

# Processional Chants in the Roman Rite: History and Current Ritual

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An appropriate evaluation of the nature of the processional chants (entrance, preparation of gifts, communion) in the Roman Catholic Order of Mass should take into account a reading of the history of these chants, to put any claims about the value of certain historical practices in context, as well as the intended function of these chants as ritual music in the Mass of Paul VI. We offer this brief historical survey to inform our members and to offer them a tool for selecting appropriate music for the processions in the Order of Mass.

## I. History of These Chants

- The writings of the early church teachers constitute the main source of information about the liturgical music of the early church. These include, for the most part, details of musical practice mentioned in passing in biblical commentaries, letters, and homilies. Some more information appears in church histories and in works of liturgical and monastic discipline. No early Christian treatise specifically on ecclesiastical music survives. Substantial descriptions of the liturgy and its music do not appear until Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636) and his *De ecclesiasticis officiis* (PL 83:737-826).

Elements of ritual practice that shaped the liturgical function of music in early Christianity include: the primacy of the word over its musical setting; lack of interest in rhythmic elements in music; an interest in moderation in singing combined, interestingly enough, with an early interest in improvisation (see 1 Cor. 14:26; Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 39:18 - "Anyone who can, either from holy Scripture or from personal inspiration, is called into the middle [of the assembly] to sing to God").

One of the earliest forms of uniquely Christian ritual music is hymnody, apparent in the several hymns to and about Christ in the New Testament. Early forms included hymns to Christ (in addition to the NT, see Clement of Alexandria, *Letter to the Ephesians* 7:2), initiation songs (*Odes of Solomon*, possibly used during the Eucharist), baptismal songs (Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 1:6), and eucharistic songs (*Acts of Thomas* #158). After the early compositions, famous hymn writers from the fourth century include Ambrose of Milan, Hilary of Poitiers, and Ephrem the Syrian.

Since the scattered patristic descriptions are very brief, it is not possible to establish the dates of origin of each musical form of the early liturgy, especially of the early Roman Rite, or the manner in which each developed. It is fairly clear, however, that the early liturgical forms included these types of ritual music:

- cantillated recitation of the Scriptures; direct, responsorial, and antiphonal hymnody; some few psalm verses used mantra-style to accompany especially the communion procession.

Musically, the worship of the first generations of Christians was centered on hymns. These may, in fact, have constituted the major form of Christian music until the later third century, when the psalms began to be linked with Christian ritual under the influence of the growing monastic movement and a recovery of Temple imagery to describe Christian worship. These early hymns - settings of short non-biblical poems, frequently, by the third century, in antiphonal form (verse and refrain) - were usually improvised, in either text or tune, and were transmitted orally. They were withdrawn from worship in the mid-to-late third century by order of the Council of Laodicea (canon 59), probably for several reasons. One reason may have been that antiphonal hymnody, a popular addition to orthodox worship, was also popular among heretical groups, and the bishops feared that heretical hymns might make their way into orthodox worship. Another concern was that much of this music was improvised, and the

elements of Christian worship were beginning to be formalized and spontaneous elements were being dropped. A third reason was that Christian worship was being reshaped as a "spiritualized" form of the worship practiced in the Jerusalem Temple (e.g., the bishop was being described as high priest, presbyters as priests, deacons as levites), and the music of the Jerusalem Temple was psalmody.

Psalmody, when introduced into Christian worship in the second half of the third century (the time of the earliest references to the use of psalmody, apart from a few verses, in Christian worship), appeared initially in two forms. Direct chanting of a psalm text by a cantor, with the rest of the assembly listening in silence, was common in the monastic celebration of the daily office. Such psalmody could be very melismatic. Responsorial psalmody, with the verses chanted by a cantor or choir and the rest of the assembly responding after each verse with an Alleluia or a short verse, replaced the suppressed antiphonal hymns. (In some instances, the congregation joined in on the final part of the verse - popular in monasteries, where the monks knew the psalter by heart.)

