

Church of the Assumption

Glorifying the Lord with Our Lives

July 01, 2021

Dear Assumption Parishioners,

As traumatic as it has been, the COVID shutdowns broke the inertia cycle of our programs and practices here at Assumption. No longer did things continue simply because that is how we have been doing them. Now, as we bring programs and practices back, we have the rare opportunity to ask whether we *ought* to do something in a certain way or if there is a way we might do it better.

At the very top of my mind during this entire pandemic has been the question of congregational singing. For many of us, it has been the greatest and most emotional liturgical change we have experienced, and we are all looking forward to its return. The Mass feels too much like a spectator sport or a stage performance without it. However, as I have been praying and planning to bring back congregational singing, it has become clear to me that, for our communal song to strengthen and grow, we require a new hymnal. To that end, **when congregational singing returns to Assumption, we will no longer be using our previous “Breaking Bread” hymnal and will instead be adopting the recently released “Saint Jean de Brebeuf Hymnal” from Sophia Institute Press.**

As is typical of my leadership style, I always accompany a major change or decision at our parish with a letter about why I think that decision is necessary. But this letter is particularly important. One of the struggles unique to liturgical decisions is that, in the last few decades, liturgy has come to be seen as an expression of *personal aesthetic tastes*, rather than as a *sacred science* whose principles are larger than the priest or the

congregation. By switching hymnals at Assumption, especially to a hymnal that many will regard as more “traditional,” I run the serious risk of being seen as an autocrat who is using his position of responsibility to reshape the liturgy to his own personal preferences. I am worried that those parishioners who already do not like my approach to the liturgy and my style of celebrating Mass will see this as the straw that broke the camel’s back. I expect some people to be upset (hymnal changes are always controversial and emotional affairs), but I am terrified that this decision – as necessary as I think it is – will destroy my ability to be the pastor for *all* of our people, not just those who like or agree with me.

As such, the purpose of this letter is to try to explain my reasoning as best as I can in order to counter the impression that this has something to do with personal preference. I really do believe this hymnal is necessary for our congregational singing to strengthen and develop. Whether you agree with my reasons or not, I hope we can at least spare ourselves the false impression that hymnals are a matter of preferences rather than a matter of principles.

Please know that I love you – all of you – and that I will only ever act for your good. The Scriptures have some dreadful things to say about shepherds who act selfishly and do not care for the flock entrusted to them, and those warnings are always foremost in my mind. Caring for you is my path to Heaven and I am very much aiming for Heaven. Thank you, as always, for your willingness to journey with me into unknown territory.

May our community always thrive in Christ,

J. Moore

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Relevant Documents

I think it is important that we always begin our discussions with the relevant Church documents and teachings. I have compiled every document I could find on liturgical music into one master document at https://jeffreyhmoore.files.wordpress.com/2021/03/liturgical_music_norms.pdf

Unfortunately, though the universal Church has much to say about music in general, the assumption of the Roman documents is that we are primarily using chants during the Mass, either the plain chants of the Mass dialogues or the more complex antiphonal chants of the *Graduale Romanum*. Hymnody, properly speaking, is not addressed in the universal liturgical documents, so we have to rely on U.S. sources to provide guidance on our local tradition of singing hymns. Though none of them are binding in the way a Roman document might be, the three most helpful and relevant analyses of liturgical hymnody are the following:

1. **Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship**, USCCB Committee on Divine Worship, 2007.¹
2. **Catholic Hymnody at the Service of the Church: An Aid for Evaluating Hymn Lyrics**, USCCB Committee on Doctrine, 2021.²
3. **Rejoice in the Lord Always**, Most Rev. Alexander K. Sample (then of Marquette, MI), 2013.³

In addition to these sources, I also recommend [Why Catholics Can't Sing \(2nd ed.\)](#) by Thomas Day, a book which speaks as much to the entire *ars celebrandi* of how to say Mass as it does to music specifically, but which has some very helpful insights that will inform my discussion here.

¹ <https://yakimadiocese.org/pdf/SingToTheLord.pdf>

² http://www.chantcafe.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Catholic_Hymnody_at_the_Service_of_the_Church.pdf

A Quick Note on Amplification

In addition to the musical quality issues explored below, a significant barrier to strong congregational singing is the over-amplification of the cantor. [Why Catholics Can't Sing](#) strongly argues that successful congregational singing requires that the congregation be able to hear itself, rather than being drowned out by a cantor or instrument. Otherwise, the congregation is not singing *congregationally*, but only as disconnected individuals singing solo underneath the all-encompassing sounds of the speakers. As we roll out this hymnal at Assumption, we will also be scaling back amplification.

