

Why do we sing at Mass?

I was recently told, by someone a bit older than myself, that “back in the day” our society wasn’t afraid to sing. Apparently there was a time when the crowd sang the national anthem together at sporting events and every school aged kid knew the words to his or her school song. Today, however, one could easily think that the national anthem was always intended to be a solo, and that fight songs were written strictly for marching bands. In my experience, most people feel embarrassed to sing in public...after all, someone might be able to hear them! This general shift away from communal singing does not bode well for the way we celebrate the Mass. When we pray a Mass together as an assembly, music plays an important role. It brings us together as one, it highlights important aspects of the Mass, and it expresses our prayers in a different way.

At Mass, the leading singer is called the “cantor.” It is more important to note that the leading singer is NOT called the “soloist.” This is because he or she is not supposed to be singing solos! The cantor’s role is to invite the assembly to sing together. He or she is there to make sure everyone is on the same page, can hear the melody, and knows when to begin singing. When the congregation truly sings together, we stay on the same pitch, form our words at the same time, and even breathe together. This unity, achieved through song, is fitting for the liturgy, during which we come together to become the body of Christ.

The music also highlights important aspects of the Mass. The hymns we sing, which vary from week to week, echo the themes from the readings and remind us of the liturgical season. The songs that remain the same each week, including the Gloria, Holy, Holy, Memorial Acclamation, Great Amen, and Lamb of God are part of the Mass itself! Just as we recite certain prayers together during Mass, so must we all participate in singing these songs together.

Finally, music enables us to pray in a different way. During the Mass, there are many instances in which we pray with words together, but the act of singing itself is a means of prayer. Music can express our greatest joys and deepest sorrows at a level beyond words. This form of expression is not reserved only for the musically trained or extremely talented. Music can be a form of prayer for you, the “assembly choir” as well. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, “When a person experiences great joy, he cannot keep it to himself. He has to express it, to pass it on. But what happens when a person is touched by the light of the resurrection and thus comes into contact with Life itself, with Truth and Love? He cannot merely speak about it. Speech is no longer adequate. He has to sing.” With that in mind, let us all open our hymnals together and make a joyful noise!