

Sacred Music Guidelines

Sacred music and liturgical song have the task of giving us a sense of God's glory, of His beauty, of His holiness that envelops us like a 'luminous cloud.'

Pope Francis,
Address to the participants of the International Congress on Sacred Music,
March 4, 2017

A. Introduction: General Principles

For over a century, the universal authority of the Church has been greatly concerned about sacred music, because it plays an integral part in the celebration of the liturgy.¹

Sacred music is prayer expressed in sound. Music makes prayer more pleasing, promotes a sense of congregational unity, and confers greater solemnity on the sacred rites. The solemn character of sacred music refers to its earnest, intense and festive focus on the great Mystery which it serves: Christ's redemptive and transformative love for his Church.

St Pius X noted the three basic characteristics of sacred music: holiness, sound form and universality.² It is the goal of these Guidelines to promote these qualities in our own local Church.³ The Archdiocese of Vancouver's first priority is to "make every Sunday matter," and among the principal means of doing this is beautiful music: "Our goal is to foster truly beautiful music because it makes it easier to pray and to encounter God at Mass."

B. Types of Sacred Music

The types of sacred music mentioned in Church documents, in order of priority, are: Gregorian chant, sacred polyphony, and modern compositions, including popular religious song, i.e., hymns.

Chant

As *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states: "The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as especially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services" (n. 116).

There are three main parts of the Mass that preferably should be chanted:

¹ See Appendix I for a list of documents. The general principles of these guidelines are derived from these documents, especially Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and John Paul II, Chirograph of 2003.

² Cf. *Tra le sollecitudini* (1903) I.2.

³ The intention of these Archdiocesan guidelines is to be brief. For an example of a fuller treatment, see Archbishop Alexander Sample's Pastoral Letter to the Archdiocese of Portland, "Sing to the Lord a New Song," Oregon (25 January 2019) available [here](#).



a. The Order of Mass

Priests and deacons should know how to sing their parts from the Sign of the Cross to “Go forth, the Mass is ended” and the people should know how to respond.

b. The Mass Ordinary

The mandated Archdiocesan Mass Setting (ICEL chants) gives everyone a basic introduction to chant.

c. The Mass Propers

The Archdiocese also encourages the use of chant Propers (the chants at Entrance, Offertory and Communion). These can be the traditional Latin or one of several recently published English Propers. (See Appendix III)

Polyphony

A cappella polyphony, as exemplified by the compositions of Palestrina, Victoria and others of the 16th century, but continuing to be composed today, is especially suited to the more solemn moments of the liturgy.

- It is desirable that choirs should know some sacred polyphony for appropriate moments of the Mass or other liturgies, which can enhance meditation.

Modern Compositions

As St Pius X pointed out, modern sacred music should be in the spirit of chant (i.e., it should convey the sacred, and allow the Word to come through).⁴

- New compositions for use in the Archdiocese, including Mass settings, must receive prior approval of the Archbishop.
- Not only does the text have to be sacred, but the music has to be sacred also. A popular, secular style is to be avoided.

Hymns

Hymns constitute the major expression of sacred music in most parish Masses.

- They are substitutes for the chant propers, and so they should be chosen for their relation to the liturgical day or season.
- A common repertoire of hymns should be known by all parishes for Archdiocesan events.
- Sacred music is not the same as the broader category, religious music.
- Religious music aids and supports Christian faith, but is not primarily sung during sacred liturgy. It includes devotional music such as popular hymnody, “praise and

⁴ Cf. *Tra le sollecitudini* II.3.

worship” music, as well as a host of other musical forms.

- It cannot be said that one kind of music is as good as another; appropriateness for liturgy is not a matter of taste.

The Archdiocesan Sacred Music Committee will publish suggestions for Confirmation, wedding, and funeral hymns on the archdiocesan website.

C. Instruments

Vatican II affirmed that the pipe organ “is to be held in high esteem, for it is the traditional musical instrument which adds a wonderful splendour to the Church’s ceremonies and powerfully lifts up man’s mind to God and to higher things” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 120). Other instruments (e.g., violin, flute, trumpet) which uphold the holiness and beauty of the liturgy can also be used.

- Pastors and choir directors should ensure that instruments are suitable for the liturgy (i.e., do not have secular connotations).
- The piano is widely used, but as a percussion instrument it is not the ideal.
- Recorded music of any kind is *not* permitted in the liturgy.