Solo vs. Ensemble vs. Congregational Singing

In general, there are three ways to sing: alone (solo), in a small group (ensemble), or with a large body of people (congregational). Each of these three methods has its place in singing universally, but also in liturgical music. From time to time, it is helpful to the prayer of the people at Mass for a soloist or a choir to sing a piece by themselves which is beautiful and complex and transcendent. Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus*, for example, is an incredibly lovely piece that might be sung for Corpus Christi or Holy Thursday, possibly in the prayerful time after Communion. At Assumption, our cantors will often sing the *Ave Maria* at funerals and weddings. *In general*, however, congregational singing makes up the majority of liturgical music following the Second Vatican Council, as that Council's focus on engaging people in the liturgy is well carried out when the people themselves are singing.

Unfortunately, one of the major problems with liturgical music today is that much of the hymnody found in modern Catholic hymnals is far better suited for soloists and choirs than it is for congregations. Specifically, congregational singing requires *metrical* and *scalar* hymns, but recent hymnody is instead *syncopated* and *jumpy*.

³ <https://www.dioceseofmarquette.org/UserFiles/Bishop/PastoralLetter-RejoiceInTheLordAlways.pdf>

Metrical vs. Syncopated

In Why Catholics Can't Sing Thomas Day describes congregational singing like a shared dance: everyone must move together in unison. While professionals might be able to pull off the moves necessary for a ballet, a congregational hymn is a lot more like a folk dance where everyone in the village has to move together, regardless of ability. This means that the best congregational hymns are not going to be *stylized*, with lots of jumps and leaps, but are instead going to seem more like a march moving forward rhythmically and methodically.

In musical terms, this means that congregations sing best with quarter notes and half notes, not with eighth notes, sixteenth notes, odd time signatures, or extended rests. A stylized song is good and beautiful in the hands of a professional musician, but not for Joe and Jane Doe in the pews. Compare, for example, the following two hymns:

COME, LORD JESUS **489**

Acc #138 Steve Angrisano and Tom Tomaszek

Refrain

Come, Lord Je - sus, come. Come and fill my heart
with your life. Hold me close, Lord, hold me tight,
and come, Lord Je - sus, come.

Verses

1. Where there's de-spair in life, Lord, let me be your voice
2. Where there is sad-ness let me be your com-fort and
1. of hope. Where there's in - ju - ry, Lord,
2. your joy. When there's fear in our hearts
to Refrain

1. let me be your voice of peace.
2. let me be a sign of faith.

Text: Verses based on a prayer ascribed to St. Francis of Assisi, ca. 1182-1226. Text and music © 1997, Steve Angrisano and Thomas N. Tomaszek. Published by Spirit & Song®, a division of OCP. All rights reserved.

826 Laudes Creaturarum (1224 AD)

Saint Francis of Assisi (d. 1226)

1. All crea - tures of our God and King, Lift up your
2. Thou rush - ing wind that art so strong Ye clouds that
3. Thou flow - ing wa - ter, pure and clear, Make mu - sic
voice and with us sing: Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia!
sail in Heav'n a - long: O___ praise Him! Al - le - lu - ia!
for thy Lord to hear: O___ praise Him! Al - le - lu - ia!
Thou burn - ing sun with gold - en beam, Thou sil - ver
Thou ris - ing moon, in praise re - joice, Ye lights of
Thou fire so mas - ter - ful and bright, That giv - est
moon with soft - er gleam: R. O___ praise Him! Al - le -
ev'n - ing, find a voice:
man both warmth and light:
lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia!

If an entire congregation has to move together in time, the second hymn is clearly the better option. The first hymn, though certainly not inappropriate for prayer, is far more appropriate for soloists who can move in their own time.

