

2.9 Guidelines for Liturgical Music

Aim

- ☉ To explain the role of music in the liturgy.
- ☉ To educate the novices of the appropriate choice of hymns for liturgical and Para liturgical services.

Materials Required

- ☉ Paper and Pen

: Input

Ever since the Second Vatican Council promulgated its momentous document, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, in December 1963, there have been plenty of changes taking place in the liturgy. Many of them have been very laudable. However, side by side with these, there have been some excesses which are regrettable. Now that the Church has sufficiently recovered her stability after the post-conciliar trauma, the time has come for the faithful in every sector to do a bit of soul-searching to see if all the adaptations that they have wrought are in keeping with the directives of the Church. In drawing up this document, we have been guided by the directives of the Church and some basic exigencies which all liturgical music must necessarily fulfil. These exigencies are presented here below:

1. Liturgical music must always elicit the fullest possible participation of all the faithful.
2. Liturgical music must be conducive to prayer. It must inspire a feeling of awe, reverence and worship.
3. Liturgical music must reflect the mind of the universal Church, while at the same time adjusting itself to local tastes.

We Salesians shoulder the grave responsibility of instilling in our youth a proper “musical sense” such as will enable them to “feel at home” even in a wider circle of worshippers. The main and all-important criterion, therefore, is appropriateness.

There are types and types of hymns. Some of them are only vaguely religious, and cannot, strictly speaking, be called hymns (e.g. ‘People over the world’, ‘You are my Soul Tattoo’, ‘I Miss my Time with You’, ‘We are the world’, ‘I’ll be there’ etc.) Others may be too “private”. The sentiments they express may not pertain to the assembly by and large (Jesus and Me, I got Jesus in my heart). Yet others may be mere Bible narratives or ballads (e.g. I cannot come, Go down Moses). As a rule, such hymns are inappropriate for use in the liturgy. If at all they must be used, which is rarely, they must be preceded by a suitable commentary that “situates” them squarely within the context of the community journey towards holiness.

The Nature of Hymns for the Eucharist:

Regarding the choice of hymns for use at Mass, it is important to remind ourselves of the characteristics of the Mass, which they must reflect in some ways. The Mass is essentially:

- a) An act of praise, thanks and blessing, rendered unto the Father, by the Christian community.
- b) A memorial sacrifice, i.e. a re-living of Christ’s passion, death and resurrection.
- c) A covenant i.e. a relationship between God and man, sealed with three typical conventional signs: blood, a meal and marriage. (The Church, as bride of Christ, addresses the Father.)
- d) A Passover, i.e. a pilgrimage leading to new life.

Thus, the best hymns for use during the Mass are those that highlight “community” action, rather than “private” devotion. For this reason also, the singing of solos during the Mass is not advisable, unless the very nature of the action (e.g. proclaiming the Word in the Responsorial Psalm) demands it.

Optional and Obligatory Occasions for Singing:

It is generally urged that when the Eucharist is celebrated, certain parts must be sung, others may be sung, while yet others could as well be left unsung. The following table gives a clear breakdown of the three different types of occasions.

Parts of the Liturgy	Always sung	Normally sung	Sometimes sung
Entrance	✓		
Penitential Rite			✓
Gloria (when used)			✓
Responsorial Psalm (apt)	✓		
Alleluia/Gospel Acclamation	✓		
We believe			✓
Prayer of the Faithful			✓
Invocations			✓
Response			✓
Offertory Procession	✓		
Preparation of Gifts	✓		
Holy, Holy, Holy	✓		
Memorial Acclamation		✓	
Great Amen		✓	
Our Father			✓
Lamb of God		✓	
Communion Hymn	✓		
Thanksgiving (Post Communion)	✓		
Recessional Hymn	✓		

A Comment on Each Occasion for Singing in the Mass:

