

Why I Chant the Mass

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Introductory Note

I am aware that my regular chanting of the entire Mass on Sundays and solemnities makes me seem like an outlier and a rebel among priests. It is something few people have seen or experienced, and travels around the U.S. indicate that it is exceedingly rare. To that end, I have found it necessary to publish a document to explain myself.

I have, essentially, two reasons. The first – the *why* – is the liturgical documents and dictates of the Church, which appear to require the chanting of the Mass if any music is used at all. The second – the *why now* – is the evangelical benefits of such an approach to the Mass.

I am also often asked why so few other priests chant the Mass, and my response is always that one should probably ask those other priests. However, my guess is that the Mass chants were not easily accessible to presiders until the publication of the new translation of the Roman Missal in 2011, in which the Mass chants were finally included in-place in the Mass texts, and the text with music was included as the first option. It is likely that 2011 sparked a renewed look at the chanted Mass, and that it even took a few years after that before seminaries instituted curriculum to facilitate it. Any priest who did the majority of his seminary education before 2011 has likely not heard of or been educated in the chanted Mass. However, by the time I reached theology in 2013, Mundelein Seminary was strongly emphasizing the chanting of the Mass and had included curriculum on how to do so.

Liturgical Requirements

Summary

One of scandals of the liturgy wars following the Second Vatican Council is that liturgy has been reduced to a matter of preference – be that traditional or progressive preference – and the idea of liturgy as a gift from God uniting eras and cultures has been lost. My fundamental belief is that a presider's primary liturgical responsibility is fidelity to the Church, who is the guardian and steward of our liturgical treasures. I believe that adherence to the rubrics is the only way to get every Catholic reading from the same playbook, and to make liturgy an expression of our shared Catholic faith rather than an expression of our personal tastes and preferences. To that end, I am hyper vigilant about following the liturgical rubrics. After all, Vatican II itself said, "no other person, even if he be a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority." (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* #22)

Regarding the documents in question, two are primarily operative: 2011's *General Instruction for the Roman Missal* (GIRM), which provides the current instructions for the Mass, and 1967's *Musicam Sacram* (MS) which implements and interprets Vatican II's teaching on liturgical music. For Masses on Sundays and solemnities, GIRM #40 requires that singing by the ministers and the people not be absent. MS #28-31 gives us an order to this music, requiring some parts of the Mass to be musical before others, listing the chanted dialogues first and the shared parts second, and stating that if there is music at the entrance or communion processions, then all of the dialogical and shared parts of the Mass must be chanted first.

GIRM #147 does not require that the Eucharistic Prayer be chanted in its entirety, but it does recommend it.

GIRM #40

Great importance should therefore be attached to the use of singing in the celebration of the Mass, with due consideration for the culture of the people and abilities of each liturgical assembly. Although it is not always necessary (e.g., in weekday Masses) to sing all the texts that are of themselves meant to be sung, every care should be taken that singing by the ministers and the people is not absent in celebrations that occur on Sundays and on holy days of obligation.

In the choosing of the parts actually to be sung, however, preference should be given to those that are of greater importance and especially to those to be sung by the priest or the deacon or the lector, with the people responding, or by the priest and people together.

Notes

“[...] every care should be taken that singing by the ministers and the people is not absent in celebrations that occur on Sundays and on holy days of obligation.” Essentially a prohibition of the old practice of Low Masses on Sunday. Music must be used on these days if the community is capable of it.

“[...] preference should be given [...] to those to be sung by the priest or the deacon or the lector, with the people responding, or by the priest and people together.” This is an implementation of *Musicam Sacram* (see below).

The footnote to this GIRM paragraph points to: “Cf. Sacred Congregation of Rites, Instruction [Musicam sacram](#), On music in the Liturgy, 5 March 1967, nos. 7, 16: AAS 59 (1967), pp. 302, 305.”

GIRM #147

[...] It is very appropriate that the priest sing those parts of the Eucharistic Prayer for which musical notation is provided.

Notes

“very appropriate” is an encouragement, not a requirement.

Musical notation was provided for the entirety of the Eucharistic Prayers (I – IV) for the first time in English in the 2011 ICEL translation of the Roman Missal, 3rd edition.

Musicam Sacram #7

Between the solemn, fuller form of liturgical celebration, in which everything that demands singing is in fact sung, and the simplest form, in which singing is not used, there can be various degrees according to the greater or lesser place allotted to singing. However, in selecting the parts which are to be sung, one should start with those that are by their nature of greater importance, and especially those which are to be sung by the priest or by the ministers, with the people replying, or those which are to be sung by the priest and people together. The other parts may be gradually added according as they are proper to the people alone or to the choir alone.

Notes

This section is quoted verbatim by the GIRM. It is made more specific by Musicam Sacram #28-31.

