

Liturgical Ensembles

There was a time when non-traditional music for Catholic liturgies was led and sung by a “folk group”—instrumentalists and singers whose style echoed folk singers and their backup instrumentation in the 1960s and 1970s. Lately, music ministry at some “youth Masses” has imitated a soft-rock group (drum set and all) and is frequently called a “praise band”—a title borrowed from “contemporary worship services” in evangelical churches.

A Catholic liturgical ensemble may, in fact, use instrumentation common to the American folk revival of the 1960s and to soft-rock bands, but it uses such instruments in worship under very different circumstances than those found in performance venues. Worship is the act of the whole assembly, so the music that is primary in Catholic liturgy is the assembly’s singing voice. The chief role of any vocalist, choir, or instrumentalist in Catholic worship, therefore, is to support the singing voice of the whole assembly, whether that voice is addressing God in hymns and acclamations or is engaged in sung dialogue with one or another minister of the Church’s worship.

Another Form of Choir

In their recent document on music for divine worship, *Sing to the Lord* (STL), the Catholic bishops in the United States described liturgical ensembles as “another form of choir that commonly includes a combination of singers and instrumentalists.” Any form of choir—including ensembles—must exercise its ministry in Catholic liturgy in light of the fact that the song of the congregation “is the primary song.” Therefore, a choir or ensemble supports this song and sometimes sings “various parts of the Mass in dialogue or alternation with the congregation”—parts like the *Kyrie* and *Agnus Dei* and even the *Gloria* and the profession of faith. Secondly, choirs “are able to enrich the celebration by adding musical elements beyond the capabilities of the congregation alone” or by enriching “congregational song by adding harmonies and descants” (STL, 28–29).

However, because they tend sometimes to model themselves on performance groups, liturgical ensembles may imitate performers’ use of sound amplification (a microphone for every voice and every instrument)—a practice in worship that simply overwhelms the sound of the rest of the assembly. Liturgy is not a concert; there is no audience at Mass; it is an action in which everyone is to be fully engaged wholeheartedly, consciously, and,

when appropriate, with full singing voice (see the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14, 113).

Members of a liturgical ensemble, therefore, must see themselves as leaders of sung prayer, singing with the rest of the assembly and blending their sound in such a way that the congregation is supported (and not replaced) in singing. The ensemble gives the assembly confidence to sing with full voice, and it helps the assembly to hear its own voice and to enhance shared prayer with creative and beautiful accompaniment.

A Variety of Instruments

In *Sing to the Lord*, the Catholic bishops wrote that “God’s people have, in various periods, used a variety of musical instruments to sing his praise. Each of these instruments, born of the culture and the traditions of a particular people, has given voice to a wide variety of forms and styles through which Christ’s faithful continue to join their voices to his perfect song of praise upon the Cross” (STL, 89).

Today, sung worship in a Catholic church may be led by an unaccompanied voice or supported by the rich, varied, and mighty sound of an organ. It may also be supported by piano, guitars and other stringed instruments, woodwinds, brass, and drums. Musicians work together in an ensemble to create a beautiful and strong support for the assembly’s song. As the bishops remind us, “the primary role of the organist, other instrumentalists, or instrumental ensemble is to lead and sustain the singing of the assembly and the choir, cantor, and psalmist without dominating or overpowering them” (STL, 41).

Time to Listen

There are, certainly, times in Catholic liturgy when it is appropriate for the choir or ensemble to sing alone, supported by the instrumentalists, while the rest of the assembly listens (STL, 30). But what must be absolutely clear in Catholic worship is that the rest of the assembly knows when the song is theirs to sing and when it is time to listen. If liturgical ensembles—like other choirs or instrumentalists—perform their ministry in a way that engages and supports the song of the whole assembly, then they have performed the first and major role of every pastoral musician.