

Homily - 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all you lands.
Tell his glory among the nations;
among all peoples, his wondrous deeds.”

In our last several reflections, we have reflected in turn on the experiences of sacramental healing and repentance, on the nature of our personal lives of prayer, and then most recently on that prayer which unites us as Christ's own Body - that is, the Mass.

But even when we consider the Mass itself, I think we all know from experience that not all Masses are created equal, in a certain sense.

No matter how ornate or humble a parish is, some celebrations are set apart as more significant and special than others.

Feasts, solemnities - even Sunday itself, as the Lord's day - these days are, or should be, celebrated with more effort, intention, and grandeur than any other liturgies throughout the year.

And what is one of the parts of the liturgy that makes them so solemn?

Today's Psalm, which I just quoted, puts it beautifully:

Music.

Sacred music is an integral part of our worship, and one of the most defining actions of prayer when the Body of Christ gathers for the sacrifice of the liturgy.

We've all experienced how beautiful music can move our hearts even in moments when we don't fully understand the mysteries of which it speaks.

But the Church wants to make it even more clear:

Our offering of sacred music is not a merely human action, or an extraneous luxury for our entertainment - it is an integral part of how we pray as a Church.

What do we mean by that?

In the United States, one of the most important guiding documents on our sacred music is titled *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*.

It begins with a quote from St. Augustine says, "Singing is for the one who loves."

"Music," it continues, "is therefore a sign of God's love for us and of our love for him... by its very nature song has both an individual and a communal dimension. Thus, it is no wonder that singing together in church expresses so well the sacramental presence of God to his people."

We find that Scripture itself is full of references and stories of the importance of song in the worship of God.

The Old Testament marks numerous occasions of victory and exultation with the People of Israel raising their voices in song after God saves them from danger and oppression.

We think of how they sang a hymn of praise, for instance, after fleeing from Egypt and crossing safely through the Red Sea.

Later in the New Testament, as the documents remind us, "Jesus and his Apostles sang a hymn before their journey to the Mount of Olives in the Gospels. St. Paul instructed the Ephesians to address one another in psalms and spiritual songs, singing and playing to the Lord in your hearts."

What was true in those earliest days of the Church is true today.

Sacred music is one of the most profound and powerful ways that we as Christ's body give voice to the intentions and praise that we offer to God, and unite ourselves in prayer throughout our liturgy.

And, like any good choir, all of us have different parts to play, no matter how musical you may think you are - or aren't.

"Singing," the Church says, "is one of the primary ways that the assembly of the faithful participates actively in the liturgy."

Sing to the Lord elaborates: "The people are encouraged 'to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalms, antiphons, and hymns'..."

This is an important point: that list actually gives us a window into what exactly is important for us to sing as a congregation, and it's more than you might think.

Let's consider each in turn:

Acclamations - these are the sung Mass parts, some of which may change slightly from season to season, but which should be familiar to us, like the Lamb of God, Kyrie, and Memorial Acclamation after the consecration, and the Great Amen.

Responses: these are interesting, because many parishes have lost the custom of singing the responses. However, even here we've continued singing some of them - think, for instance, of the response to the introduction to the prayers of the Preface: *"The Lord be with you..."*

In reality, virtually every prayer of the liturgy can be sung. Believe it or not, even the readings can be chanted on solemn occasions! And for every part that has a response, that too can be sung by you, the congregation.

The more solemn the occasion or feast, the more fitting it is to sing these chants and responses.

The Church describes chant, the way we sing our liturgical texts, as, quote, "uniquely the Church's own music," and something we should give pride of place in our liturgies. Chant, it continues, "is a living connection with our forebears in the faith, the traditional music of the Roman rite, a sign of communion with the universal Church, a bond of unity across cultures, a means for diverse communities to participate together in song, and a summons to contemplative participation in the Liturgy."

That's quite an endorsement! By way of analogy, I think many of us have experienced how so many families in modern times have lost touch with our family histories and culture - it's a sort of modern phenomenon that many young people have become less grounded and aware of where they came from.

I think our tradition of sacred music in the Church is, in a sense, a way of preserving that sense of identity within our own faith - recognizing that we're part of a community and history much bigger than just our own local parish or even our diocese.

Continuing down that list, then we have more familiar parts.

Both of the next two parts of Mass that are mentioned actually have to do with singing the words of Scripture itself.

The first is what we probably think of first: the Responsorial Psalm.

The reason we sing the psalms should be obvious: these are the songs given to us in the Word of God itself.

These are literally the sacred words that Jesus himself knew and used to give voice to his eternal communion of love with his heavenly Father.

But beyond the psalm itself, we are also invited to integrate scripture through the use of antiphons.

For most modern Catholics, this is the most unfamiliar category of sacred music.

Most antiphons are verses and phrases from sacred scripture that are connected to the feast day or liturgical season, and if you listen to the antiphon itself, it will often give us a theme we're supposed to be praying with in the Mass.

