



Norms for Liturgical Musicians

I. Introduction

Liturgical worship is given a more noble form when the divine offices are celebrated solemnly in song, with the assistance of sacred ministers and the active participation of the people.⁶¹ 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.⁶²

Liturgical musicians are first of all disciples, and only then are they ministers. Joined to Christ through the Sacraments of Initiation, musicians belong to the assembly of the baptized faithful; they are worshipers above all else. Like the other baptized members of the assembly, pastoral musicians need to hear the Gospel, experience conversion, profess faith in Christ, and so proclaim the praise of God.⁶³ All pastoral musicians – professional or volunteer, full-time or part-time, director or choir member, cantor or instrumentalist – exercise a genuine liturgical ministry.⁶⁴

II. Liturgical Musicians

Liturgical musicians provide a very important service to the People of God assembled to give praise and worship to the Lord. Through the exercise of their musical talents, they add the element of song to the spoken word and contribute the non-verbal communication of musical expression to the Sacred Liturgy. As such, it is the primary task of liturgical musicians to encourage the active participation of the People of God in the sacred rites, assisting them to lift their emotions to the Lord by means of their voice from an appropriate interior disposition and to find exterior expression in harmony and melodious song.

Liturgical musicians are either vocalists, instrumentalists or directors. Whenever possible, a Director of Music Ministries should be appointed to coordinate personally with the pastor

⁶³ UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, 49.

⁶⁴ *Sing to the Lord*, 50.



of the parish, or chaplain of the school or institution, in leading all those participating in the Sacred Music ministry, and especially to organize the efforts of this program in general.

III. Specific Norms Governing the Service of Liturgical Musicians

1. All liturgical musicians must follow the norms within the current ritual books of the Roman Rite which pertain to the exercise of sacred and liturgical music within them, especially those norms contained in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal, Third Typical Edition (GIRM)*, and in *The Order of Readings for Mass*.

2., All salaried liturgical musicians must be knowledgeable of the prescriptions regarding the use of sacred music in the liturgical rites found in the Church's magisterial documentation, especially chapter 6 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and in *Musicam Sacram*. They must also follow the prescriptions established by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops regarding music in the liturgical rites found in the document *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*.⁶⁵

3. All those who wish to participate in the sacred music program of a parish or institution of the Diocese of Bridgeport, including salaried employees, volunteers or those hired per diem, must fulfill certain requirements. These include:

- a. Being a baptized Christian; (i.e., an exception can be made by any pastor if there is genuine lack of availability of competent musicians to assist in the celebration of the liturgy)
 - b. Being a Catholic, they should seek to lead a life of Christian faith and prayer;
 - c. Possessing a desire and willingness to learn liturgical music, including a proper awareness of the nature of sacred music, of the purpose of musical expression in the rites and prayers, and a familiarity with the liturgy of the Roman Rite;
 - d. Being in full compliance with the requirements of the Safe Environment Program of the Diocese of Bridgeport.
4. All liturgical musicians, both salaried employees and volunteers, must successfully complete the appropriate formation requirements of the Diocese of Bridgeport to function as liturgical musicians in their respective parishes and institutions.
- a. Those liturgical musicians who are hired per diem are exempted from this requirement unless they are hired for more than four (4) occasions within the calendar year by a particular parish or institution.
 - b. Liturgical musicians who become salaried employees resulting from an emergency or urgent need as determined by their pastor or chaplain have a grace period of no longer than three (3) months to complete these formation

⁶⁵ This document was published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2007 as volume 4 of their *Pastoral Liturgy Series*.



requirements. They must be notified of this requirement in their offer letter before the agreement to hire is finalized.

IV. Formation and Blessing as a Liturgical Musician

To exercise the ministry of liturgical musician, each candidate must complete the following:

Step One: Required Initial Formation

Since music is one of the various kinds of language that Sacred Liturgy employs in its ritual aesthetic, it is of paramount importance that those who serve as liturgical musicians possess an appropriate level of formation in the nature and qualities of sacred music. The basis of this formation begins with the understanding that the fundamental purpose of sacred music is “the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful.”⁶⁶

Music in service to the sacred possesses different qualities than the musical expression found in many aspects of ordinary life, for its purpose rests in its connection with the mystery at the heart of the liturgical rites. Since musical expression in the liturgy serves to uplift the minds and hearts of the faithful to their sanctification and redemption, “the community of the faithful has a right to expect that this service will be provided competently.”⁶⁷ Therefore, liturgical musicians “should receive appropriate formation that is based on their baptismal call to discipleship; that grounds them in a love for and knowledge of Scripture, Catholic teaching, Liturgy, and music; and that equips them with the musical, liturgical, and pastoral skills to serve the Church at prayer.”⁶⁸

These essential elements are examined in the program of ministerial formation for liturgical musicians conducted through The Leadership Institute of the Diocese of Bridgeport. Details about the formation program and its accompanying schedules are available from the Institute.