Scalar vs. “Jumpy”

The other musical quality that makes a hymn far easier to sing for everyone in the congregation regardless of musical training is the interval between musical notes. Most people can limp though “Do Re Mi Fa...” because they merely need to go up a scale. But ask someone to jump a fifth or more multiple times and they will likely not succeed. Compare these two hymns for example:

468 **THE LORD IS MY HOPE** M.D. Ridge
Acc #536

Refrain

The Lord is my hope and my glo-ry. The Lord is the song that I
sing: so ten-der and lov-ing a shep-herd, so root-ed in
jus-tice, a king. When shad-ow con-fus-es my vi-sion,
when sor-row lays claim to my heart, God is my ref-uge, my
rock and my shield. I will re-ly on the Lord.

Verses

1. Near to death, I cried, “Save me!” and you heard.
2. King-doms fall; na-tions trem-ble at your pow’r.
3. Jus-tice reigns, and the wick-ed are cast down.
4. All who trust in your prom-ise will be saved,
5. Morn-ing comes: I will praise you with my life,

to Refrain

1. You are God, and you lift up the poor.
2. None can stand with-out you at their side.
3. In your love is our safe-ty and strength.
4. for your word has been test-ed in fire.
5. ev-er faith-ful and true to your word.

Text: Based on 2 Samuel 22. Text and music © 1989, M.D. Ridge, 1938–2017. Published by OCP. All rights reserved.

780 O Sanctissima, O Piissima (Blessed Virgin)

“Virgin Mother of God, He whom the whole world cannot contain was enclosed in thy womb, and was made man.”—Virgo Dei Genitrix, vi

1. O san - ctis - si - ma, O pi - is - si - ma,
2. Tu, so - lá - ti - um Et re - fú - gi - um,
3. Ec - ce dé - bi - les, Per - quam flé - bi - les,

Dul - cis Vir - go Ma - ri - a! Ma - ter a -
Vir - go Ma - ter Ma - ri - a! Quid - quid o -
Sal - va nos, O Ma - ri - a! Tol - le lan -

má - ta, In - te - me - rá - ta, O - ra,
ptá - mus, Per te spe - rá - mus; O - ra,
guó - res, Sa - na do - ló - res; O - ra,

4. Virgo, respice,
Mater, aspice,
Audi nos, O Maria!
Tu, medicinam,
Portas divinam;
Ora, ora pro nobis.

While much of the first hymn is scalar, it regularly relies on a jump from a sixth down into an octave up; and there are many fifths scattered throughout the hymn. The second hymn does still have jumps, but these are restricted to fourths, and the rest of the intervals are single steps with a few thirds.

The Brebeuf Hymnal

The primary reason that we are switching to the Brebeuf Hymnal is that it shows a nearly perfect respect for the principles illustrated above. Every single hymn present in this hymnal is singable by a broad and diverse congregation regardless of musical training. However, the Brebeuf Hymnal also has two additional qualities which are worth highlighting here.

Interchangeable Melodies

First, the Brebeuf Hymnal relies on and encourages interchangeable melodies. For centuries, Latin, German, and English hymns were written as a form of metrical poem, with a certain number of syllables in each line. This allowed an incredible variety and wealth of hymn tunes to develop alongside them, with most hymns able to be sung to multiple tunes. (You can, for example, sing the verses of “O Come O Come Emmanuel” to the tune of “All People that on Earth do Dwell” as both are 8.8.8.8.)

While this is a fun curiosity, it also serves an important function in congregational singing. People are far more likely to sing (and sing well) hymn tunes that they have memorized, so that they do not have to read along with both the words and the music when singing. The Brebeuf Hymnal specifically encourages (and has the resources and indices necessary for) the mixing of hymn tunes. At Assumption, we may, for example, use the same hymn tune for the entrance hymn for a few months, even while singing different words appropriate for each season, until that hymn tune is in our bones and we can all sing it confidently without an amplified cantor or loud accompaniment.

Catholic Tradition

For a Church with a 2000-year history, it is bizarre that the vast majority of the liturgical music in use in American Catholic parishes today should have been written only after 1970. While the Church is always looking to integrate the new and contemporary with the traditions handed on by previous generations, musically we seem to have felt the need to wipe the slate clean and start over, at the expense of millennia of Catholic devotion and wisdom. The Brebeuf Hymnal has tried to remedy that in a truly inspiring way.

