

SINGING AT MASS

The true test of successful congregational singing is not getting people to sing but whether they want to sing. Those in charge of liturgical singing have to find a way to achieve this goal.

We Catholics don't have a strong tradition of congregational singing. In Ireland getting the congregation to sing is like 'pulling teeth'. There are some hymns that people sing with much more gusto than others - that's because they enjoy them. The object is not to 'get in' a certain number of hymns or even to 'get ' the people to sing but to provide an uplifting religious experience for them so that they want to sing. St Augustine said that 'anyone who sings prays twice' but let's not forget that you could sing and not pray at all.

In my experience too much singing at Sunday Mass is as bad as too little. Music is supposed to improve the celebration of Sunday Mass and lead people into prayer. Organists, cantors, singers and other musicians are there to help engage the people in singing and to try create a prayerful and uplifting liturgical experience. Some organists play as if they were solo performers and fail to 'tune into' the liturgy. They should not operate as if they were a separate entity from the congregation. Do our present musical arrangements lead people into a deeper appreciation of the sacred mysteries being celebrated? There is no requirement to 'get in' a certain number of hymns at Mass. Singing is meant to be an improvement, not a requirement. It shouldn't be overpowering or stifle the Liturgy.

It is not good liturgy to fill up every available space in the Mass with singing or music. In my experience singing doesn't always improve on a prayerful silence. However fairly quiet background music can facilitate prayer and reflection. Does our music and singing help to facilitate silent reflection or does it hinder it?

Good organists, musicians or singers will always take the following into account:

- 1 The **theme of the Mass** for a particular Sunday or Holyday
- 2 The **mood** of the liturgical season
- 3 The **capability** of the congregation.

- 4 Not to be a slave of the **'four hymn 'sandwich.**
- 5 Organists **not to play so loud** as to 'drown out' congregational singing. Some organists for instance play the communion hymn as loud as the final hymn. This is because they misjudge the mood of the liturgy and are not tuned in themselves.
- 6 Organists and musicians to play at **the right speed** for congregational singing.
- 7 **Getting musical priorities right.** It is far more important to sing acclamations (e.g. Great Amen, acclamation before the Gospel, acclamation after the consecration, Gloria etc) than hymns.
- 8 To play and sing **appropriate music** for certain 'moments' in the Mass. (E.g. a quiet reflective piece after Communion sung by the choir alone is far better than loud earth shaking music and singing at this time. More quiet reflective music should be played after Holy Communion. Opening and closing hymns can be reasonably loud. Sometimes organists play as if they were 'over and above' the liturgy – they don't seem to be engaged spiritually in the Mass.

SOME REQUIREMENTS WHICH MAY BE APPROPRIATE TO US. (My own observations as president of the liturgy)

The music is reasonably good here at St Vincent's. More often than not it is leading people into prayer.

The 'offertory hymn' should accompany the procession and not be something which is started before the people sit down after the bidding prayers. Good liturgy has always got 'prayerful breaks.' Rushed liturgy rarely nourishes peoples spiritual life.

Try and always include sung acclamations at Sunday Mass. The acclamation before the Gospel is meant to accompany the procession, with or without big Green book, to the lectern. It is meant to be like a fanfare or a salute to the presence of Christ in His Word. It is best if the cantor sing it from the microphone near the tabernacle. I suggest that the only singing from the lectern be the psalm.

Please try and sing the Great Amen during Mass

A Music leader would be a great help at least for the main Sunday Mass. That person would help the congregation to sing

new pieces of music. Sometimes they are called animators. They would lead the congregation to sing the acclamations from a prominent place. A cantor of the psalm could be an animator. The music leader would work closely with the organist and priest. If the music leader or organist is on an ego-trip, liturgy can go haywire.

Choices for the communion hymn: To have the cantor stand at the microphone, sing a verse with a repeated congregational response until the distribution of communion is over, or wait until after every one is back in their seats and sing a communal hymn together.

Please don't start playing when the bell rings at the beginning of Mass – please wait until the people have first stood up. The bell is for the people to stand not to start the music.

To form a group of singers, who would meet now and again with the Music leader, organist and priest to learn new music. This especially applies to the Sunday morning congregation but could also apply to Saturday.

The Music leader to practice for a few minutes before Mass with different musical items. This especially applies to the response to the psalm. There should be more leaning towards responsorial singing.

THE MAIN THING AGAIN IS TO BE CREATIVE. MORE OF THE SAME IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH. ALL THOSE INVOLVED IN MUSIC AT MASS ARE SERVANTS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE GREAT MYSTERY BEING CELEBRATED. MUSIC SHOULD LEAD PEOPLE TO PRAYER AND NOT PUT THEM OFF IT. IT SHOULD BE CHRIST CENTERED AND NOT ORGANIST CENTERED, OR CANTOR CENTERED, OR PRIEST CENTEED, OR MUSICIAN CENTERED OR MUSIC LEADER CENTERED. THANK YOU.