Today's entrance antiphon, for example, is taken from Psalm 17, which reads, "To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me."

In these words, we are invited to begin the Mass by calling to mind our needs and petitions. Where do we need to invite God to care for our needs? What is causing us fear and anxiety, and how can we entrust it to the Lord?

In many cases, we never hear these lines sung at Mass, because we are given the option to sing hymns alongside or instead of the antiphons at the entrance, offertory, and communion rites.

However, like the many other ways that the Church has rediscovered the beauty of Scripture in recent years, many places are starting to see a revival of the use of the sung antiphons in sacred music programs as one more way to enrich our worship.

Finally, the hymns themselves are most familiar to us as the primary way most parishes in our country use sacred music.

This is an interesting phenomenon in that hymns are actually not the recommended starting point in the directives of the liturgy - they're seen as especially fitting to our most solemn occasions, rather than the default.

Of course, the custom in the majority of parishes at this point is exactly the opposite, so for most communities, we're already more or less comfortable with hymns, and instead the biggest area of growth is to recover more of the texts that are tied to the liturgy itself - the sung prayers, scriptural texts, and antiphons that change from day to day and ground us more deeply in the Mass.

So what does that growth involve?

The directives of *Sing to the Lord* put it this way:

"The musical formation of the assembly must be a continuing concern in order to foster full, conscious, and active participation."

All of us should always be growing and learning! I'll put myself on the spot here with what it says about priests and my own role in Mass:

"No other single factor affects the liturgy as much as the attitude, style, and bearing of the priest celebrant, 'who prays in the name of the Church and of the assembled community.'"

"The importance of the priest's participation in the liturgy, especially by singing, cannot be overemphasized." The priest sings the presidential prayers and dialogues of the Liturgy according to his capabilities, and he encourages sung participation in the liturgy by his own example..."

That's a lot of pressure on me. The Church is saying that if I don't do my own due diligence to learn and celebrate the Mass reverently and well, including by singing the texts of the liturgy in a way that invites the community to participate, then I'm undermining the prayer of everyone else present.

All of us have a role to play. Parishes everywhere are encouraged to expand their comfort levels, knowledge, and experience with sacred music - not just in their choirs, but in everyone who is present for the liturgy.

To put it bluntly: we need to sing! And, we shouldn't be afraid to challenge ourselves to learn more parts of our tradition of sacred music - I myself have found that I'm constantly discovering new parts of our cultural heritage as Catholics that I never knew existed.

One great example of where this growth and education happens for many communities is in the proper integration of Latin, the universal language of the Roman Church, into the music of the liturgy.

Depending on who you ask, this is one of the topics that prompts the most confused and conflicting opinions.

Here's what our current, most modern directives have to say on the topic:

"The Second Vatican Council directed that the faithful be able to sing parts of the Ordinary of the Mass together in Latin."

What does that mean? Well, if you remember, these are the parts of Mass we sing every single week.

I think this makes sense as a very moderate option: the parts of Mass that are less familiar to us, which change from week to week, especially the readings, can and ought to be in the vernacular - that is, the language we know best - so that we can participate inwardly.

But with parts that we sing every single Sunday, where we are much more familiar and we know their meaning by heart, we are encouraged to make the extra effort to learn them in our mother language and share in that additional way in the universal prayer of the Catholic Church.

So, what is there to learn from this?

First, we should all make the effort to participate.

I, as a priest, need to make the effort to learn the chants and texts of the Mass and lead and pray them well.

The congregation ought to make an effort - that's all of you! - to sing, and sing joyfully! This is one of the most beautiful ways we pray together as one body - it gives voice to the participation that all of us should already have in our hearts as we pray the Mass.

And for those who are called to this as a ministry, namely as part of our choir and as instrumentalists, it's a challenge to bring our best efforts and artistic skill to every act of the liturgy, so that we can offer God the most beautiful worship possible.

Once again, if you are so inclined and have the ability, I do want to again invite you to contribute those gifts by joining our choir and music program - please talk to our music ministers about it.

If someone next to you has a really nice voice, give them a little nudge and encourage them to think about it.

And most of all, speaking to myself as much as anyone, I'll conclude with this one last piece of encouragement: don't be afraid - whether it's to learn something old or try something new.

The Church itself puts it this way:

“Our participation in the Liturgy is challenging. Sometimes, our voices do not correspond to the convictions of our hearts. At other times, we are distracted or preoccupied by the cares of the world. Christ always invites us, however, to enter into song, to rise above our own preoccupations, and to give our entire selves to the hymn of his Paschal Sacrifice for the honor and glory of the Most Blessed Trinity.”

That is the joy of our worship, our greatest treasure of prayer, and the glory of our liturgy, where Christ himself comes among us to be present in his Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity.

In other words, as the psalmist, the saints, and the Church herself would say:

Don't be afraid - to sing.