Step Two: Commission by the Local Pastor

Appointment as a liturgical musician is through approval by one’s respective pastor or chaplain. All liturgical musicians will be commissioned by their local pastor or chaplain,

⁶⁶ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 112.

⁶⁷ *Sing to the Lord*, 50.

⁶⁸ *Sing to the Lord*, 50.



employing the *Order for the Blessing of Altar Servers, Sacristans, Musicians and Ushers* contained within the *Book of Blessings* (found in Chapter 62 of the American edition).

V. Continuing Formation

Liturgical musicians should strive to continually develop their musical abilities, as well as to keep current with musical literature so that they can remain effective liturgical music ministers to the People of God. In fact, study of the treasury of sacred music should remain constant in the continuing formation of the liturgical musician. Study of this rich tradition provides the liturgical musician with an historical and cultural context which ultimately will assist in selecting appropriate musical repertoire in the liturgical rites of the modern era.

Preparation, prayer, study, and practice are key to one's development as an effective liturgical musician. "Preparation for music ministry should include appropriate human formation, spiritual formation, intellectual formation, and pastoral formation."⁶⁹ To promote such comprehensive preparation, liturgical musicians are encouraged "to take part in ministerial formation opportunities offered by universities, colleges, seminaries, ministry formation programs, dioceses, and national ministry associations."⁷⁰

Liturgical ministers are encouraged to meet with their pastor or chaplain to review and discuss their service and personal spiritual growth, as well as to obtain advice regarding any ministerial situations which they have encountered.

VI. The Various Types of Liturgical Musician within the Liturgical Rites

Liturgical musicians fall into one of three categories: vocalists, instrumentalists and directors. This section will elaborate further on the ministerial service provided by each type of musician within the liturgical context.

1. Vocalists

Through sung response to ritual action, members of the congregation are assisted in uplifting their minds and hearts to the Lord. For this reason, any sacred music program

⁶⁹ *Sing to the Lord*, 51.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.



must begin with an emphasis on sung vocal participation of the faithful within the liturgical rites. Vocalists can contribute to the Sacred Liturgy either as choristers, soloists, cantors or psalmists. Each has a contribution to the beauty of the liturgical musical aesthetic, and towards encouraging the active participation of the faithful within.

a. Choristers

A chorister is a member of an organized choir, who sing together either in unison or in harmony. In the liturgical rites, the use of the choir takes on various levels of significance. It can symbolize the angelic choir of angels who sing ceaselessly before the Almighty in the celestial liturgy of the new and eternal Jerusalem, as when the *Gloria in excelsis* is sung, or when the choir sings in dialogue with the assembly. Further, a choir can signify the assembly itself, as when they sing psalms, hymns or anthems in their place during the liturgical action. Choirs also encourage the sung vocal participation of the faithful through joining together with them in sung response to the invocations chanted by the priest or deacon.

b. Soloists

Soloists are vocalists who take a specific vocal part in a composition that is written to be sung alone. They can be of assistance to a liturgical choir as a section leader of a voice tone, where by the strength of their voice they can help maintain integrity of tone and pitch. When they operate in this fashion, they must be careful to restrain their voices to remain in unison with the other choristers of their voice tone.

c. Cantors

Cantors are soloists who promote the active participation of the faithful in encouraging their sung response, as “both a singer and a leader of congregational song. Especially when no choir is present, the cantor may sing in alternation or dialogue with the assembly [...] the cantor may serve as psalmist, leading and proclaiming the verses of the responsorial psalm.”⁷¹ When a cantor acts as leader of congregational song, the cantor sings alongside the assembly to promote their sung vocal participation. In this role, care must be exercised, for “the cantor’s voice should not be heard above the congregation.”⁷² The cantor must realize that “as the congregation finds its voice and sings with increasing confidence, the cantor’s voice should correspondingly recede”⁷³ and that the use of “gesture that invites

⁷¹ *Sing to the Lord*, 37.

⁷² *Sing to the Lord*, 38.

