

Music and the Rites

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Few would argue that the Catholic Church over the ages has provided a wellspring of melodic compositions that evoke the sense of transcendence. Since the Second Vatican Council, those who compose the music and lyrics of our parish hymnals have tried to create melodies that are user-friendly and words that speak of the profound mystery between God and humanity. It is not easy to balance these two aspects given the climate of secular society and the impact music has, shallow or fulfilling as it may be, on daily life in Western culture. While the aspect of music in all liturgical celebrations is among the most critical for those who prepare the liturgy in local parishes, a frequent challenge is particularly evident in the preparation of Catholic weddings and funerals.

Music within our liturgical celebrations aims to support and affirm the ritual actions, gestures and language we use in our praise of God. The U. S. Bishops relayed this thought in the document *Music in Catholic Worship* published in 1972. They said: “The function of music is ministerial; it must serve and never dominate. Music should assist the assembled of believers to express and share the gift of faith that is within them and to nourish and strengthen their interior commitment of faith”. (art.23) Music for the rites of the Church must have a purpose and not simply be chosen independent of the occasion for which it is used.

Those who prepare the liturgy in local parishes are often at a loss when a bride or grieving member of a family requests a musical selection that, while it may strike an emotional chord or have a particular connection with the couple being married or the person being buried, simply does not have a place in a religious service. Too often than not the pastor or parish musician who is trying to follow the liturgical directives with appropriate musical selections is bad-mouthed as not being cooperative because they would not permit the personal requests. All liturgical rituals are public celebrations of the entire Church, not private gatherings that are “owned” by those who provide the occasion of offering praise to God. A Catholic wedding or a funeral is an occasion to render God praise, not the bride and groom or the deceased person.

In November 2007, the U.S. Bishops again published another document related to music and the liturgy. *Sing to the Lord, Music in Divine Worship* (STL) reiterates consistently that music used in the celebration of Catholic weddings and funerals ought to reflect the Paschal Mystery of Christ (art. 220, 246). Regarding the use of secular music at weddings, STL states that “even though it may emphasize the love of spouses for one another, it is not appropriate for the Sacred Liturgy. Songs that are chosen for the Liturgy should be appropriate for the celebration and express the faith of the Church”. (art. 220)

Of Catholic funerals, STL relates “Music should never be used to memorialize the deceased, but rather to give praise to the Lord, whose Paschal Sacrifice has freed us from the bonds of death”. (art. 248)

In these ritual circumstances it is advisable to have the non-liturgical song or popular tune performed at the wedding reception, or in the case of a deceased person, over the sound system at the funeral home during the visitation. Musicians at the service of the Catholic liturgy should always choose and encourage the people they serve to consider musical selections equally on the merits of their musical, liturgical and pastoral aspects.