



THE PLACE OF CHOIRS IN THE LITURGY

A resource to help parish musicians understand
the roles of the Cantor, Choir and People in the Liturgy



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INTRODUCTION

Are choirs in or out? Is the choir allowed to sing pieces of music on its own? Do the congregation get to join in everything?

These are just some questions which are asked about choirs in the liturgy. There are those people who think the choir should sing everything on its own, and then there are those people who think the choir should just sing everything the people sing and that the people should sing everything in the liturgy. Both suggestions here are polar opposites and both are incorrect. So, if that's the case what is the correct practice when it comes to choirs in the liturgy? There are three documents or resources which will be used in this discussion on choirs: *Sacrosanctum Concilium (SC)*, *The General Instruction of The Roman Missal (Third Edition) (GIRM)* and *Catholic Worship Book II (CWB II)*. In examining these documents, we will see that cantors and/or choirs have an important role in teaching music to the people, so that they will become familiar with such pieces.

Terminology

For the purposes of this discussion, the terms used in the GIRM and CWB II are those used here. We have used the term Priest, where some may use the term Celebrant, and the term people, where others may use the term members of the Gathered Assembly or Assembly. The reason for using the terms used in GIRM and CWB II is for consistency and to avoid confusion. Just like everything else we do in life, the liturgy and its terminology should be consistent.

WHAT DO THE LITURGICAL DOCUMENTS SAY ABOUT CHOIRS?

Sacrosanctum Concilium (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy)

The best way to start this discussion on the place of choirs in the liturgy is to consider *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which is the document from the Second Vatican Council on the Liturgy. It has an article on choirs and it states:

The treasure of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with great care. Choirs must be diligently promoted, especially in cathedral churches; but bishops and other pastors of souls must be at pains to ensure that, whenever the sacred action is to be celebrated with song, the whole body of the faithful may be able to contribute that active participation which is rightly theirs. (#114)

This same document also states:

Religious singing by the people is to be intelligently fostered so that in devotions and sacred exercises, as also during liturgical services, the voices of the faithful may ring out according to the norms and requirements of the rubrics. (#118)

So, as we can see from the document on the Liturgy from the *Second Vatican Council*, there is room for a choir to sing music on its own, as well as lead people in the parts that pertain to them. In other words, there is room for a choir to sing on its own as well for congregational participation in the liturgy. Like all things, the key is balance.

The General Instruction of *The Roman Missal* (Third Edition) (GIRM)

The General Instruction of *The Roman Missal* (Third Edition) (GIRM) is the document at the start of the Missal that outlines all the rules and procedures for celebrating the liturgy, what in liturgical terms are referred to as the rubrics. In this document that contains these rubrics, it also explains where music is to take place in the Mass, what parts can be sung by the people and what parts may be sung by a choir alone, or by a choir and/or cantor alternating with the people. The table below shows that for some parts of the Mass there are choices as to who can sing at that point in the liturgy and these have been laid out. There are other parts of the Mass which belong specifically to the people and it is their right to sing those as explained by article 118 in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

The General Instruction of The Roman Missal outlines the roles of the choir and the cantor. It states:

Among the faithful, the *schola cantorum* or choir exercises its own liturgical function, its place being to take care that the parts proper to it, in keeping with the different genres of chant, are properly carried out and to foster the active participation of the

faithful by means of the singing. What is said about the *schola cantorum* also applies, with due regard for the relevant norms, to other musicians, and especially the organist. (#103)

It is fitting that there be a cantor or choir director to direct and support the people's singing. Indeed, when there is no choir, it is up to the cantor to direct the different chants, with the people taking the part proper to them. (#104)

In the table below the reference is given to the article in the GIRM which relates to that specific part of the Mass.

Catholic Worship Book II

Finally, in 2016 Catholic Worship Book II (CWB II) was published and released by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. This hymnal is the benchmark hymnal for Catholics in Australia. On pages xxii-xxiii it lists the musical priorities for the Mass. That is, those parts which should always be sung, and those parts which might be sung on more solemn feast days. The tables below marry up with the GIRM and CWB II.

CATEGORIES AND PRIORITIES OF WHAT CAN/SHOULD BE SUNG IN THE LITURGY?

The table below lists 7 categories of music used in the liturgy together with the priority appropriate to each category. The first priority is the acclamations and the dialogues. These should be sung whenever possible.

Category	Priority
Acclamation	1
Dialogue	1
Responsorial Psalm	2
Litany	3
Ordinary Chant	4
Presidential Chant	4
Supplementary Song	5

The Principle of Progressive Solemnity is a guide to the choice of the parts of the Mass that are to be sung on different occasions. It states that the more solemn the occasion the more music should be used during Mass. When selecting which parts of the Mass are to be sung on a particular occasion preference should be given to categories with higher priority. That is, weekday or memorial the singing should be considerably less than on a feast day or a solemnity.