Antiphonal psalmody was probably introduced in the fourth century as part of a widespread liturgical reform. In this practice, the congregation is divided into two choirs, one sometimes larger than the other, especially in non-monastic communities. The choirs alternate the verses of the psalm or a smaller group sings the verse, with the larger group joining in on a repeated refrain. Antiphonal psalmody was introduced at the points where antiphonal hymnody had been used. This practice of antiphonal psalmody was not, at first, universally accepted, perhaps because the shape of the composition suggested the suppressed hymnody, though Ambrose introduced it into the liturgy at Milan and it was widely used in the East. By the time of the *Rule of St. Benedict*, in the sixth century, it was an accepted form of psalmody. The role of the cantor was introduced as a formal office at about the time that antiphonal psalmody was introduced.

## I.1. The entrance chant in the Roman Rite

- It is probable that antiphonal psalmody was introduced in the fourth century as a replacement for the opening hymn, especially an antiphonal hymn, which seems to have been the older practice in the Roman Rite. The *Liber pontificalis* attributed to the reign of Pope Celestine I (d.432), but actually written later than that though before the mid-sixth century, claims that the introit developed as a psalm sung antiphonally by the congregation (see Jungmann I, 5/1962, p. 416)

The use of a complete - or nearly complete - psalm with antiphon and doxology (*Gloria Patri*) may have continued for about two centuries in Rome, though the practice began to be modified in the eighth century, especially under the influence of Gallican liturgy.

The *Ordines romani* of the eighth century retain traces of this practice, but the length of the introit - and thus the portion of the psalm that was actually chanted - varied by the length of the procession and by the form used in Rome and in areas under Gallican influence. The earliest "standard" form in Rome seems to be this: After the antiphon had been chanted, the psalm verses were chanted until the pope gave the signal to begin the *Gloria Patri*, usually when he reached the altar. "A change in the design of churches, bringing the sacristy closer to the altar and thus shortening the time required for the procession, is commonly thought to have been the reason for the later reduction in the number of introit verses" (Ruth Steiner, Grove 9:281).

Variations on this standard form appear in other *ordines*:

*Ordo Romanus I*: A description of the papal Mass at Rome compiled in the late seventh century and revised in the early eighth century suggests that the introit psalm was combined with an ancient hymn through an inclusion: The processional psalm led into the *Gloria*, which was united to it by the repetition of the antiphon after the singing of the *Gloria*.

*Ordo Romanus IV (Ordo of St. Amand)*: A description of the papal Mass modified at the end of the eighth century to serve as a model for Masses in Gaul suggests this form for the introit: antiphon, psalm, Gloria Patri, a repeated psalm verse (*versus ad repetendum* - perhaps simply additional psalm verses to use until the procession was completed), antiphon (Andrieu, *Les Ordines romani du haut moyen-âge* [Louvain, 1939-62] II:159).

*Ordo Romanus XV (Capitulare ecclesiastici)*: A mid-eighth century text that shows considerable Gallican influence offers a much-reduced model in which the psalm itself has all but disappeared. The introit consists of antiphon, one psalm verse, first section of the Gloria Patri, antiphon, second part of the Gloria Patri, antiphon, a second psalm verse, antiphon.

The fact about the antiphons that have been preserved should also be noted: Although it is true that most of the introit antiphon texts, at least as they exist in their developed form in the medieval chant books, were drawn from the psalms, those for the most important feasts were often from other sources, though usually biblical (e.g., "Viri Galilei" for the Ascension). This fact may be related to the older antiphonal hymnody, which frequently took as its inspiration a verse or a story from a non-psalmodic biblical source.

By the time of the Reformation, even the reduced form of the introit (antiphon, psalm verse or verses, doxology, antiphon), adopted under Gallican influence and the change in the place of the sacristy that modified the length of processions, was undergoing additional modification. In some German sources from the sixteenth century, for example, instrumental introits played on the organ replaced all or part of the sung introit - usually the antiphon and its repeat, leaving the psalm verse and doxology to be chanted (see, for example, the *Buxheimer Orgelbuch* and Hans Buchner's *Fundamentum*). This practice seems to have been limited, for the most part, to German and Eastern European areas. In the seventeenth century, however, several other practices developed. Frescobaldi's *Fiori musicali* (1635) includes short introductory toccatas that replace the introit; in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the elaborate *Kyrie* of Mass suites was sung while the priest simply recited the introit text.

The practice illustrated by Frescobaldi influenced the development of organ accompaniment for low Mass in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Liszt, Kodály, Tournemire, Messiaen, and others composed "organ Masses" that included an introductory movement for the entry of the ministers.