⁷³ *Sing to the Lord*, 38.



participation and clearly indicates when the congregation is to begin [...] should be used sparingly and only when genuinely needed.”⁷⁴

As far as location is concerned, “cantors should lead the assembly from a place where they can be seen by all without drawing attention from the liturgical action,”⁷⁵ exercising their ministry “from a conveniently located stand, but not from the ambo.”⁷⁶ However, when a congregation is singing very familiar responses, acclamations or songs that do not include verses for the cantor alone, the cantor need not be visible. Ultimately, the location of the cantor during the celebration of the liturgy is decided by the local pastor.

d. Psalmists

“The psalmist, or cantor of the psalm, is responsible for singing, responsorially or directly, the chants between the readings – the psalm or other biblical canticle, the gradual and *Alleluia*, or other chant. The psalmist may, as occasion requires, intone the *Alleluia* and verse.”⁷⁷ The psalmist “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, except when the Psalm is sung straight through, that is, without a response.”⁷⁸

2. Instrumentalists

Instrumentalists accompany vocalists in their task of promoting the musical active participation of the faithful. Their role “is to lead and sustain the singing of the assembly and of the choir, cantor and psalmist, without dominating or overpowering them.”⁷⁹ The use of musical instruments within the liturgical rites “to accompany the singing can act as a support to voices, render participation easier, and achieve a deeper union in the assembly. However, their sound should not so overwhelm the voices that it is difficult to make out the text; and when some part is proclaimed aloud by the priest or a minister by virtue of his role, they should be silent.”⁸⁰

⁷⁴ *Sing to the Lord*, 38.

⁷⁵ *Sing to the Lord*, 39.

⁷⁶ *Sing to the Lord*, 39.

⁷⁷ THE HOLY SEE, *Order of the Readings for Mass*, 56.

⁷⁸ *GIRM*, 61.

⁷⁹ *Sing to the Lord*, 41.

⁸⁰ *Musicam Sacram*, 64.



In 2013, the USCCB published *Stewards of the Tradition – Fifty Years after Sacrosanctum Concilium* and offered the following guidelines: “Liturgical song has a preeminent place in the *ars celebrandi*, for not only is it a means of active participation, but it is another source of beauty that can lift hearts and inspire worship. We commend those who have dedicated themselves as composers and pastoral musicians who enrich our worship and enable our songs of praise. The development of a repertory of vernacular music for the Liturgy over the past fifty years is a gift for which we are grateful and which we continue to promote. We also seek to improve the quality of our celebrations in light of the 2007 USCCB guidelines *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*. To rely only on the music of a single genre or style for the celebration of the Liturgy is to diminish the breadth and depth of our liturgical heritage and to risk the exclusion of the legitimate contributions of particular cultures and composers.”

Regarding the question of musical instruments, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states “In the Latin Church the pipe organ is to be held in high esteem, for it is the traditional musical instrument which adds a wonderful splendor to the Church's ceremonies and powerfully lifts up man's mind to God and to higher things. But other instruments also may be admitted for use in divine worship, with the knowledge and consent of the competent territorial authority, as laid down in Art. 22, 52, 37, and 40. This may be done, however, only on condition that the instruments are suitable, or can be made suitable, for sacred use, accord with the dignity of the temple, and truly contribute to the edification of the faithful.⁸¹ In the Diocese of Bridgeport, musical instruments other than the pipe organ may be used in the Sacred Liturgy provided they are in keeping with the dignity of the celebration, and truly contribute to the edification of the faithful. When selecting appropriate musical instruments for divine worship, “the culture and traditions of individual peoples must be taken into account.”⁸² In the selection of musical instruments, the pastor has wide discretion to choose those instruments that best take into account the needs of his people.

In their ministry, liturgical musicians must have a keen awareness of their capabilities, especially where the musical tradition of improvisation is concerned: “The art of improvisation requires its own special talent and training. More than mere background sound is called for. When worthy improvisation is not possible, it is recommended that musicians play quality published literature, which is available at all levels of difficulty.”⁸³

⁸¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 116, 119, 120.

⁸² *Musicam Sacram*, 63.

⁸³ *Sing to the Lord*, 43.



3. Directors

Just as a symphony orchestra cannot operate without the artistic direction of a conductor, so also the various musical ensembles that make up a Sacred Music program require artistic direction by individuals who are not merely experienced musically but are sensitive liturgically. Such directors of music must have an intimate knowledge of the inherent needs of the rites and prayers, as well as that of their corresponding ritual action, so that they may ensure that musical expression will complement the sacred mysteries which the faithful actively participate in, rather than detract from them.

“It is fitting that there be a cantor or choir director to direct and support the people’s singing.”⁸⁴ While there may be choir directors and conductors of instrumental ensembles, it is preferred for there to be an overall director of music ministries: “The director of music ministries fosters the active participation of the liturgical assembly in singing; coordinates the preparation of music to be sung at various liturgical celebrations; and promotes the ministries of choirs, psalmists, cantors, organists, and all who play instruments that serve the Liturgy.”⁸⁵ The director of music ministries must work directly with their respective pastor or chaplain in planning, overseeing and coordinating all aspects of a Sacred Music program, especially to ensure that the music admitted to divine worship is that which is sacred and liturgical in nature.

⁸⁴ *GIRM*, 104.

⁸⁵ *Sing to the Lord*, 43.