- a) Entrance: The words of the entrance hymn should reflect the idea of a community assembling together for a sacred celebration. They may also serve to introduce the congregation to the mystery of the season or feast being celebrated.
- b) Kyrie: The “Lord have mercy” is sung after the penitential rite, unless it has already been included as part of the penitential rite.
- c) Gloria: The Gloria is a hymn of praise to the Father and the Lamb. It is inadvisable to substitute it.
- d) Responsorial Psalm: When sung, care must be taken to ensure that the words are scriptural and that they closely approximate the psalm of the day, or some legitimate substitute for it. Ordinarily, the congregation takes part by singing the response only, unless the psalm is sung straight through without response. If the Psalm is sung, any of the following texts may be chosen:
 1. the psalm in the lectionary
 2. the gradual in the Roman Gradual or,
 3. the Responsorial or Alleluia Psalm in the Simple Gradual.
- e) Acclamation: Like the Responsorial Psalm, it must be scriptural. The verse must be taken either from the Lectionary or the Gradual. Alleluia is sung in every season outside lent. (Gen. instruction of the Roman missal No. 62a). The congregation should be taught some standard Alleluia tunes which may be sung by all, before and after the scriptural verse (sung in plain chant or recited by the lector).
- f) Profession of faith is to be sung or said by all (No 68)
- g) Offertory Procession: The hymn that is sung at this time must convey the idea of an offering made by the assembly to the Father. Hymns of dedication/offering to Jesus are not appropriate (e.g. I surrender all, I give my hands). It must always be accompanied by the liturgical song (No 73-76)
- h) Our Father: If the Our Father is sung, the wordings of the prayer should be respected.
- h) Communion Hymns: It must express the spiritual union of the communicants who join their voices in a single song. It must reflect the joy of all, and convey the feeling that communion procession is an act of community.
- i) Post Communion Hymn: If sung, it should be a psalm or song of praise and thanksgiving for the privilege of having participated in the Eucharist. Here care must be taken that the song is not or does not give the impression of entertainment.
- j) Recessional Hymn: Oddly enough, the General Instruction of the Roman missal mentions nothing about it but neither is there anything against it! Perhaps the most appropriate hymn at this moment would be one that amplifies the final words of the priest: “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.”

Music Outside the Liturgy

There are many occasions outside the Mass, when hymns are sung: prayer meetings, adoration services, community rosaries, etc. These celebrations are para-liturgical, and as such, allow for greater liberty in the selection of hymns. Much will depend on the theme chosen. There are, however, a few fundamental obligatory observances which must be borne in mind.

- a) If the Blessed Sacrament is exposed, the hymn sung should not detract attention from it, but should be able to turn one’s attention to the Blessed Sacrament.
- b) The hymn sung immediately before the blessing should be one of Eucharistic veneration, i.e., in praise of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.



Lauds, Vespers, Compline:

- The animation of the Liturgy of the Hours depends much on the resourcefulness of the prayer leader. As regards the music, we may at least point out that many of the psalms are available in song, in various hymn books.
- If the verses are regular, one can, with a little creativity, even invent simple tunes in plain chant, for the singing of the psalms, or at least of their antiphons.

Musical Instruments:

- The organ does – and always will – occupy a pride of place in Western liturgical music. But beyond this fact, we must realise that the organ too could be misused. By playing it in “disco-style” one can ruin liturgical singing because of the adverse connotation that such music has in the minds of the participants. In Africa, the drum and *kayamba* are also used to accompany music.
- In all musical accompaniments, therefore, there should be a certain amount of sobriety and dignity, for it is these elements that are most conducive to creating an aura of sacredness, reverence and prayer, which is essential to any liturgy.
- There is no musical instrument which is intrinsically unfit for use in the liturgy. What tilts the balance one way or the other is the manner in which these instruments are played. Musical instruments must always be used only to accompany and support the singing. They ought to occupy an entirely secondary and optional role. Hence, their music must be simple (i.e. without frills) and unobtrusive.
- It is also important that the musical accompanist be given such a place as not to distract the attention of the congregation from the altar and the celebrant. For this reason, it is ill advised to position the players in the sanctuary, or any other prominent spot in front, near the altar. The same can also be said of the choir, if there is one specially constituted for any occasion.

Singing for Special Occasions

People-participation is perhaps the most emphasised aspect of liturgical music in our day. This can be a problem on several occasions, when the congregation is heterogeneous. On such occasions, there is a tendency to overlook the exigency for popular participation, thus making the liturgical music seem more like some sort of “concert performance”. As an antidote to this danger, here are some suggestions:

- a) Choose only well-known hymns for such occasions: hymns which are sure to elicit people-participation.
- b) Appoint an intoner/cantor to guide the singing over a microphone and to repeatedly invite, encourage and coax the congregation to join in the singing.
- c) If a choir has been trained for the occasion, its sole purpose must be to boost the singing, rather than provide the singing itself.
- d) Sing in unison, rather than in rigidly orchestrated polyphony. The latter is reminiscent of concert performances.
- e) If new hymns must be sung, seize opportunities before the “big day” to familiarise the outsiders with the melodies. Either after Sunday Mass, or during the novena days that precede the feast.
- f) Keep instrumental accompaniment to a minimum. The more the instruments and their intricate accompaniment, the more likely it is that the outsider will “sit back and listen to the performance”.