Two practices in the first half of the twentieth century have also influenced our current approach to the entrance chant. The first is the restoration of chanted liturgy ("high Mass") under the influence of Solesmes and with the patronage of Pope St. Pius X and other popes of the twentieth century. The second practice was the widespread introduction, through indult, of the use of vernacular hymnody at "low" Mass - a practice using or adapting the German *Singmesse*, which was first introduced to counter the popularity of Lutheran hymnody in the seventeenth century. This practice, in the United States, gave rise to the preconciliar "four-hymn Mass," with vernacular hymnody used in place of the processional chants and at the end of Mass.

## I.2 Chant at the procession with gifts and at communion

- Based on the evidence in *Ordo Romanus I*, many authors have presumed that the other two processional chants, once psalmody was introduced to replace hymnody, originally had a form similar to that for the entrance chant. That is, according to OR I, they were sung antiphonally, and as much of the psalm was used as was necessary to accompany the action, either the procession with gifts or the communion procession. When the actions were over, at a signal from the pope, the psalm concluded with the doxology, and the antiphon was repeated one final time. However, there may be evidence that elements of the older practice (antiphonal hymnody) or some other practice still remained, especially in the offertory chant but also in the communion chant, even after psalmody was introduced. "The offertory chant appears quite different from the others in musical style in even the earliest notated manuscripts; and the frequent uncertainties concerning the mode of particular communions seems unlikely to have arisen in connection with chants that were always associated with psalmody. If these three chants were indeed originally psalms, then it is difficult to explain the considerable number of non-psalmodic texts among the introits and, even more, the communions" (Ruth Steiner, *Grove* 11:772).

### **Preparation/Offertory**

"There is . . . no hint in surviving chants that the music for the offertory was originally like that of the introit and communion - an antiphon in neumatic style followed by verses chanted to a simple tone . . . It does however share with them the liturgical role of accompanying an action . . ." "If these chants were originally psalmodic, after the reform that introduced psalmody into Christian worship, then "at some point between the early 5th and the 8th centuries a profound change occurred in the form and style of these chants. The date of this and the circumstances are not known. The offertories of the Gregorian tradition, in manuscripts of the 8th, 9th and succeeding centuries, are the most elaborate chants in the entire Gregorian repertory. They begin with an antiphon, which is followed by verses (usually two but often three) with freely composed, ornate melodies; each verse is followed by a refrain that is usually a repetition of the end of the antiphon . . ., but in a few cases, it is a repetition of the opening phrase. Melismas occur frequently, and - a rare feature in the chant repertory - some words and phrases are repeated, with the melody even more elaborate the second time . . ." (Giacomo B. Baroffio et al., *Grove* 13:514).

"The course and form of the procession, the private prayers of the celebrant, and various rites including the censuring and the washing of hands probably contributed most towards the form of the offertory chants in the earliest manuscripts" (ibid.). In the Roman Rite, most of the texts were taken from the psalms, often with some connection to other texts of the day (introit, Gospel), but musically these texts were set as independent and highly elaborate compositions; it seems that they did not serve for long, if they ever served, as processional chants.

### **Communion**

There is certainly evidence that one verse of one psalm was an early part of the Christian communion rite: "O taste and see the goodness of the Lord" (Psalm 34:8) - it is mentioned, e.g., in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, Cyril of Jerusalem's *Mystagogical Catecheses*, and Augustine's *Sermo 225*. But there is also evidence that hymns were used during the communion procession,

including some composed for this purpose by Severus of Antioch; the Irish *Bangor Antiphonary* also contains such hymns from the Celtic or Gallican Rite. The earliest use of psalm texts may have been as antiphons unrelated to the chanting of a psalm, but the development of the communion in the Roman Rite probably followed the form of the introit when psalmody was introduced: an antiphon with one or more psalm verses. It also probably followed the introit in the reduction of psalm verses by the late eighth century. By the eleventh or twelfth century, depending on the region, all psalm verses associated with the antiphon began to be dropped. (Helmut Hucke and Michel Huglo, *Grove* 4:592).

### **I.3 Conclusions from the history**

- Hymnody and psalmody both have a strong claim to use during the three major processions of the Roman Rite.

