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In case you missed the presentation a few weeks back on Sacred Music and Liturgy, here are some topics that were discussed.

Why do we sing antiphons at Mass?

Principally, it is a matter of thinking with the Church, and being docile to what Holy Mother Church asks of us with regard to the liturgy. Perhaps the best way is to look at the writings of the Holy Father, the Holy See, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on this matter. The place of antiphons at Mass is quite ancient and consistent with Catholic practice. The teaching of the Holy Father, the Holy See, and the USCCB reflects that.

1. It is the word of God

The place of the word of God in the sacred liturgy is not limited to the readings, but is also especially evident in the antiphons and their accompanying psalms. Here are some of the more significant texts on the matter.

- “Preference should be given to the singing which is of clear biblical inspiration and which expresses, through the harmony of music and words, the beauty of God’s word. We would do well to make the most of that signing handed down to us by the Church’s tradition which respects this criterion. I think in particular of the importance of Gregorian chant” (Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 70. f).
- “It goes without saying that the biblical and liturgical texts are the normative words from which liturgical music has to take its bearings” (Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* p. 149). Here, the Holy Father Emeritus was referring to the biblical chants that appear in the *Graduale Romanum* (1974) or the *Graduale Simplex* (1967) and the antiphons of the *Roman Missal*.
- The antiphons are, with rare exception, always texts of the word of God. Consistent, therefore, with the thought of the Holy Fathers, we seek to continue the practice of the Church by using antiphons which are of clear biblical inspiration and which express, through the harmony of music and words, the beauty of God’s word.
- “Proper antiphons from the liturgical books are to be esteemed and used especially because they are the very voice of God speaking to us in the Scriptures. Here, ‘the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them. And such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigor, and the Children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life.’ The Christian faithful are to be led to an ever deeper appreciation of the psalms



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as the voice of Christ and the voice of his Church at prayer” (*Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, USCCB, 2007).

Thus, we can say that one principal reason why we use antiphons is because it is God’s word handed down to us by the Church, rather than words that are loosely based on biblical themes. The liturgical calendar has set out for us texts that follow the ancient tradition of the liturgy—specifically designated for each day in the liturgical calendar.

2. Sing the Mass, and not sing during Mass

In response to various requests for clarification regarding whether the Instruction of September 3, 1958 which allowed for the singing of four vernacular hymns during a recited Mass still applied, the Congregation for Divine Worship in 1969 responded as follows:

“That formula has been *superseded*. What must be sung is the Mass, the Ordinary and the Proper, and not ‘something,’ *no matter how consistent*, that is imposed on the Mass. Since the *liturgical action* is one, it has a single countenance, one motif, and once voice: the voice of the Church. To continue to sing motets, even if they be reverent and devout...but extraneous to the Mass, *in place of the Mass of the day that is being celebrated*, amounts to continuing an acceptable ambiguity: it is like giving the people bran instead of the finest wheat, and a lesser type of wine diluted with water instead of a truly great wine.

Liturgical song involves not a mere melody, but words, texts, thoughts and sentiments clothed in poetry and melody. Thus, these texts must be those of the Mass, not others. Singing, therefore, means singing the Mass and not just singing during Mass” (*Notitiae*, Consilium ad Exsequendam Constitutionem de Sacra Liturgia, 1969, 406) (emphasis in the original).

The above quoted text references the 1958 text issued before Vatican II which gave permission to sing four vernacular hymns: Entrance, Offertory, Communion, and Recessional, at a recited Low Mass. In the words of the *Consilium*, it was “superseded” so that the faithful could be faithful to the texts of the Mass itself which at that point were being translated into the vernacular. The *Consilium* preferred that the texts of the Mass itself be sung—ie, the Ordinaries (*Kyrie, Gloria, Creed, Sanctus*, and *Agnus Dei*) and the Propers (Entrance, Offertory, and Communion antiphons) since they presented a unified liturgical action with one motif and one voice, the voice of the Church. Singing meant to sign the Mass and not just sign during Mass.

Committee on the Liturgy Newsletter, August/September 1993



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In spite of these efforts to promote the sung liturgy, preference continues to be given to singing *during* the Mass instead of singing the Mass. IN fact many of the faithful interpret singing the liturgy to mean singing hymns or songs. Thus those involved in liturgical preparation oftentimes confine themselves to the selection of hymns as their first priority and neglect the singing of ritual texts. Likewise many composers give preference to the composition of hymns and other sacred songs rather than to the ritual texts of the liturgy (NCCB, *Committee on the Liturgy Newsletter*, August/September 1993, Rereading the Constitution on the Liturgy (art. 112-121), p. 2) (emphasis in the original).

