

Word and Music in Worship: A Powerful Combination

Text joined to music is powerful. It is so powerful a combination in worship that the Second Vatican Council dealt with the combination of text and music at length—more, in fact, than any other council of the Church. The bishops at Vatican II called sacred music “a treasure of inestimable value,” and the Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* calls song bound to text “a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy.”

Because the combination of word and song is so powerful, Catholics have always been cautious about the texts we sing in the liturgy as well as the music we use for worship. Several times in the history of Christian liturgy, new combinations of text and music in worship have led to heated discussions and even violent condemnations. Among the major times that disputes broke out over aspects of sung worship were the early battles over the use of instruments in church (they were banned for centuries); the introduction of the Roman Empire’s official language (Latin) into the liturgy instead of the familiar vernacular (Greek); the extensive introduction of psalmody, under the influence of the rising monastic communities in the fourth and fifth centuries, to replace earlier and beloved hymns; the introduction of the organ into Western liturgy (it has never been part of Eastern Christian worship); the introduction of vernacular hymns in Catholic worship in imitation of the Evangelical and Reformed churches during the sixteenth century European Reformation; the introduction of popular styles of music into church during the baroque and rococo periods (the work of composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, and their contemporaries); the introduction of a particular style of Gregorian chant in the early twentieth century (prepared by the monks of Solesmes); the introduction of vernacular texts and popular musical styles in the decades after the Second Vatican Council; and the increased use of psalmody and psalm-tone music to replace hymns in recent decades.

When the liturgy of the Latin Catholic Church (the Roman Rite) was translated into contemporary language immediately after the Second Vatican Council, translators developed a set of principles to guide the work. The texts were intended faithfully to “communicate to a given people, and in their own language, that which the Church by means of this given text originally intended to communicate to another people in another time” (Instruction *Comme le prévoit* [January 25, 1969], 6). Translators were told to take “particular care . . . for texts which are to be

sung,” and they were offered directions about translating the texts in ways that reflected “the form of singing which is proper to every liturgical action and to each of its parts” (*Comme le prévoit*, 36).

Another principle guiding the translators was the theology of the Church embraced and proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council—a theology based on baptism as our common heritage and as the foundation of our liturgical participation. This theology was captured in the image of the Church as the “people of God” and a vision of the liturgy as an act of the whole Church—Christ and all the baptized—in which we are all engaged fully, consciously, and actively. Only such total engagement in the liturgical act, the Council said, provides the firm “source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14).

For forty years, Latin Church Catholics around the world have been worshipping in their own language as well as in Latin. While those vernacular texts have become familiar, it has been clear to many people that the first translations of the Latin texts were rushed, and some of the translations were poorly done. Acknowledging that this is so, the group of experts responsible for the English texts, under the leadership of the bishops of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, has been working for nearly twenty years on an improved English translation of the Mass. Some of that work was short-circuited by the appearance of a new edition of the Latin *Missale Romanum* and a new set of translation guidelines that, in some instances, provided principles that contradicted the first set of guidelines from 1969, under which the translators had been working. But much of the work has not been lost, and the experience of forty years of vernacular worship has also been brought to bear on the new translation that is in the works.

Like all other texts of the liturgy down the centuries, these new translations will be carried by music to the ears and the hearts of those who use them in worship. These revised texts will change the way the Mass sounds, and some people will find the change very difficult. But as with all other texts that the Church has used for prayer, the intent of these texts is to break open the Scriptures and our faith tradition and to illuminate the meaning of the sacraments, to provide both familiar and new ways for the Spirit to touch us and transform us and shape us into what we are through baptism—the Body of Christ.