup> Deborah, a judge of Israel, sang to the Lord with Barak after God gave them victory.<sup>6</sup> David and the Israelites “made merry before the Lord with all their strength, with singing and with citharas, harps, tambourines, sistrums and cymbals.”<sup>7</sup>

4. Jesus and his apostles sang a hymn before their journey to the Mount of Olives.<sup>8</sup> St. Paul instructed the Ephesians to “[address] one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and playing to the Lord in your hearts.”<sup>9</sup> He sang with Silas in captivity.<sup>10</sup> The letter of St. James asks, “Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone in good spirits? He should sing praise.”<sup>11</sup>



Women sing with the choir during a Mass at St. Charles Borromeo Church in Harlem, New York City.

5. Obedient to Christ and to the Church, we gather in liturgical assembly, week after week. As our predecessors did, we find ourselves “singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in [our] hearts to God.”<sup>12</sup> This common, sung expression of faith within

1 “Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for the temple of God, which you are, is holy” (1 Cor 3:16-17).

2 See St. Augustine, Epis. 161, *De origine animae hominis*, 1, 2; PL XXXIII, 725, as quoted in Pope Pius XII, Encyclical *On Sacred Music (Musicae Sacrae Disciplina)* (MSD), no. 5, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_25121955\\_musicae-sacrae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_25121955_musicae-sacrae_en.html).

3 St. Augustine, *Sermo* 336, 1 (PL 1844-1855, 38, 1472).

4 Dt 31:19.

5 Ex 15:1-18, 21.

6 Jgs 4:4-5:31.

7 2 Sm 6:5.

8 See Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26.

9 Eph 5:18-19.

10 “About midnight . . . Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, as the other prisoners listened” (Acts 16:25).

11 Jas 5:13.

12 Col 3:16; see *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM), no. 39 (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2003). See Eph 5:19.

liturgical celebrations strengthens our faith when it grows weak and draws us into the divinely inspired voice of the Church at prayer. Faith grows when it is well expressed in celebration. Good celebrations can foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken it. Good music “make[s] the liturgical prayers of the Christian community more alive and fervent so that everyone can praise and beseech the Triune God more powerfully, more intently and more effectively.”<sup>13</sup>

6. “In human life, signs and symbols occupy an important place. As a being at once body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols. . . . Inasmuch as they are creatures, these perceptible realities can become means of expressing the action of God who sanctifies men, and the action of men who offer worship to God.”<sup>14</sup> This sacramental principle is the consistent belief of the church throughout history. In Liturgy, we use words, gestures, signs, and symbols to proclaim Christ’s presence and to reply with our worship and praise.

7. The primordial song of the Liturgy is the canticle of victory over sin and death. It is the song of the saints, standing beside “the sea of glass”: “They were holding God’s harps, and they sang the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb.”<sup>15</sup> “Liturgical singing is established in the midst of this great historical tension. For Israel, the event of salvation in the Red

Sea will always be the main reason for praising God, the basic theme of the songs it sings before God. For Christians, the Resurrection of Christ is the true Exodus. . . . The definitively new song has been intoned. . . .”<sup>16</sup>

8. The Paschal hymn, of course, does not cease when a liturgical celebration ends. Christ, whose praises we have sung, remains with us and leads us through church doors to the whole world, with its joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties.<sup>17</sup> The words Jesus chose from the book of Isaiah at the beginning of his ministry become the song of the Body of Christ. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, / because he has anointed me / to bring glad tidings to the poor. / He has sent me to proclaim liberty to / captives and recovery of sight to the blind, / to let the oppressed go free, / and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.”<sup>18</sup>

9. Charity, justice, and evangelization are thus the normal consequences of liturgical celebration. Particularly inspired by sung participation, the body of the Word Incarnate goes forth to spread the Gospel with full force and compassion. In this way, the Church leads men and women “to the faith, freedom and peace of Christ by the example of its life and teaching, by the sacraments and other means of grace. Its aim is to open up for all men a free and sure path to full participation in the mystery of Christ.”<sup>19</sup>

13 MSD, no. 31; see no. 33.

14 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 2nd ed., nos. 1146, 1148 (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–USCCB, 2000).

15 Rev 15:3.

16 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (Ignatius Press, 2000), 137-138.

17 See Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*) (GS), no. 1, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, new revised edition, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996). All subsequent Second Vatican Council passages come from the Flannery edition.

18 Lk 4:18; see Is 61:1-2, 58:6.

19 Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes Divinitus* (*Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity*) (AG), no. 5.

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