Volume and Expression:

- Somebody once remarked facetiously that in youth liturgies, there are only three grades of volume: loud, louder and loudest. Youth must realise that “singing with gusto” does not necessarily mean “blasting away”. Volume, if over emphasised, can often kill the spirit of devotion and reverence.
- Practically speaking, singing loudly becomes inevitable when the pitch chosen for singing is too high. At a lower pitch, the yelling is sure to diminish. (In general, young boys require to sing at a pitch which is two tones lower than that suited for adult males)

Tempo and Rhythm:

The pace or tempo at which church music is sung, should be reverent and devotional. One way to ensure that the tempo of a hymn is not unduly tampered with is by maintaining the correct beat/rhythm. Very often, the choice of a wrong rhythm could result in a change of tempo from the normal one. We suggest, therefore, that those who provide instrumental accompaniment for liturgical singing get familiarised not only with the pitch/scale proper to every hymn, but also with the rhythm most appropriate to that hymn.

Words

- If often does seem, to our discredit, that we do not seriously mean what we sing. How often we choose particular hymns because we find the tune catchy... hardly bothering to check whether the words are appropriate for the occasion, or whether they are doctrinally sound! We ought to keep in mind that the words are the primary content of a hymn. Hence, whenever a hymn is sung in the liturgy, we should make sure that the words are directly related to the liturgical action being performed.
- In this regard, we should always be wary of adapting secular songs for liturgical use by simply modifying a few words here and there. Experience has amply proved that when “modified pop-songs” are used in the liturgy, their contra-associations are so strong, that (despite the changes in the words), they are a distraction and come in the way of harmonious action.

Use of Vernacular Hymns:

- With the strong drive towards indigenisation that is present in the Church, it is necessary that we too keep abreast, by singing hymns in the vernacular during our liturgical celebrations. We would recommend the moderate use of vernacular hymns, even if the liturgy is in English.
- However, whichever hymns are sung, care must be taken to have the meanings of these hymns explained to all. Secondly, vernacular hymns should not be imposed autocratically upon the people. Instead, the people must be sensitised into seeing the need for vernacular hymns in the liturgy, so that they may willingly accept them. Thirdly, in choosing vernacular hymns, the best known and most popular ones ought to receive priority.

Music for Youngsters:

Youngsters are likely to meet with certain difficulties which are not normally felt by adults when singing. Hence, for their sake,

- a) The hymns chosen should have simple and easily understandable words.
- b) The hymns chosen should not have intricate tunes. Neither should they have too wide a compass (i.e. not more than an octave).
- c) The hymns must be made up of short musical phrases.

The main and overruling criterion therefore is appropriateness. To conclude, we would do well to remind ourselves that music is so much a part of the very fabric of worship, that if it is bad or inappropriate, it tears at the very soul of the rite, interrupts prayer, and diverts attention from the mysteries being celebrated. Best wishes for a more meaningful musical participation in our Salesian houses!

Review

1. Ever since the Second Vatican Council promulgated its momentous document, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, in December 1963, there have been plenty of changes taking place in the liturgy. Many of them have been very laudable while there have been some excesses which are regrettable.
2. Hymns for use at Mass should reflect the characteristics of the Mass.
3. Para-liturgical celebrations allow for greater liberty in the selection of hymns.
4. In the use of musical accompaniments, there should be a certain amount of sobriety and dignity, for it is these elements that an environment conducive to creating an aura of sacredness, reverence and prayer, is formed.
5. The pace or tempo at which church music is sung, should be reverent and devotional.
6. We ought to keep in mind that the words are the primary content of a hymn. Hence, whenever a hymn is sung in the liturgy, the words should be directly related to the liturgical action being performed.
7. We would recommend the moderate use of vernacular hymns, even if the liturgy is in English.
8. Vernacular hymns should not be imposed autocratically upon the people. Instead, the people must be sensitised into seeing the need for vernacular hymns in the liturgy, so that they may willingly accept them. Also, in choosing vernacular hymns, the best known and most popular ones ought to receive priority.

Reflection

1. Reflect on the process of creating and making hymns suitable for use during the Liturgical Celebration of the Mass.
2. On this reflection, compose 2 hymns suitable for use during Mass.

Relevant Skills

Choose a Feast Day, a Sunday in Ordinary Time and a weekday in Lent and choose appropriate hymns and indicate the parts to be sung.

Resources

BOSCOM-INDIA. 'SHEPHERDS' FOR AN INFORMATION AGE. Matunga: Tej Prasarini, 2000.

References

Wagner Nick. Modern Liturgy Answers the 101 Most-Asked Questions about Liturgy. California: Resource Publications Inc., 1996.

