



# Liturgical Principles for Pastoral Musicians

(Cf. General Instruction of the  
Roman Missal/GIRM)



## Introduction

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal/GIRM*, promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 2002 is the fifth such instruction to accompany the Roman Missal since Vatican II. This document serves as a preface to the third edition of the *Roman Missal* which came into use in the English-speaking world on the First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2011. The 2002 *GIRM* replaces and updates the previous instructions and sets forth the Church's manner of celebrating her central liturgy, the Eucharist. The *GIRM* is a helpful gauge by which parishes can evaluate their celebration of the Eucharist, thus bringing these celebrations into conformity with official understandings and prescriptions for the proper celebration of the liturgy. Far more fruitful is it to approach the *GIRM* as a diagnostic tool rather than as a simple "rule book", for it is a rich resource for celebrating the liturgy with dignity and will inform those charged with the preparation of liturgical celebrations.

There are numerous references to music in the *GIRM* which highlights the importance of music as a key element in the celebration of the Eucharist. Furthermore, the *GIRM* sets forth certain principles with regard to the choice, preparation, execution and place of music in the liturgy.

### 1. Singing is Normative

The *GIRM*'s most prominent liturgical music principle is that singing is normative in the liturgy, (nos. 39, 40, 115). While it is not always necessary to sing everything that can be sung in the liturgy, ministers and assemblies should sing on Sundays and holy days of obligation, (n. 40). The use of "should" in this directive indicates the obligatory and normative nature of singing.

Whenever the *GIRM* lists the option of either singing or speaking an element of the liturgy (such as the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Sanctus*, etc.), the sung option is always listed ahead of the spoken option, which suggests the church's preferred option is singing.

### 2. Importance of Planning, Preparation, and Decorum

Careful liturgical planning strives to achieve the full, conscious, active participation of the faithful in the liturgical action, (n. 18; cf. Vatican II Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 14). To this end, liturgical musicians should be educated regarding what is in the *Roman Missal* and other liturgical books if they are to properly carry out their task of facilitating the assembly's musical participation in the liturgy. Decorum in liturgical music suggests that time is properly taken for the sung parts of the liturgy, that they are not rushed, shortened, or omitted for the sake of expediency.

### **3. Silence**

The *GIRM* places significant emphasis on silence in the liturgy, that is, when not to use music. When the presidential texts are spoken, there should be no other singing or musical accompaniment so that those texts may be clearly heard and understood, (n. 32). Designated times in the liturgy are characterized by silence (n. 45), and pastoral musicians should resist the temptation to fill every liturgical space with music. The silences in the liturgy are not “empty” spaces but are often “charged” with meaning, prayer, and serve the unity of the assembly in their own right.

### **4. Progressive Solemnity**

While the *GIRM* does not use the term “progressive solemnity” in regard to liturgical music, this principle is apparent in the directive that “in the choosing of the parts actually to be sung, preference is to be given to those that are of greater importance and especially to those which are to be sung by the Priest or the Deacon or a reader, with the people replying, or by the priest and people together,” (n. 40).

Ideally as a minimum, the dialogues between presider and assembly should be sung, along with the Ordinary parts of the Mass (*Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Mystery of Faith, Great Amen, Agnus Dei*). The Entrance, Offertory, and Communion songs are of lesser importance as is the singing of the prayers of intercession and the psalmody. While it is customary in parishes to sing a recessional hymn, the *GIRM* makes no mention of music at this point in the liturgy.

### **5. Choice of Liturgical Music and the Importance of Latin Chant**

The *GIRM* does suggest that the Priest may make adaptations in choosing which rites, texts, chants, readings, prayers, explanations and gestures should be used in the liturgy so that these respond better to the needs, preparation, and culture of the assembly. However, on his own, the Priest may not change, add, or remove anything in the celebration of the Mass, (n. 24).

Liturgical musicians are encouraged to make an effort to carry out those directives in the *GIRM* regarding musical types, forms, purposes, and languages, recognizing the need to learn some new music and texts which will help bring local practise into conformity with the updated expectations of the *GIRM* and the *Roman Missal*.

The *GIRM* reminds us that Gregorian chant has pride of place in the liturgy without excluding other kinds of sacred liturgical music. There has been a tendency to allow chant to fall into disuse. Being reminded of the pre-eminence of chant may help parish musicians to remember to include it among the music chosen for the liturgy. It is fitting that the faithful know how to sing at least some of the parts of the Ordinary of the Mass in Latin, (n. 41). The *GIRM* in no way suggests that Latin will or ought to displace the vernacular in the celebration of the liturgy; rather it must not be allowed to fall into complete disuse.