TABLE OF THE PARTS OF THE MASS THAT CAN BE SUNG

The table below lists all the parts of the Mass that can be sung or may require music. It shows the category of each piece of music, its priority of importance, who may sing it and the relevant GIRM reference.

Part of the Mass	Category	Sung by	Priority	GIRM Reference
THE INTRODUCTORY RITES				
The Entrance Chant	ProceSSIONal Song	Choir and People Cantor and People People (alone) Choir (alone)	4	#48
Sign of the Cross	Dialogue	Priest/ People	1	#50
Greeting	Dialogue	Priest/ People	1	#50
The Penitential Act/ Lord, have mercy	Litany	Choir and People Cantor and People Priest and People	3	#51-52
Sprinkling of Water				
Gloria	Ordinary Chant	People Choir and People Choir	4	#53
The Collect	Presidential Chant	Priest	4	#54
THE LITURGY OF THE WORD				
Responsorial Psalm	Responsorial Psalm	Psalmist/People	2	#61
Sequence (See below)		Cantor and People Choir and People People (alone) Choir (alone)		#64
Gospel Acclamation	Acclamation	Cantor and People Choir and People People	1	#63

Part of the Mass	Category	Sung by	Priority	GIRM Reference
Introduction to the Gospel	Dialogue	Priest/ People	2	#59 #134
Gospel	Presidential Chant	Priest	4	#59 #134
Dialogue at the end of the Gospel	Dialogue	Priest/ People	2	#59 #134
The Profession of Faith (Creed)	Ordinary Chant	Choir and People Cantor and People	4	#68
Universal Prayer (Prayer of the Faithful)	Litany	Cantor and People		#71 #138
THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST				
The Offertory Chant	Supplementary Song	People Choir and People Cantor and People Choir (alone) Instrumental Music Silence	5	#74 CWB II #9 #313
Invitation to Prayer Pray brothers and sisters...	Dialogue	Priest/People	1	#77
Prayer over the Offerings	Presidential Chant	Priest	4	#77
Preface dialogue	Dialogue	Priest/People	1	(#79a) #148
Preface	Presidential Chant	Priest	4	#79a
Holy, Holy, Holy (Sanctus)	Acclamation	Priest and People	1	#79b
Eucharistic Prayer	Presidential Chant	Priest	4	#79c-g
Memorial Acclamation	Acclamation	Priest and People	1	#147 #151
Great Amen	Acclamation	Priest and People	1	#79h

Part of the Mass	Category	Sung by	Priority	GIRM Reference
The Communion Rite				
The Lord's Prayer	Ordinary Chant	Priest and People	4	#81
Embolism (Deliver us, O Lord)	Presidential Chant	Priest	4	#81
Doxology: For the kingdom...	Acclamation	People	1	#81
Lamb of God (Agnus Dei)	Litany	Choir and People Cantor and People	3	#83
The Communion Chant/ Hymn	Processional Song	Choir and People Cantor and People Choir alone	4	#87
Post Communion Hymn	Supplementary Song	People	5	#88
Prayer after Communion	Presidential Chant	Priest	4	#89
THE CONCLUDING RITES				
Greeting and Blessing	Dialogue	Priest and People	1	#167
Dismissal	Dialogue	Priest and People	1	#168
Recessional Song	Supplementary Song (Optional)	People Choir People and Choir Instrumental Music Silence	5	

Where the table says “Cantor and People” or “Choir and People”, the people may join in the refrain while the cantor or choir sings the verses, as in the case of the Responsorial Psalm or they may join in singing everything, e.g. the Entrance hymn.

Singing at the Preparation of the Gifts and at the Recessional is optional. It may be replaced by instrumental music or silence. Silence at these times in the liturgy during Lent would highlight the austerity that characterizes the Season of Lent.

The Sequence is a liturgical hymn that is sung before the Gospel Acclamation on certain days. There are four times in the liturgical year when a Sequence is used in the liturgy:

- Easter Sunday
- Pentecost Sunday
- Corpus Christi and
- Our Lady of Sorrows (15 September).

On Easter Sunday and Pentecost Sunday, the Sequence is obligatory. On the feasts of Corpus Christi and Our Lady of Sorrows it is optional.

HOW CAN THE CHOIR AND PEOPLE WORK TOGETHER IN THE LITURGY?

First, we will take two Mass settings from CWB II to illustrate how this goal can be achieved.

Mass of Saint Francis by Paul Taylor (CWB II #22)

Lord, have mercy (22a):

The cantor or choir intones the acclamation ‘Lord, have mercy’ and all repeat it. The other acclamations in the litany continue in the same manner. By having the choir or cantor intone the acclamation and then having everyone repeat it, the cantor or choir is fulfilling their role of leading the people. The people first need to hear what it is they are going to sing. They follow the lead they are given.

Gloria (22b):

This setting of the Gloria is through composed and does not have a refrain. The choir and people or the cantor and people are able to sing this setting together.

Holy, Holy, Holy (22c):

This acclamation is sung by everyone together.

Lamb of God (22f):

This litany can be sung by everyone together.

