



FORETASTE OF HEAVEN

Liturgy + Music + Theology + Catechesis + Discussion + Evangelization
Celebrate Authentic, Noble, Prayerful Roman Liturgy

Foretasteofheaven.com

Why Sung Liturgy? A Brief Introduction

By John Gaffney

In the beginning, the liturgy was sung. In the earliest centuries of the Church, the priest would chant, “The Lord be with you” and the assembly would respond by chanting, “And with your spirit.” The deacon would chant, “Go forth you are sent” and the assembly would respond by chanting, “Thanks be to God.” It would have been unthinkable to speak these dialogues and the other dialogues of the liturgy. It would be like speaking the song *Happy Birthday To You* or *For He’s A Jolly Good Fellow*; it just would not make sense.

This ideal of a sung liturgy remained the common practice in the Eastern Catholic and Orthodox Churches to this day. Sadly, in the West, the ideal of a sung liturgy was largely lost. As monasteries began ordaining more and more monks to the priesthood at the turn of the first millennium, each monk wanted to celebrate his own Mass and so the “private Mass” or “low Mass” was born, an entirely spoken Mass. This style of a spoken liturgy in Latin, maybe with a few vernacular hymns thrown in, became the norm in most communities and parishes into the 1960’s.

During the Second Vatican Council, (1962-1965), four Church Constitutions were promulgated, the first being *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* in 1963. These four constitutions hold the highest authority in the Church (similar to our United States Constitution holding the highest authority in this country). No person can change a church Constitution, not even the Pope. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* upholds and promotes the ideal of a sung liturgy as does every Church document on music and liturgy that has followed to this very day, including our new Missal.

When Church documents speak of “sung liturgy” or “singing the liturgy,” it is quite different from “singing at the liturgy” which is what one still experiences at most parishes. “Singing at the liturgy” refers to merely singing hymns or songs during the entrance, offertory and Communion processions and maybe a few parts of the Mass Ordinary, such as the Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus or Agnus Dei. “Singing the liturgy” or “sung liturgy,” on the other hand, first and foremost means chanting the dialogues: those prayers which are sung by the priest or deacon with the assembly responding (such as “The Lord be with you...And with your spirit”) as well as singing the entire Mass Ordinary, including the Creed. “Singing the liturgy” also requires that the celebrant chants the orations (the opening prayer, the prayer over the gifts, the prayer after Communion), the Eucharistic Prayer and the blessing and dismissal. Finally, an authentically “sung liturgy” does NOT use hymns or songs during the three processions of the Mass (entrance, offertory, Communion). For every Sunday in the liturgical year, an antiphon (a scriptural verse set to music) and psalm is appointed to be sung during each of these three processions. Singing these antiphons and psalms are an important part of a “sung liturgy” (and should not be replaced by hymns or songs). Including the responsorial psalm, four psalms are appointed to be sung during Mass. The book of Psalms has always been the official songbook of the Judeo-Christian people. When we sing psalms and antiphons, the Word of God is placed on our lips, enters into our hearts and hopefully shapes our actions. The Word is made incarnate, made flesh in Christ’s body: us, the Church, here and now in our midst.

Pope Benedict the XVI has a great quote on singing the Proper of Mass, “The biblical and liturgical texts are the normative words from which liturgical music has to take Its bearings. To replace the propers with other songs is cheating the people.” Goto foretasteofheaven.com to find catechetical articles on singing the propers, PDFs of the official books of propers and review articles on the many collections of settings of propers (there is a collection accessible to any parish community). Let us sing the liturgy!

Copyright © 2022, John Gaffney, Music & Liturgy, Compositions & Workshops, jgaffney.org, foretasteofheaven.com All Rights Reserved.
To reprint this article in parish bulletins, on websites and in other printed materials, contact John Gaffney at info@foretasteofheaven.com for reprint permission