“The other parts may be gradually added according as they are proper to the people alone or to the choir alone.” It is clear that, functionally, music is intended to serve as an interaction and connection between priest and people, and dialogical or shared parts are favored for musical treatment.

Musicam Sacram #16

One cannot find anything more religious and more joyful in sacred celebrations than a whole congregation expressing its faith and devotion in song. Therefore the active participation of the whole people, which is shown in singing, is to be carefully promoted as follows:

It should first of all include acclamations, responses to the greetings of the priest and ministers and to the prayers of litany form, and also antiphons and psalms, refrains or repeated responses, hymns and canticles.

Through suitable instruction and practices, the people should be gradually led to a fuller—indeed, to a complete—participation in those parts of the singing which pertain to them.

Some of the people's song, however, especially if the faithful have not yet been sufficiently instructed, or if musical settings for several voices are used, can be handed over to the choir alone, provided that the people are not excluded from those parts that concern them. But the usage of entrusting to the choir alone the entire singing of the whole Proper and of the whole Ordinary, to the complete exclusion of the people's participation in the singing, is to be deprecated.

Notes

This does not really affect the chanting of the Mass. I only included it here because it is cited by the GIRM.

Musicam Sacram #28-31

28. The distinction between solemn, sung and read Mass, sanctioned by the Instruction of 1958 (n. 3), is retained, according to the traditional liturgical laws at present in force. However, for the sung Mass (*Missa cantata*), different degrees of participation are put forward here for reasons of pastoral usefulness, so that it may become easier to make the celebration of Mass more beautiful by singing, according to the capabilities of each congregation.
- These degrees are so arranged that the first may be used even by itself, but the second and third, wholly or partially, may never be used without the first. In this way the faithful will be continually led towards an ever greater participation in the singing.
29. The following belong to the first degree:
- a. In the entrance rites: the greeting of the priest together with the reply of the people; the prayer.
 - b. In the Liturgy of the Word: the acclamations at the Gospel.
 - c. In the Eucharistic Liturgy: the prayer over the offerings; the preface with its dialogue and the Sanctus; the final doxology of the Canon, the Lord's prayer with its introduction and embolism; the Pax Domini; the prayer after the Communion; the formulas of dismissal.
30. The following belong to the second degree:
- a. the Kyrie, Gloria and Agnus Dei;
 - b. the Creed;
 - c. the prayer of the faithful.
31. The following belong to the third degree:
- a. the songs at the Entrance and Communion processions;
 - b. the songs after the Lesson or Epistle;
 - c. the Alleluia before the Gospel;
 - d. the song at the Offertory;
 - e. the readings of Sacred Scripture, unless it seems more suitable to proclaim them without singing.

Notes

Since the publication of *Musicam Sacram*, the *Mysterium Fidei* has been added to the Mass and musical notation has been given for the entire Eucharistic Prayer. Otherwise, this list remains relevant to the Mass in its current form.

Evangelical Value

Even given all of the above, the standard American parish often fails to follow the liturgical rubrics in multiple ways. To that end, pastors have to choose their battles and decide which rubrics to tackle first. Even a priest who is convinced of the requirement to chant the Mass might not prioritize its implementation as highly as I have. The reason I push chanting the Mass as a high priority is because I think such chanting has a high evangelical value.

In short, I believe that the massive drop off in Mass attendance over the last few decades is mostly attributable to the feeling that attendance at Mass does not add anything to peoples' lives. If my life is the same whether I attend Mass or not, then why both taking time out of my weekend or struggling with the kids or waking up early? To put this another way, for many people there is nothing *special* about the Mass that cannot be obtained in another way.

To correct this way of thinking, two things are necessary, both of which are served by chanting the Mass.

First, people need to believe that being at Mass *does something*. This was the great liturgical message of Vatican II: that the active participation of the lay faithful *matters*, that the people have proper parts, and that these parts ought to be reclaimed by them. To that end, the entirety of *Musica Sacram* is focused on how liturgical music can better serve the participation of the people, and one conclusion of that document is that chanted dialogues are more engaging than spoken dialogues, and that the participation of the people will be greater if the dialogical sections of the Mass are chanted.

Second, Mass needs to be obviously dissimilar to the wider culture. One of the important distinctions made in the Church's musical documents (a compilation of which can be found [here](#)), going all the way back to *Tra Le Sollecitudini*, is the distinction between *sacred* and *profane* music. In this case, profane does not mean crass, but simply "non-sacred". The recommendation of the Church for more than a century has been that music in the church should sound different than music on the street (or, in our age, on the radio). This difference helps people quickly internalize and appreciate that what is happening in the church and at Mass is somehow *different* or *special*. Chanting the Mass creates this environment quickly, even more quickly than hymn style, because chant in the Western world began in and was exclusively maintained by the Christian liturgy and is something that cannot be found anywhere else. In two words, chant is transcendent and sacred, in a way that nothing else is.