Music at the three processions had very different functions. Only the introit seems to have served for a long time as a chant to accompany a procession. The reduction in the length of the procession following the re-arrangement of churches, however, meant that the use of full or nearly full psalm texts lasted only about two centuries. At the preparation of gifts/offertory, when the evidence testifies that the most elaborate settings were used, music seems to have quickly become a composition to be performed by a trained schola and to be listened to by the rest of the congregation. At communion, particularly when independent antiphons were used in the early centuries, the original intent may have been to provide something short, memorable, and repeated that could be sung by the people as they came forward. Later, it became a more elaborate musical event, but one that is still simpler than the offertory chant.

Historical evidence does not support the current pattern suggested in the Mass of Paul VI: three processional chants of similar shape, using an antiphon sung by the congregation with psalm verses sung by a cantor or schola. This is, in fact, a new pattern within the history of these chants.

## **II. Current Function of the Processional Chants as Ritual Music Events**

- The function of each of these processional chants is described in the *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani*. It is clear from the descriptions that some of them have wider ritual roles beyond their service as processional song. Using the draft English translation of the IGMR 2000, we can name these functions this way:

### **Opening Song**

As part of the introductory rites, the function of the opening liturgical song is as a "beginning, introduction, and preparation." It is to aid the faithful as they come together to "take on the form of a community and prepare themselves to listen properly to God's word and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily" (#46). "After the people have gathered, the opening liturgical song begins as the priest with the deacon and ministers come in. The purpose of this liturgical song is to open the celebration, intensify

the unity of those who have assembled, lead their thoughts to the mystery of the season or feast, and accompany the procession of priest and ministers" (#47).

It should also be noted that this song is followed closely by several other ritual elements that should rightly be sung: the penitential rite and the *Gloria*. The strongly musical nature of the whole set of introductory rites should be kept in mind when making decisions about the opening song.

The fact that this song is much more than a chant to accompany the procession may explain why its form may vary so widely, according to the documents, and why it may be chosen from one of several sources, including psalmody and hymnody, in accord with the longer traditional practices of the Roman Rite.

## **Preparation of Gifts**

On the other hand, the liturgical song for the preparation of gifts is explicitly a processional song: "The procession bringing the gifts is accompanied by the liturgical song for the preparation of the gifts, which continues at least until the gifts have been placed on the altar" (#74). Despite the permission for similar variety in choosing this song and performing it (#74), its function seems much more restricted than that of the opening song.

## **Communion Song**

Like the opening song, the communion song performs (or may perform) several functions. Begun during the priest's reception of communion, its "function is to express outwardly the communicant's union in spirit by means of the unity of their voices, to give evidence of joy of heart and to highlight more the 'communitarian' character of the communion procession. The song continues while the Sacrament is being ministered to the faithful. But the communion song should be ended in good time whenever there is to be a hymn after communion" (#86).

Once again (#87), the rite offers several ways in which this communion song may be performed and several options for its selection, in keeping with its various functions and with the fact that it may be followed by another song after communion.

It is worth noting the variety of ways in which the texts of the various antiphons provided in the *Missale Romanum* for these processional chants are to be treated according to IGMR 2000 and earlier versions of the *General Instruction* when they are not sung or replaced by some other song. The entrance antiphon (#48) may be proclaimed in several ways, among which, the document notes, is this option: The priest may incorporate the text into his opening remarks. This suggests that the proclamation of this text, when there is no singing, is not a significant ritual event. At the preparation of gifts (#74), there is no provision for speaking the antiphon if it is not sung or replaced by another song, which suggests that it may be omitted even if there is no singing. At communion, if there is no singing, the communion antiphon may be recited "either by the faithful, or by a group of them, or by a reader" (#87), as at the entrance. But unlike the entrance antiphon, it seems that more should be made of the communion antiphon if it is not sung or replaced by another song. If there is no other singing, it becomes almost a call to communion: "Otherwise the priest himself says it after he has received communion and before he gives communion to [the rest of the assembly]" (#87). This suggests a special nature to the communion antiphon, in keeping with its ancient origins as a familiar and repeated text. It may also suggest in pastoral practice that more attention should be paid to this antiphon, not in unison

with a psalm, but on its own, as something that ought to be sung. If not incorporated into a communion song, in other words, the antiphon might be performed musically by a cantor or schola before the song of the whole assembly as an invitation to communion, or even after the community's song.

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