

The Place of Marian Hymns in the Liturgy

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As I began to play the closing song on the Solemnity of the Annunciation, I was pleasantly surprised by the robust singing of “Sing of Mary.” The congregational singing was so wholehearted that we sang all three verses, with the assembly remaining in their places even after the priest had left the nave. To the dismay of many who prepare the liturgy, congregations don’t always sing with such enthusiasm. Certain songs, however, almost always engage the congregation. “Sing a New Song,” “On Eagles Wings,” and “Holy God, We Praise Thy Name” are among those songs. Also among the favorites are familiar songs about the Blessed Mother, such as “Sing of Mary,” “Immaculate Mary,” “Hail Holy Queen,” “Hail Mary, Gentle Woman,” and “O Sanctissima.” The assembly’s welcome of these Marian songs, coupled with their fondness for Mary, makes it tempting to play them frequently. Perhaps these songs are reminiscent of our childhood, our school days, May crowning, or other festive celebrations. A deep devotion to the Blessed Mother is commendable, but should Marian songs be sung at Sunday Mass on a regular basis?

Before answering, let us review the focus of the liturgy and how music is selected for our ritual celebrations.

Every celebration of the liturgy, every Mass, every gathering for Morning or Evening Prayer, every sacrament, is a sacred action that is more important than anything else the Church does. This is because the liturgy is a personal encounter with Christ. We celebrate the liturgy with Christ; he as Head, and we as members of his Mystical Body. He is closer to us than any saint, including Mary. One of the strengths of the liturgy is that we can be close to God the Father because Jesus Christ is already so very close to us.

It is also important to remember that the first aspect of the liturgical year to be celebrated is Sunday itself. Consistent with Pope John Paul II’s apostolic letter *Dies Domini: On Keeping the Lord’s Day Holy*, the directory affirms the centrality of Sunday as “the Lord’s Day” and the “primordial feast.” With the Paschal Mystery lying at the heart of Sunday, the day is the “basis and center of the liturgical year.”

DETERMINING THE APPROPRIATENESS OF A MUSICAL PIECE

To support this ritual encounter with the Risen Christ, the Church has provided guidelines for the selection of music for the liturgy. To begin, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (STL) reminds



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Through the singing of the *Magnificat*, a sense of Mary is provided.

us of the three judgments for determining whether a musical selection is appropriate for a given liturgy. These three judgments—the liturgical, pastoral, and musical—together answer the question, “Is this particular piece of music appropriate for use in this particular liturgy?” (STL, 126). The liturgical judgment answers the question, “Is this composition capable of meeting the structural and textual requirements set forth by the liturgical books for this particular rite?” (127). In other words, it asks whether the song text has the ability to support the liturgical text and to convey meaning faithful to the teaching of the Church.

The liturgical judgment suggests that selecting Marian tunes for liturgy when Mary is not a part of the liturgical season or the readings of the day would be a disservice to the gathered assembly. Consequently, we do not have the flexibility to sing of Mary or any other saint unless they are a part of the readings of the liturgy that is being celebrated.

The pastoral and musical judgments would focus more on the style of music and other musical characteristics of the piece and are less relevant to this discussion.

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* and *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* provide assistance in selecting music at specific ritual moments with the following descriptions.

Entrance Song: The purpose of the Entrance Chant or Song is to “open the celebration, foster the unity of those who have been gathered, introduce their thoughts to the mystery of the liturgical season or festivity, and accompany the procession of the priest and ministers” (STL, 142; GIRM, 47).

Song during the Preparation of the Gifts: The norms on the manner of singing are the same as for the Entrance Chant (STL, 173).

Communion Song: Similarly, the purpose of the Communion Song is “to express the communicants’ union in spirit by means of the unity of their voices, to show joy of heart, and to highlight more clearly the ‘communitarian’ nature of the procession to receive Communion” (STL, 189; GIRM, 86).

Song after Communion: “When the distribution of Communion is finished, as circumstances suggest, the priest

and faithful spend some time praying privately. If desired, a psalm or other canticle of praise or a hymn may also be sung by the entire congregation' (GIRM, 88). The song after Communion should focus the assembly on the mystery of the Holy Communion in which it participates" (STL, 196).

Recessional: Since the recessional chant or song is not a requirement of the liturgy, and since technically it occurs after the Mass is over, it is difficult to make statements about what its focus should or should not be. Neither the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* nor *Sing to the Lord* comments on the recessional hymn. STL notes, "when it is a custom, all may join in a hymn or song after the dismissal" (199). While I would personally find it inappropriate to sing a Marian tune after a liturgy that was celebrating a non-Marian feast, for instance, the Body and Blood of Christ, one might make an argument for singing Marian songs during October or May.

