

Singing the Mass

DEFINITION AND HISTORY OF MASS PROPERS

The Proper of the Mass includes the scriptural texts that are carefully assigned to each day of the liturgical calendar. Some of the Mass Propers we use today can be found in Sacramentaries (liturgical books) dating back to the 5th century A.D. There is also written evidence that refers to their existence in the earliest days of the Church. These prayers/chants/texts have been developed and perfected throughout the centuries by the Catholic Church. Musical notation was in fact invented for the sole purpose of recording Catholic liturgical chants. From a historical perspective, the schola cantorum or choir has sung the propers. The reason for this is that the texts and melodies are difficult and change on a daily basis.

The *Graduale Romanum* is an official liturgical book of the Roman Rite containing Ordinary and Proper chants for use at Mass. In 1974, after the Second Vatican Council an edition of the Roman Gradual based on that of 1908 was issued. While the melodies remained unchanged, there was a relocation of pieces to fit the revised Roman Missal and calendar. Some chants were replaced by ancient ones rediscovered after 1908. Many of the original Latin chants can be quite difficult to learn for parish choirs, due to the fact that the melodies are complex and change every week. There has been a very recent liturgical movement to translate these texts into English and set to simpler chant melodies so that they may be easier to learn.

GROUPING OF LITURGICAL MUSIC

The music of the Mass can be grouped into two sections: The Ordinary (those sung at every Mass), and the Proper (those that change according to the season or saint being celebrated). The pieces that make up the **Ordinary** are the Kyrie (Lord, Have Mercy), Gloria (Glory to God in the Highest), Credo (The Creed), Sanctus (Holy, Holy, Holy, and Agnus Dei (Lamb of God)). The pieces that traditionally make up the **Proper** are the Introit, Gradual, Alleluia/Tract, Offertory, and Communion.

Introit: scriptural text with its antiphon sung while the celebrant and ministers enter the Church and approach the altar.

Gradual: scriptural text sung after the Epistle (more common in the Tridentine Mass)

Alleluia: Hebrew translation is "Praise Yahweh", sung with a changing verse before the Gospel

Offertory: sung scriptural text accompanying the procession and preparation of the gifts

Communion: scriptural text sung beginning with the Priest's reception of Communion and continued through the faithful's reception

EXAMPLES OF PROPERS CHANGING WITH FEAST DAYS

We are accustomed to the readings, responsorial psalm, and Alleluia verse which change each week in the Missalette. These scriptural texts of the Mass Propers allow us to more fully participate in the liturgical day being celebrated. An example of the is the Introit for Christmas - Mass at Dawn. "*Radiant Light will shine upon us today, for the Lord is born to us. He shall be called Wonderful God, Prince of Peace, Father of the world to come. His reign shall have no end*" (Cf. Is 9:2, 6; Luke 1:33). A contrasting example is the proper for Communion for the vigil Mass of the Assumption of the Blessed Mother. "*Blessed is the womb of the Virgin Mary / who has carried the Son of the Eternal Father*" (Lk 11:27). One can see that each text contains deep scriptural theology which helps us more fully contemplate the specific liturgical feast. The beauty of the Mass Propers is that they allow us to **sing the Mass**, rather to *sing at Mass*.

"What must be sung is the Mass, its Ordinary and Proper, not "something", no matter how consistent, that is imposed on the Mass. Because the liturgical service is one, it has only one countenance, one motif, one voice, the voice of the Church. To continue to replace the texts of the Mass being celebrated with motets that are reverent and devout, yet out of keeping with the Mass of the day amounts to continuing an unacceptable ambiguity: it is to cheat the people. Liturgical song involves not mere melody, but words, text, thought and the sentiments that the poetry and music contain. Thus texts must be those of the Mass, not others, and singing means singing the Mass not just singing during Mass." 1969 response to an inquiry by the the Consilium (group of bishops and experts set up by Pope Paul VI to implement the Constitution on the Liturgy).