The front section of the Brebeuf Hymnal is made up of 40 ancient and medieval Catholic hymns⁴. These hymns are first presented in their original Latin and then each is presented in different English translations done by translators from different eras; and then each translation is set to multiple hymn tunes. As the publishers of the hymnal state in their introduction, “The ancient Latin hymns contain rich theology. For this reason, we have included *numerous translations* – since no single translation can fully capture the meaning.” As I was reviewing this hymnal, I was surprised to realize that many hymns that Catholics know and love are actually based on much older Latin hymns that were translated after the Reformation, and I was amazed to see how the same Latin hymn could produce two different, incredibly rich translations.

The back section of the Brebeuf Hymnal consists of 225 “supplemental” hymns, which simply means they are not as ancient or as liturgically important as the hymns in the first section. Looking through this second section, I saw an incredible wealth and variety of hymns that our community already knows and loves, which alleviated some of my fears about the first section being too restrictive of foreign.

⁴ **NB:** in the mind of the Roman Rite, hymns are primarily used in the Liturgy of the Hours, not the Mass, so while there is a depth and richness to ancient and medieval Catholic hymns, there are not, relatively, very many of them. The Brebeuf Hymnal

has managed to incorporate nearly every ancient or Medieval Catholic hymn which has withstood the test of time.

FAQs

Why Now?

Even without the pandemic, we were headed towards a new hymnal sooner rather than later. “Breaking Bread” is an annually printed publication that requires (by its own copyright) that we trash it and order a new version each year. Even though an individual “Breaking Bread” book is not particularly expensive, hardcover hymnals are less wasteful and often pay for themselves in 3-5 years.

The pandemic, however, created an additional urgency. Oregon Catholic Press (OCP), the publisher of “Breaking Bread,” requires a separate streaming license, in addition to their book purchase, if we are going to use their copyrighted hymns at a streaming Mass. Though OCP gave a temporary exemption to this policy at the beginning of the pandemic, the exemption has now expired, and Dr. Mabalot and I decided we did not want to get caught up in this kind of licensing agreement, especially with the possibility of streaming major liturgies going forward. In addition, having worked with OCP on this streaming issue and in a few other contexts over the last two years, it has become abundantly clear to me that they care far more about the creation of new content than they do about serving parishes. Beyond their copyright policies (which are, understandably, necessary for artists to make a living), OCP seems to have no interest in publishing public domain hymns or creating resources to serve a truly diverse ecosystem of parishes, because they primarily want to create new content for which they have the copyright. In other words, they focus on artists first and parishes second which, as a parish administrator, was not in my best interests.

It was time to move away from OCP and look for a new publisher with a hardcover hymnal. I could have waited a few more years, but the shutdown will make the transition to a new hymnal easier than it would have been otherwise.

How will we pay for these hymnals?

An OCP “Breaking Bread” book costs about \$6.00 per hymnal per year, while our new Brebeuf Hymnals cost \$25/hymnal. So they will pay for themselves after about four years of use.

My favorite hymn is not in the new hymnal. Will I ever hear it again?

Yes! A hymnal is the core of a community’s repertoire and what we will use for the majority of our hymns. However, it is possible to purchase choir copies of individual pieces, and we already have many of the OCP hymns in our music library, so there is no reason we cannot continue to use some of the favorites. This is especially true for hymns our congregation has memorized, as memorized hymns overcome many of the musical quality issues explored above.

In general, I do not want this to be a sharp, painful, or even particularly noticeable transition. Dr. Mabalot and I will work together to make sure there is a reasonable mix of the old and the new for a while yet. However, as mentioned above, OCP has a very strict streaming policy, so for Masses we choose to stream, we will likely have to stick with the new hymnal.

Do these hymnals have the Sunday readings?

No, they do not. They are only hymnals. However, a different publisher has recently released a hard cover bilingual missal (a book with the Mass responses and readings), with the English and Spanish on facing pages. This new missal is perfect for our congregation and we will be purchasing it as soon as our parish has the funds to do so.

The Brebeuf Hymnal says “for the Ordinary and Extraordinary Forms of the Mass.” That worries me.

Fret not! I am fully on board with the Second Vatican Council, and have no hidden agenda to return us to the old Mass. Yes, this hymnal could be used by an Extraordinary Form congregation and, yes, this hymnal contains Latin. But my primary concern is always and only the needs of our parishioners, and I truly believe that this hymnal is necessary for our congregational singing to grow and develop. An extraordinary form Mass does not make sense for our community and we are not headed that way. The use of Latin, which is still encouraged by the instructions for Mass, will be continually discerned with Dr. Mabalot, the Pastoral Council, and our entire community.