What makes Gregorian chant unique?

There are a number of reasons why the Church prefers that Gregorian chant be used in the liturgy. Here are some of the reasons (cf. Nov. 6, 2018 article in Life Site News by Peter Kwasniewski):

1. **Primacy of the Word**—most chant is based on God's own word in Scripture. Chant is an exegesis of the text: the melody and rhythm is not casually or incidentally related to the text, but unpacks and savors its truth.
2. **Unison Singing**—because the focus in chant is on the word of God as it gathers us into one Body of Christ, it is sung in unison—that is, everyone singing the same melody at the same time. Few things witness more impressively to the unity, antiquity, and universality of the Church than a large congregation chanting the Creed together at Mass, for example, demonstrating in action that the Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.
3. **Emotional moderation**—it would be a mistake to say that chant is without emotion. The melodies are deeply satisfying to sing and listen to (when well executed). They plumb the depths of joy and exultation, bitterness and sorrow, yearning and trustful surrender. They express many fine shades of feeling. They can even induce tears in one who is spiritually sensitive. However, the emotions in chant are moderate, gentle, noble, and refined. They induce and conduce to meditation—to the flight of the spirit into God. The temperance in chant takes on a special importance in our times, when so many people live a fast-paced life, busily rushing over the surface of things, excitable and even wearied from too much stimulation.
4. **Unambiguous sacrality**—Gregorian chant arose exclusively for divine worship, and lends itself to no other (profane) use. It is inherently sacred, that is, set apart for God alone. It is the music equivalent of incense and vestments, which are not used except for worship.

Other pertinent considerations?

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With all questions surrounding Sacred Music and Liturgy, we must ask ourselves: are we lowering God to our own level or asking Him to lift us up to share in His divinity. You may have noticed a recent bulletin article wherein I highlighted the changes that Martin Luther made to the liturgy, declaring it no longer an act meant to render homage to God, but directed to the consolation of man; and that sacrifice shall no longer hold pride of place, but the most important will be the sermon. “The cult (i.e., the Mass) was formerly meant to render homage to God; henceforth it shall be directed to man in order to console him and enlighten him. Whereas the sacrifice formerly held pride of place, henceforth the most important will be the sermon” (Luther quoted by Leon Christiani, *Du lutheranisme au protestantisme* (1910), p. 312). In so doing, the stage was set for the Mass to become about entertainment, rather than worship of God.

There may be personal preference with regard to one form of music or another; and nothing prevents us even from preferring one form of popular religious song to another. But music that is suitable for sacred liturgy must be of a special sort. No longer can personal preference be the sole criterion. “Not all musical forms can be considered suitable for liturgical celebrations” says Pope Saint John Paul II in his *Chirograph on sacred music* (2003). In docility to the Church that Christ instituted, we receive the tradition that she has given us.

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is not properly ours—it is Christ’s perfect sacrifice offered to the Father. That is what makes the Mass efficacious. Thankfully, as St. Thomas Aquinas rightly stated, the grace given in the sacrament is not attributed to the worker (the minister, or the faithful, etc.), but rather in the work that is accomplished. It is not the holiness of the minister or the people that makes the Mass efficacious, but its efficacy rests in celebrating the sacraments validly, as the Church has asked.

One other consideration is the following of the liturgical calendar. You may already be aware that there are varying degrees of solemnity in liturgical celebrations—the lowest tier being memorials, then feasts, then solemnities. You will notice various differences in the celebration of Mass depending on the day’s rank. For memorials, we generally place two candles on the altar, four for feasts, and six for solemnities. You’ll also notice that I generally use Eucharistic Prayer II for memorials, Eucharistic Prayer III for feasts, and Eucharistic Prayer I for solemnities. Feasts and solemnities will generally also have a greater degree of music and singing. The use of incense is generally reserved for higher ranking feasts. These more particular local or universal customs seek to help teach progressive solemnity—that by observing the differences in the various celebrations, we might ponder what we are celebrating.

At the end of the day, Sacred Liturgy seeks to lift the soul to heaven—that the individual might experience the eschatological tension of being simultaneously in the world and having a foretaste of the



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heavenly banquet. Our natural perceptions fail when we approach the heavenly mysteries. And so, we come before the altar with complete awe, and a great desire to seek and worship a hidden God.

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