

1-12-2020

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Recommended Citation

Dyball, Fiona. "Celebrating Liturgy in Schools: Catholic Identity in Song." *Pastoral Liturgy* 50, no. 1 (2020): 1-3.
<https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/pastoral-liturgy/vol50/iss1/2>

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Celebrating Liturgy in Schools: Catholic Identity in Song

by Fiona Dyball

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**Be not afraid. I go before you always.
Come, follow me, and I will give you rest.**

Be Not Afraid by Bob Dufford SJ has been sung at countless Catholic high school graduations. This hymn of faith and trust in the accompaniment of God in times of trial and hardship might seem a challenging choice in some ways, as the hymn speaks openly and poetically of moving in and through difficult emotions and life situations. However, it was one of the greatest prayers I could have received as a young person going out into the world from the safety of my tight-knit Catholic school community. Anchored in Sacred Scripture, the hymn is based on Isaiah 43:2-3 and Luke 6:20 and emphasises God's care and presence always and everywhere. God leads people forward in love into greater fullness of life, despite all obstacles. I have regularly prayed this prayer in song since singing it for the first time at high school, and it has always affirmed in me the resilience that faith in Christ freely offers. Singing this hymn with others in community over years has consistently allowed me to experience renewed courage, hope, and peace.

Giving children rich Catholic liturgical music to sing that will console them in difficult times and help them celebrate in times of joy is a gift that can be offered through liturgies at primary and secondary Catholic schools, and especially at highlight events like opening Masses, feast days, and graduations. Beautiful music with a strong Scripture-based text that is sung often can ignite and animate the Christic imagination in the long-term memory of students, teachers, and parents. It can also be a powerful means of evangelisation. Singing of God's promises, works, nature, and deeds reinforces an embodied sacramental worldview of all times and places being touched by the presence of a loving God.

Mentoring, modelling, remuneration and repertoire

It is important that the liturgical music chosen for liturgy is modelled, known and sung by all where possible (including male and female teachers), not just by a few select students. Training cantors prepares for the dialogical and invitational singing of the Responsorial Psalm, but cantors and choirs should ideally never replace the voice of the people in sung prayer in all other parts of a liturgy. A Leader of Song can teach new music and support singing while it takes hold in a community: but the song belongs to all and it is desired that it be sung by all at most points, especially in the Mass.

Promoting communal singing means scheduled class and year level rehearsals offered over time with a skilled facilitator, as in any formation program (just like sports training). This remains the same for primary and secondary contexts. A four-week minimum time frame of weekly one hour rehearsals in preparation for a key liturgical event is standard practice in setting up non-professional musicians for success. It also attracts students for future events if they know that they are part of something positive, valued, and well organised. Commitment to a financial outlay that includes *school experienced, qualified, and pastorally sensitive live musicians* needs to be included in the Mission or Religious Education budget for liturgies as a matter of course and usual practice.

A well-known core repertoire slowly added to over time is preferable over a rapidly changing collection of yearly 'hits' when encouraging young people to sing with confidence and joy. This creates a shared musical and sacramental memory. A consistent weekly rehearsal, one well-known Mass setting, one new psalm setting, and two new hymns/pieces a year is a good start in promoting and growing a repertoire that all people have the chance to enjoy singing with confidence throughout their time at school (see Appendix 1 for musical repertoire suggestions for secondary school graduations; Appendix 2 for links to pay scales for professional musicians and other useful resources; and Appendix 3 for an event management timeline/checklist for end-of-year Masses).

Transformative mission in the world

The primary role of music in the celebration of the liturgy is as helping the members of the gathered assembly join themselves to the action of Christ and to give voice to the gift of faith.¹ Liturgical music is sacramental and deeply tied to the rite itself, so it's necessary to choose music that matches different parts of the Mass well.² Music is part of the larger goals and purposes of liturgy: the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful.³ This leads to transformative mission in the world to work towards and to be a witness to the Kingdom of God in the world.

The foundational document on liturgy from Vatican II, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 1963), is clear in according a high value to musical training in Catholic schools. Article 115 states that

Great importance is to be attached to the teaching and practice of music in ... Catholic institutions and schools. To impart this instruction, teachers are to be carefully trained and put in charge of the teaching of sacred music.

Music Ministers in schools, whether teachers or students, are involved in living Christ-life with others. Involvement in sacred music is acknowledged as one of the most potent means of evangelisation throughout the lifespan, and especially for the young. Musical skills are offered for the service of Christ and the Church: this is the fundamental orientation of the Music Minister, in collaboration with others in ritual, pastoral, and musical matters, as called for in Article 5 of *Musicam Sacram* (Instruction on Music in the Liturgy, 1967).

Ritual considerations

Liturgy is ritual and not a concert. Catholic rituals are repeated all over the world and we owe it to our students in schools to ensure that the ritual is recognisable and true to Catholic identity. This is particularly important in those schools where liturgy is not often celebrated. Students in Catholic schools should be able to attend Mass and be familiar with the ritual. Involving secondary school students in the selection process for liturgical music helps to increase their liturgical literacy, understanding of the role of Scripture, and their buy-in, as some songs which work well in prayer groups do not necessarily enrich Masses (e.g. 'Oceans' from Hillsong). When people understand liturgy, a song from the Top 10 can also be pastorally directed to the graduation after-party. Having a positive conversation to educate around liturgy in the planning process is integral in growing respectful liturgical awareness with young people. This empowers them to find the right places for music in the cycle of the liturgical year and the flow of the Mass itself. Important ritual considerations include the following:

- The liturgical action and the liturgical moment in the liturgy (e.g. Gathering, Communion), and the liturgical season and readings of the day.
- An understanding of progressive solemnity (e.g. A Graduation Mass will generally have more singing than a regular weekday Mass), and an emphasis on 'we' rather than 'me' in texts chosen for singing.
- The type of ritual. Not every piece of sacred music is appropriate in every context, (e.g. retreat, prayer service, rally, or Mass).
- Music for ritual must be *Christ-centred*, the text must be in line with the teachings of the Catholic Church, and the timing should be appropriate. (e.g. Singing that the resurrection didn't happen won't get a run, and Morning Has Broken isn't a great choice for the end of the day/Vigil Mass).