D. Musical Roles in the Liturgy

Everyone has a role in sacred music in the celebration of the liturgy. The primary role lies with the Archbishop, which is why these guidelines are being published. At the parish level, the pastor has primary responsibility for the liturgy and therefore for sacred music. The priests and deacons who function at Mass and the other actions of the liturgy are of course also involved. Choir directors, choir members, organists, other liturgical instrumentalists, and the congregation all have a necessary role.

- There should be coordination of the various musical roles in the liturgy, with special importance given to the choir.
- Pastors should take care in appointing choir directors who have an understanding of liturgy as well as the requisite technical ability. In a large parish this may be a paid position.
- There should be preparation and coordination between celebrant, and music director for any particular celebration.
- The choir assists general participation and sings the proper antiphons as well as supplemental music.
- If there is no choir, a cantor or leader of song should lead and assist the congregation.
- The congregation should participate at least in the responses and the Ordinary of the Mass.

E. The Liturgical Year

An understanding of the liturgical year is essential since sacred music is integral to the Mass.

- The selection of music should be in accordance with the liturgical season being celebrated.
- The music directors should prepare the Mass according to the liturgical texts.
- During Lent the organ is used only to support the singing, if at all. The use of other instruments should be kept to a bare minimum. The Mass setting, which does not include a Gloria, should be a simple chant setting.
- During the seasons of Christmas and Easter, the music is more exuberant and festive. The Mass setting should be more festive than one used during Ordinary Time.

F. Formation for Sacred Music

Formation is important for both clerics and the laity.

- The Archdiocese will strive to offer workshops for training of priests, deacons, choir directors, musicians, and the general public; in this the Sacred Music Committee should take a lead role. Such workshops may be offered at the deanery level. In the Archdiocese conferences, festivals, workshops, concerts should be promoted and offered.
- Seminarians should be thoroughly formed in sacred music.
- Students in Catholic schools should be formed in the sacred music of the liturgy with a growing number of chants learned each school year.⁵
- Music teachers in Catholic schools should have some training in liturgical music.
- Appendix II lists some online resources for preparation and formation.
- Appendix III lists some resources for singing the Propers in English.

G. Conclusion

The implementation of these Guidelines will require effort and even a change of heart for all who are involved (or should be involved) in sacred music. But the effort will be worth it, for it will contribute to the worthy celebration of the Sacred Liturgy, the source and summit of the activity of the Church (see *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 10).

The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as sacred song united to the words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy.

Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 112.

⁵ The Sacred Music Committee will produce a chant booklet for schools, *Chants Every Catholic Student Should Know*.



Archdiocese
of Vancouver

LITURGY & SACRAMENTS
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Appendix I: Church Documents on Sacred Music

In chronological order, with links to English translations (if available):

Benedict XIV, Encyclical *Annus qui* (1749.02.19) [Italian translation](#)

Pius X, Motu proprio *Tra le sollecitudini* (1903.11.22) [English translation](#)

Pius XI, Apostolic Constitution *Divini cultus* (1928.12.20) [English translation](#)

Pius XII, Encyclical *Musicae sacrae disciplina* (1955.12.25) [English translation](#)

Sacred Congregation of Rites, Instruction *De musica sacra* (1958.09.03) [English translation](#)

Vatican II, Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 112-121 (Chapter VI) (1963.12.04) [English translation \(Abbott & Gallagher\)](#)

Sacred Congregation of Rites, Instruction *Musicam sacram* (1967.03.05) [English translation](#)

John Paul II, Chirograph *Mosso dal vivo* (2003.11.22) [English translation](#)



Appendix II: Online Resources

See also lists at [CMAA resources](#)

Cantica Nova – Planning Pages by Liturgical Season, available [here](#).

Choral Public Domain – music in print by the choral masters: see [here](#).

Corpus Christi Watershed - download and listen to Simple English Propers: [here](#).

Voluntati Obsequens (1974) on the minimum repertoire of plainchant ([English translation](#));

Iubilare Deo booklet available from [Libreria Editrice Vaticana](#) or [Amazon](#).



Appendix III: Resources for English Propers

By Flowing Waters by Paul F. Ford (1999) available from [Liturgical Press](#).

Introit Hymns by Kathleen Pluth: [Advent](#) / [Lent](#)

Lumen Christi Hymnal available from [Illuminare](#) site.

Proper of the Mass for Sundays and Solemnities by Samuel Weber, available from [Ignatius Press](#).

Simple English Propers by Adam Bartlett (2011) available [Musica Sacra](#).