



Music Ministry during the CoVID-19 Pandemic

After two and a half months of being unable to gather for the celebration of the Eucharist here in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, we are finally planning and preparing to resume Sunday Mass on May 30/31 – the Solemnity of Pentecost. Because the coronavirus still poses a very real threat to public health, the celebration of Sunday Mass will look and feel very different than it did back in March. Cleaning our churches, washing and sanitizing our hands, wearing face coverings and maintaining a social distance of 6 feet between households are only some of the challenges that we will face as a community.

As we learn more about the virus and its transmission, there has been growing concern about congregational singing. Preliminary research is showing that singing causes the aerosolization of respiratory droplets, which linger in the air longer than heavier droplets released while speaking. Therefore, having several people singing at full voice increases the release of these aerosol droplets and contributes to the spread of the virus. As a result, some dioceses are eliminating congregational singing altogether. In an attempt to balance good liturgical participation and safety, in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, we are discouraging choirs, but permitting a single cantor. It is not the intention of Archdiocesan leadership to discontinue or discourage music ministry. Therefore, as we begin a gradual return to Sunday Mass, much thought will need to go into preparing music for Mass.

First, consider the ways music contributes to the already sensory rich experience of the liturgy, including the meditative experience of appropriate instrumental music. For example, maybe your parish has decided to eliminate a congregational song at the Preparation of the Gifts. On our first Sunday back (Pentecost), a violinist or cellist could play a solo of a well-known song invoking the Holy Spirit.

Second, consider “the sound of the season” and the power of instrumental music to form us in our faith. As an example, simply hearing the first few bars of the refrain of Moore’s Taste and See immediately calls to mind the theme of Eucharist. In lieu of a choral prelude on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, the accompanist could play a creative arrangement of that song on the piano or organ. Or, perhaps your parish has decided to recite the responsorial psalm. You may want to play the melody of a familiar setting of that particular psalm while the lector is reciting the verses.

Third, return to the 2007 USCCB document, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*. In Chapter IV, “Preparing Music for Catholic Worship,” we find a prioritized order of the parts to be sung, beginning with the Dialogues and Acclamations, moving to Antiphons and Psalms, followed by Refrains and Repeated Responses and ending with Hymns. For the first phase of the Catholic Comeback, you may want to consider only singing the acclamations and the psalm.

Finally, consider using refrain-style songs, like psalm settings, or songs with repeated, ostinato refrains, such as the music of the Taizé community. With the removal of hymnals from the pews, these types of songs will make it easier for the community to participate without a book or worship aid in front of them.

Without a doubt, the necessary precautions we must take at limiting the amount of congregational singing at Mass feels contrary to our liturgical sensibilities. One of the greatest gifts we received from the work of the Second Vatican Council was full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy, and a primary means of that participation is through song. After decades of working hard to teach, encourage

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and sometimes cajole sung participation, we find ourselves in the most difficult and uncertain of times. With the invisibility of this virus, combined with the amount of questions still left unanswered, we may wonder if it is even safe to sing at all, and what effect, if any, the limited amount of congregational singing will have on our overall participation in the liturgy.

Before we get discouraged, let us think about what liturgy is. Pure and simple, liturgy is ritual immersion in the paschal mystery. The very work of liturgy is nothing less than God acting to transform us and our surrender to that transformation by choosing to pass from death to new life. Christ is leading the way through his own act of self-surrender to the mystery of dying and rising. We follow by fully, consciously, and actively choosing to surrender ourselves to the paschal mystery as it both unfolds in the liturgy and in the demands of our daily lives.

This is an opportunity for us, as ministers of the church, to reflect upon the concept expressed in Romans 6:3-11 – that this is our mystery; it is we who live, die, and rise today as the Body of Christ in the world. The paschal mystery is playing out at this moment right now in our experience as Church, and we are called to choose fidelity to the Christian life by dying to self so that together, we all may have life. That death, right now, is to reduce the amount of singing we do as a community in order to safeguard and protect the lives of those around us, especially those who are most vulnerable in our communities. Once we grasp that the core of the liturgy is ritual enactment of the paschal mystery, our understanding of our role and our responsibilities in celebrating the liturgy during this time of pandemic moves us to a whole new level of consciousness and awareness.