Pastoral considerations

- Consultation in the process of choosing the music so that it is accepted, especially with secondary students. Meetings in good time with all people involved attending.
- Musicians and congregations need to be set up for success in realising the music. *It is almost impossible for a school community to sing well a piece they do not know.* People need to be able to see and hear the music and text, and invited clearly in spoken word, written word, and gesture to join in. Similarly, musicians cannot lead music confidently and prayerfully if they are not familiar with the text and music and have had not had time to rehearse.
- Cultural awareness and sensitivity are integral. For example, in a community that has a strong Tongan representation, there should be some songs/responses/acclamations in that language. Many African, Islander, and Vietnamese communities will also incorporate dance into processions. Openness, sensitivity and consultation are important in working with people of different cultural backgrounds and traditions. Diversity enriches all.

Musical considerations

- **The music must be led well** by a pastorally and musically skilled practitioner, and musical choices must be able to be sung and played well by the people in any given community. Rehearsing the Responsorial Psalm and new music for communal singing before every Mass in a prayerful way allows people the chance to join in when invited.

- **Liturgical music is prayer** and should always point to God. Great performance skills are laid at the service of supporting the collective sung prayer of the people: there is space for a suitable piece by a soloist or choral group (especially at the Procession of the Gifts) but the voice of the people is the voice to be encouraged and supported in most parts of a celebration.
- **Pieces must be well-constructed**, remaining fresh after repeated playing and singing over time. (e.g. A hymn text set to a pop tune, a ringtone, or a footy song would be a no-go, even though it might be catchy).
- **Selecting music** from Catholic Worship Book II, As One Voice, and from other legally purchased Catholic sources (digital download from Willow and Marist Music in Australia, and GIA, OCP and WLP in the US) helps to build a common repertoire and skill students for musical and liturgical leadership.
- **The culture of people matters.** Sensitivity is required in multicultural contexts, as is humility and joy in listening and learning to play the music of different cultures.
- **A consistent space** in which to rehearse needs to be provided by schools, equipped with robust music stands for the instrumentalists. The space should be large enough for the musicians and singers, not overpowered by other noise, and have a reliable and appropriate harmony instrument (piano, organ, guitar) that is in tune if used (e.g. A full length and at least partially weighted keyboard that makes enough sound).
- **A sound system** (if used) that is set up and run by someone skilled in this area other than the performers shares the workload. This enables the music and singing to be balanced and heard well without overpowering the voice of the people.
- **Enough time** for set up, pack up, sight-line and sound check in the venue is non-negotiable. Checklist and timeline all equipment and support needs as you would for any other large event. This is team event management and needs to be prepared well in advance.
- **A good quality backing track** (instrumental) that can be heard well can be used to support communal singing if there is no other resource available. Backing tracks with guide vocals are useful for supporting learning but are generally not recommended for live performance. Live music is the ideal and allows a community to breathe together and find its own voice in song.
- **Consistency of music editions**, arrangements, tempos, phrasing, keys (transposing instruments like clarinets and trumpets need to be taken into account for bands), texts, dynamics, introductions and endings. Some music may also need to be transposed in some cases to enable successful communal singing. This should all be ready to go at the start of the rehearsal process, and all singers and musicians need a *legal copy* of the appropriate music (not just a chord chart or lyrics) to be prepared for liturgy. This promotes a growing and engaged liturgical and musical literacy amongst students.

The music of the Church carries a person's faith throughout their life. This is why liturgical music needs to be carefully chosen for school communities so that it is theologically, liturgically, musically, and pastorally sound for the Catholic context. In the interests of building pastorally strong communities, parishes and schools should also hold some music in common. It is hoped that *every student could leave school with a solid intergenerational Catholic liturgical music repertoire* to carry them forward in their lives, and to connect them in prayer to a life-giving faith, lived in community.

Appendices

- Appendix 1: Road-tested intergenerational repertoire for graduations in Catholic secondary schools <http://www.cam.org.au/Portals/7/Appendix%201%20Singing%20Our%20Catholic%20Identity.pdf?ver=2018-08-22-164247-360>
- Appendix 2: Further resources <http://www.cam.org.au/Portals/7/Appendix%202%20Singing%20Our%20Catholic%20Identity.pdf?ver=2018-08-22-164306-713>
- Appendix 3: Checklist for planning graduation masses <http://www.cam.org.au/Portals/7/Appendix%203%20Marcellin%20Valedictory%20Timeline.pdf?ver=2018-08-22-164321-700>

References

- ¹ USCCB, *Sing to the Lord* (Washington, USCCB, 2007), article 125.
- ² Anthony Ruff, *Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform*, 1 SC 112.
- ³ Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II. Sacrosanctum Concilium*, article 112.