

7-11-1973

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Recommended Citation

Mangan, Michael. "The Communion Song: When to Sing and What to Sing." *Pastoral Liturgy* 53, no. 1 (2022): 1-3.
<https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/pastoral-liturgy/vol53/iss1/7>

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The Communion Song: When to Sing and What to Sing

By Michael Mangan

(Previous versions of this article were published in the *Australian Pastoral Musicians Network Newsletter* (11/2), *GIA Quarterly* (33/1) and *Liturgy News* (51/3).

The string quartet has been engaged to provide music for the convention's annual gala dinner. Once set up they quickly seat themselves at the head table and tuck into the beautifully presented appetisers as other guests are gradually served. All eat in silence until the musicians return to their instruments to provide the dinner music for which they had been contracted. A liturgical version of this unlikely scenario is enacted in many churches each weekend.

As a liturgical music clinician, I find that few topics are as contentious as the Communion song. And the issues aren't Latin *versus* vernacular, traditional or contemporary, organ or a *capella*. Nope. The hot topic is, 'When do the musicians receive Communion?' Many music ministers are committed to being first in the Communion procession. I have sat in cathedrals and parish churches where the organist will play a quiet instrumental as choir members process to receive Communion. And sometimes, like the gala dinner, the Communion procession begins in complete silence as all the music ministers rush to be first in line.

The stated concerns are always the same. 'We might miss out on receiving from the chalice if we don't go first!' 'They might be running low on hosts and we will only get a small piece!' 'We can't exactly time the ending of the Communion song if we don't go first!' 'There will be an awkward silence before the start of the post-Communion song.' That's when I suggest that we step back, look at the liturgy, delve into the documents, and revisit the point and purpose of the Communion song, and for that matter, of music ministry.

Firstly, like all liturgical ministers, music ministers are called to be servants. The very word 'ministry' comes from the Latin *ministerium*, meaning 'service.' Music ministers are called to serve the needs of the liturgy and serve the liturgical 'work,' the full, conscious and active participation, of the assembly. Servants don't load up their plates first in case the food runs out. The needs of the guests, and of the occasion, are always prioritised. In the liturgy, these needs are very clear. The Communion song helps unify the entire ritual action of the Communion procession; a single action which begins with the presider's Communion and continues until all have received. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM), the user manual for liturgy, spells out the purpose, place and procedure for the Communion song.

'While the priest is receiving the Sacrament, the Communion chant (song) is begun' (GIRM,86). Not after the priest has received. Not after the Communion antiphon has been recited. Not after a long instrumental introduction to enable the choir to receive Communion first. The Communion procession begins with the priest's Communion and the song should accompany the entire procession. But does it really matter?

It matters. The purpose of the Communion song 'is to express the communicants' union in spirit by means of the unity of their voices, to show joy of heart, and to

highlight more clearly the 'communitarian' nature of the procession to receive Communion' (GIRM, 86). The Communion procession is never the place for silent, private prayer and reflection. Rather, it is a time of heightened unity in sacrament and community. Singing together enables the assembly to experience and express this unity as all process to be sacramentally unified in the eucharistic meal.

Theologically and liturgically, the Communion rite is about unity in, and through the body of Christ. 'Many' become 'one' through shared ritual action as the assembly sings, processes, eats and drinks together. And the 'glue' that holds this whole 'ritual of unity' together is the song. The active participation of the assembly in the shared Communion song is a vital and integral part of making this sacramental unity a reality.

The 'unity of voices,' which is called for in GIRM 86, is only possible if the assembly can actively participate in the chosen song. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL)* states that 'full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else' (CSL, 14) and this is especially true for the Communion song. The choice of the song to accompany the procession to receive from the Lord's table is vital. Enabling the voice of the assembly is the paramount consideration. This is no time for instrumentals, solos or performances of Latin motets or choral anthems. This is about the participation of the people. So the Communion song must be discerned and chosen carefully. Can this piece be sung by the assembly? Is the refrain easily remembered? Does the language in the song express the unity of many becoming one – *we, us* and *our* rather than *I, me* and *my*? Is the song *processional* in nature? Does it accompany and assist the physical movement of the procession?

At this point, it must be acknowledged that there are tensions in the documents. After listing suitable texts and songs to be sung during Communion, GIRM 87 goes on to say that '[the Communion song] is sung by the choir alone or by the choir or cantor with the people'. The singing of the Communion song 'by the choir alone' is inconsistent with the theological basis and spirit of GIRM 86. GIRM 87 is often used to support the use of choral performance pieces, rather than community song, during the Communion procession.

The pattern of many liturgical documents is that the theology, purpose, and best practice are stated first (GIRM, 86) and then a 'fall back' position (often to placate alternative viewpoints) is presented afterwards. In this light, it is recommended that music and liturgy directors look to the principles and best practice found in GIRM 86 rather than relying on the often easier option of, 'Let's just let the choir do it.' Clearly, the 'choir alone' option fails to 'express the communicants' union in spirit by means of the unity of their voices' or 'highlight more clearly the communitarian nature of the procession to receive Communion'. Let the people sing and choir support them!

How long should the Communion song last? 'The singing is continued for as long as the Sacrament is being administered to the faithful' (GIRM, 86). To unify the Communion procession through the voice of the assembly, the song accompanies the distribution of Communion until the last person has received or for as long as practically possible. GIRM 86 concludes with a reminder that 'care should be taken that singers, too, can receive Communion with ease'.

So, when and how **do** music ministers receive Communion? Certainly, musicians' communion must not be forgotten but this occurs **after** they have served the liturgy and the assembly. Balancing these seemingly competing needs is imperative and is possible with careful forethought and planning.

Specific procedures will depend on the size and make up of particular music ministry groups and their placement in the liturgical space. A larger music ministry group might go to receive Communion a few at a time so that some are always available to support the song of the assembly throughout the procession; and, of course, when processing they would still sing as members of the full, conscious and actively participating assembly! This might mean that the flute descant or vocal harmonies that have been rehearsed may need to be omitted for part of the song. But are the harmonies the priority here? Is the performance of the choir or instrumentalists more important than the song of the assembly during the Communion procession? GIRM 86 clearly indicates not.

For smaller groups with a single accompanist, an instrumental interlude might continue as the singers receive Communion or the singers could continue to lead the song of the assembly *a capella* as they join the end of the procession. And, if necessary, a little silence as the last few musicians receive communion is immeasurably preferable to delaying participatory song until all of the musicians have processed to the table first! Ministers of Communion must be aware of the local procedure and ensure that the musicians also have the opportunity to share in the eucharistic banquet.

Rather than being perceived as 'awkward,' a short period of silence while musicians receive Communion at the end of the procession could be reframed as the beginning the contemplative silence suggested in GIRM 88 where 'the priest and faithful spend some time praying privately'. It is much more important for the Communion song to begin 'on time', as the priest receives Communion, than it is to end it exactly as the last communicant receives.

In conclusion:

- The Communion song begins as the priest receives Communion and continues for as long as the sacrament is being administered.
- This song belongs to the assembly: the unity of voices shows a unity of spirit and highlights the communitarian nature of the Communion procession.
- The Communion procession is not a time for silence, instrumentals, or choral pieces in which the assembly cannot participate.
- As servants of the liturgy and the assembly, music ministers must firstly fulfill the requirements of the rite. This may often mean that they receive Communion at the end of the procession.

Finally, while there may be good logistical reasons for music ministers hurrying off to Communion first, there are no good liturgical or theological reasons to do so. Liturgy always trumps logistics!