## **6. Musical Form and Purpose**

The *GIRM* instructs that it is important for those choosing music for the liturgy to make use of a variety of musical forms, that is, singing alternately by the choir and the people, cantor and people, entirely by the people, or by the choir alone, (n. 48). The *GIRM* presents as liturgical law the practise of using the organ and other musical instruments with moderation during Advent, and playing them only to support the singing during Lent, (n. 313). Marking the changing liturgical seasons through greater and lesser use of instrumental accompaniment can serve to reinforce the assembly's experience of the different flavours of the liturgical year. Likewise, it can be an empowering experience for the assembly to sing without instrumental accompaniment on occasion.

The decision-making process in selecting music needs to move beyond mere personal preference or desire for variety to ensure that the music actually accomplishes what it is supposed to at its particular moment in the liturgy, (e.g., cf. n. 47).

Another important aspect of musical choice is the need to ensure that the music chosen is of sufficient quality (artistically, textually, and theologically) that it can bear repetition over many years' use in the community's worship.

## **7. Appropriate Use and Placement of Musicians in the Liturgy**

The *GIRM* specifies certain roles for musicians within the liturgy, noting that the choir and organist have their own liturgical function of carrying out the different types of music proper to it and fostering the active participation of the faithful through singing, (n. 103). It is also appropriate to have a cantor or choir director to lead and sustain the people's singing even if there is no choir, (n. 104). Furthermore, the *GIRM* insists that the choir should be placed relative to the congregation within the liturgical space so that it can fulfill its function and so that its members can still be allowed full sacramental participation in the Mass. The placement of musical instruments should be such that they can sustain the singing of the choir and congregation and be heard with ease, (nos. 312, 313).

## **8. The Congregation Has A Right To Sing**

Present throughout the *GIRM* is the principle that the congregation has a right to sing certain parts of the Mass. Here are a few examples: Since the *Kyrie* is a chant by which the faithful acclaim the Lord and implore his mercy, it is ordinarily done by all, with the people and the choir or cantor having a part in it, (n. 52). The Gospel Acclamation constitutes a rite or act in itself by which the faithful welcome the Lord who speaks. This acclamation is sung by all while standing and is led by the choir or a cantor, being repeated if appropriate, (n. 62). In the *Sanctus* the whole congregation joins with the heavenly powers to sing to the glory of God, (n. 79b).

The choice of music for the liturgy must not exclude the congregation's participation. That there are certain elements of the liturgy that are reserved to the assembly makes it clear that the choir and instrumentalists must not usurp the people's right to sing those parts of the Mass because this subverts the intentions of the ritual.

## 9. The Psalmist is a Minister of the Word

The *GIRM* assumes that wherever possible, the responsorial Psalm will be sung. While other articles of the *GIRM* mention a “cantor” or “psalmist” in relation to the Psalm, n. 40 calls for the “lector” to sing. Hence, whoever proclaims the Psalm (whether sung or spoken) is a minister of the Word. This means that any directive pertaining to ministers of the Word must also apply to psalmists in their sung proclamation of the Psalm. The proper tone of voice should be employed relative to the genre of the text (n. 38), psalmists should be truly suited to perform this function and should receive careful preparation (n. 101), and they should have the ability for singing, proper pronunciation and diction, (n. 102).

Since the Psalmist is a minister of the Word, the *GIRM* states that the Psalm be proclaimed from the ambo or another suitable place, (n. 61). More explicitly, paragraph 309 states that from the ambo only the readings, the Psalm, and the Easter Proclamation (*Exsultet*) are to be proclaimed. It may also be used for the homily and for the Prayer of the Faithful. The dignity of the ambo requires that only a minister of the word should go up to it, and this includes the psalmist.

## 10. Respecting Official Liturgical Texts

The *GIRM* is quite explicit about the importance of maintaining the integrity of official liturgical texts. It is **not permitted** to substitute other texts for those found in the Order of Mass, such as the *Gloria*, (n. 53). Neither is it permitted to include alternate tropes in the *Agnus Dei*, (nos. 83, 366). Furthermore, it is unlawful to substitute other non-biblical texts for the readings and the responsorial Psalm, which contain the Word of God, (n. 57). While it is often easier to choose one of the many contemporary familiar paraphrases of the psalms, the *GIRM* upholds the integrity of the Psalm text (from the current approved Lectionary). Therefore, songs and hymns are not to be substituted for the Psalm. There are other legitimate places in the liturgy where psalm-paraphrases are licit such as during the communion procession.

## Conclusion

With the introduction of the third edition of the *Roman Missal* and its accompanying *GIRM*, liturgical musicians are invited to identify their strengths and make an honest evaluation of their areas for growth in the ways in which they choose, prepare, and execute music in the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist. The *GIRM* helps us to understand the manner in which music is ideally employed in the liturgy and giving our prayerful attention to these directives will help our communities to celebrate the liturgy with a lively and active faith.