MARIAN FEASTS, ROLE IN SALVATION

Having reviewed the basics concerning the liturgy and music selection within it, we return to the discussion of when it is appropriate to use Marian tunes in the liturgy. From the guidelines above, it would seem that, for the most part, songs about Mary are only appropriate on feasts and solemnities of our Blessed Mother. Most parishes in the United States celebrate only three or four of these with a full assembly: Mary, the Holy Mother of God (January 1), the Assumption (August 15), and the Immaculate Conception (December 8) and, in more and more parishes, Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12). (When the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe falls on a Sunday, the Sunday celebration supersedes it.)

Besides the aforementioned Marian days, the liturgical year includes the following solemnities, feasts, and memorials of Mary: the Presentation of the Lord (February 2), Our Lady of Lourdes (February 11), the Annunciation (March 25), Our Lady of Fatima (May 13), the Memorial of the Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Saturday after the second Sunday after Pentecost), the Feast of the Visitation (May 31), Our Lady of Mount Carmel (July 16), the Queenship of the Blessed Virgin Mary (August 22), the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (September 8), Our Lady of Sorrows (September 15), Our Lady of the Rosary (October 7), and the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (November 21). Additionally, a Mass of the Blessed Virgin Mary may be celebrated on Saturdays during Ordinary Time when no other obligatory celebration falls. Hymns to Mary should be used at these liturgies.

There are, however, also some opportunities on Sundays for Marian hymns at times when the liturgy includes her part in our salvation. An example of such a day is the Fourth Sunday of Advent when readings speak of the expected birth of Jesus, the Sundays when the Gospel of the Wedding at Cana is read, or the Feast of the Holy Family. "We Sing with Holy Mary," by Alan Hommeding, would be most appropriate during the last weeks of Advent when we are preparing for the Incarnation. Similarly, though "Be Joyful, Mary, Heavenly Queen" refers to Mary, its text also is appropriate during the Easter season. Since the fifty days of Easter coincide with May, such a tune might serve more than one function. Perusing the hymnal will yield other such songs.

Traditionally, the month of May is dedicated to Mary, and October is considered the Month of the Rosary. Should devotions in honor of Mary be celebrated at these times? Absolutely! Should elements of these devotions, including Marian hymns, the Rosary, or prayers to the Blessed Virgin be part of Sunday Mass if Mary is not mentioned in the readings? Probably not. But there are some ways to give a sense of Mary to the liturgy without doing a disservice to it.

A very fitting way to do this is through the singing of the *Magnificat*. The *Magnificat*, taken from Luke's Gospel (1:46–55), is the Blessed Virgin Mary's hymn of praise to the Lord. It is also referred to as the Canticle of Mary in the Liturgy of the Hours. Though proclaimed by Mary, the song is not about her. The *Graduale Simplex* gives this important prayer as an option for Communion on Marian Feasts. The *Graduale* also indicates that it is appropriate for Communion any time.

In fact, singing the *Magnificat* during the liturgy can be a way both to catechize the assembly on this canticle and help them make it their own. While several singable compositions of the *Magnificat* are in most hymnals, I suggest using only one or two settings until the assembly is familiar with them. Some settings of the *Magnificat*, especially those with a refrain, are rather long, and since the canticle must be sung in its entirety, length can be a problem. (I am particularly fond of Bernadette Farrell's setting by Oregon Catholic Press. Since a refrain is not sung between the verses, the text is showcased more clearly, in my opinion.)

Songs to Mary are frequently requested for funeral liturgies. Pastoral sensitivity must be used when accommodating the musical requests of grieving family members when preparing funeral liturgies. When the *Ave Maria* is requested, I am sure to include the second verse, which includes the words: *pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death*. Even if those words are in Latin, they provide a connection to the liturgy being celebrated.

In addition to the liturgy, of course, devotions to the Blessed Mother offer a great opportunity to use a Marian repertoire. Such devotions, as the Church teaches and the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* emphasizes, should be in keeping with the liturgical season.

In conclusion, the Church presents abundant occasions for singing hymns to the Blessed Mother: Sundays in which the readings include Mary, during the daily Rosary prayed in many parishes, Marian devotions or novenas, weekday feasts of Mary, Saturdays of our Lady, the *Magnificat* in Evening Prayer, and antiphons at the conclusion of each day's Compline (Night Prayer).

It is difficult, however, to justify the singing of Marian hymns during Sunday Mass; doing so opens the door for other inappropriate liturgical choices. Year-round, though, the *Magnificat* may be sung during Sunday celebrations and assemblies may be catechized on the importance of emulating Mary's joyful surrender to the will of God. Mary is never far from the mystery of salvation celebrated throughout the liturgical year. ♦

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