Mass Shalom by Colin D. Smith CFC and Paul Mason (CWB II #27)

Lord, have mercy (27a):

The cantor or choir intones the acclamation ‘Lord, have mercy’ and all repeat it. The other acclamations in the litany continue in the same manner. By having the choir or cantor intone the acclamation and then having everyone repeat it, the cantor or choir is fulfilling their role of leading the people. The people first need to hear what it is they are going to sing. They follow the lead they are given.

Penitential Act (27b):

In this version, a Minister sings the invocation and everybody responds.

Gloria (27c):

This setting of the Gloria has a refrain. The cantor or choir may sing the verses, while the people join in the refrain. Alternatively, everyone may sing the whole Gloria.

Gospel Acclamation (27d) and Lenten Gospel Acclamation (27e):

The cantor or choir intones the acclamation and then everyone repeats it, thereby illustrating the role of the cantor or choir to lead the acclamations, and the role of the people to follow the lead of the cantor or choir. The cantor or choir then sings the verse, and all repeat the acclamation.

Holy, Holy, Holy (27f):

This acclamation is sung by everyone together.

Lamb of God (27k):

This litany can be sung by everyone together.

How to achieve a balance between choirs and people in the Liturgy?

The table above lists options for the choir to sing on its own or alternate with the people. As was stated above, balance is the key. Therefore, if the choir is going to sing the Gloria on its own (which is a legitimate option given in the GIRM), then it would be wise to have the choir or cantor alternate with the people in singing the Lord, have mercy. In this instance it would also be helpful to have the people join in singing all or part of the Entrance Chant.

If the choir is going to sing a piece on its own during Communion, then the people should sing the Post Communion hymn. In this way, balance is achieved by the choir and people working together, taking their parts in the liturgy and the Mass does not become a performance opportunity for the choristers, nor a spectator sport for the people.

Purposes of a Choir

As we seen from the examples above one of the purposes or functions of a choir is to lead the people. The term ‘lead’ here is used to mean the cantor or choir first sings what the people will sing so that the people can hear it and then repeat it.

Choirs also embellish music with harmonies and descants.

There may be two types of choirs in parishes. Either (1) a group of volunteers, or (2) a choir of professional or trained musicians.

Those places which have professional musicians or trained choristers will be able to do greater things with the music in the liturgy, such as harmonies or descants.

Another function of the choir is to teach music to the people. Since it is an option for the choir to sing a piece on its own during the Offertory, Communion or at the

Recessional, opportunities present themselves here for the choir to fulfil its teaching role. That is, if there is a hymn they would like the people to learn, the choir can use these opportunities to teach this piece of music to the people.

Before the choir can teach a piece of music to the people, the members of the choir themselves need to know the music very well. As was mentioned above choirs must also lead, but leaders can only lead when they know what they are doing. In other words, they must know the music they are singing and/or playing extremely well before teaching it to the people to learn.

An effective way to introduce a piece of music to the people is to have it sung for at least two weeks in a row before the people are being expected to join. In this way, they will have heard it at least twice and will hopefully be familiar with the melody. Listening is a form of participation and prayer in the liturgy for the people. If they are singing a piece of music they are unfamiliar with they will not get to learn it well.

Another option for choirs may be to sing a motet or anthem on its own at an appropriate point in the liturgy. Motets and Anthems are pieces for choirs, which the people do not join in singing. When the choir sings on its own, the singing should be an aid to prayer, not a performance or a distraction to the people's prayer in the liturgy.

It is better to have a multidirectional microphone for a choir so that a blended sound is amplified through the sound system rather than individual voices dominating the sound. Having individual microphones for each chorister or for each singer does not help the voices to blend.

CONCLUSION

By using the various documents on the liturgy, exploring and explaining the parts of the Mass and who is to sing what part in the Mass, this discussion has illustrated that there are those parts that belong to the people to sing in the liturgy, there are those parts where the choir or cantors lead or intone, so that the people can respond, and there are those parts which the choir can sing on its own and there are those parts in the Mass where there can be instrumental music.

Examples have been given on how to achieve balance between the choir singing everything whereby the people do not sing anything, or the polar opposite where the people join in singing everything and the choir become the back up singers for “the show”.

The Second Vatican Council rightly called for the “full, conscious and active participation of the people.” However, listening is also a form of prayer. There is no better example of listening being a form of participation and prayer than in article 61 from the GIRM on the Responsorial Psalm which states: “the psalmist, or cantor of the Psalm, sings the Psalm verses at the ambo or another suitable place, while the whole congregation sits and listens, normally taking part by means of the response”. Here we see that the people fully, consciously and actively participate in the liturgy by singing and listening.

In order that the people can learn music which is unfamiliar to them to choir has a role to fulfil in teaching the people such music. Here the people participate by listening to the music being sung so that they can learn it effectively. They will then be able to fully and actively participate in singing music that was unfamiliar to them because it has been taught effectively to them and they were given the opportunity to listen to it enough times before having to join in singing it themselves.