

# “When in Rome . . .”

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**T**he Roman Rite—or Latin Rite—of the Catholic Church is the most widespread liturgical rite used in the Western Catholic Church. It’s the one most people think of when they are talking about “Eucharist” or “the Mass.” In fact, most people reading this are probably *Roman* Catholic. Its home base is the Diocese of Rome: It is, quite literally, the rite used by the Catholics of Rome. And the rest of us, outside the bounds of that diocese and its suburban sees, have adopted it as our standard for ritual worship.

Because it is so widespread, and because it has official books and standards of practice, we tend to think that the rituals of the Roman or Latin Church are conducted universally pretty much the same way. Those who have had an opportunity to travel, of course, know that this is not the case. Certainly the language of the rite changes, as does the music, from one country to another. Liturgical colors may also vary, as may church decoration and forms of participation.

We would all be willing to agree that this has certainly been the case since the reforms following the Second Vatican Council, but we forget that before those changes there is a whole history of change in the Roman Rite. The earliest form of the Eucharist practiced at Rome developed from the practices of older Christian communities in the East, the birthplace of Christianity. By the end of the fourth century, there were differences in the way the liturgy was practiced in Rome and in what was then the imperial capital, Milan, where St. Ambrose was bishop. When St. Augustine arrived in Milan, he noticed that there was a different practice in fasting from what he had experienced in Rome. He asked Ambrose about it, and the bishop replied: “When I am in Rome, I fast on a Saturday; when I am in Milan, I do not. Follow the custom of the church where you are.”

This advice came at a time when what people knew as the Roman Rite was itself beginning to change. By the sixth century, under the influence of how Christians were worshipping at Antioch and Alexandria, even the heart of the Eucharist—the Eucharistic Prayer—had undergone a dramatic change. In the seventh century (and for some considerable time thereafter), the liturgy of the Church of Rome continued to go through changes in text, music, and ritual under the influence of the Church in Gaul (where the center of political power in Western Europe was then centered).

The music of the Roman Rite has its own history of change. In Europe, monophonic chant yielded to poly-

phonic song, and non-instrumental vocal music was enriched by the addition of organs and other instruments. In other countries, local instruments were incorporated into Catholic liturgy, including the instruments of indigenous peoples in the Americas and the gongs and drums of Oriental nations.

With all of the continuing change, of course, people still recognized the basic structure of the Mass. Despite postconciliar attempts to rein in this variety (in this case, “postconciliar” means “after the Council of Trent”), the Roman Rite retained much of its diversity within an essential unity. There is a saying, attributed to various authors (especially to writers in the European Reformation) but quoted affirmatively by Pope John XXIII in his first encyclical: “In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity” (*Ad Petri Cathedram* [June 29, 1959], 72). That is the goal of celebrations of the Roman Rite throughout the world.

That is why, when you talk and think about “sung liturgy,” you’ll find that people mean different things, but they’re all working toward the same goal. In *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (STL, 2007), the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops pointed to two main reasons why “sung liturgy” may mean different things in different communities, and even different things within the same community, from time to time. The first is the diversity of liturgical assemblies: “Factors such as the age, spiritual heritage, and cultural and ethnic background of a given liturgical assembly must be considered [since they influence] the ways in which a particular group finds it best to join their hearts and minds to the liturgical action” (STL, 70).

The second reason is that sung liturgy varies from solemnity to feast, from season to season. Decisions about what is to be sung and how it is to be sung are governed by the principle of “progressive solemnity.” This means that “between the solemn, fuller form of liturgical celebration, in which everything that demands singing is in fact sung, and the simplest form, in which singing is not used, there can be various degrees according to the greater or lesser place allotted to singing” (STL, 111, quoting the *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours*).

So, as in other parts of our shared life as Catholic Christians, when it comes to sung worship, we need to observe three things: unity in essentials (the importance of sung worship); liberty in doubtful matters (the amount and style of music for particular communities and occasions); and, in all things, charity.