



# Guidelines for Music at Funerals

## Archdiocese of New York

Prepared by the  
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Music is integral to the funeral rites. It allows the community to express convictions and feelings that words alone may fail to convey. It has the power to console and uplift the mourners and to strengthen the unity of the assembly in faith and love. The texts of the songs chosen for a particular celebration should express the paschal mystery of the Lord's suffering, death, and triumph over death and should be related to the readings from Scripture.

—*Order of Christian Funerals*, 30.

In the celebration of her funeral rites, the Church recalls and participates in the redemption won for humanity by the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. In these same liturgies, the Church ministers to those who mourn the loss of a loved one and prays for those who have completed their earthly journey. The music which is chosen for the celebration of these rites can play a powerful role in supporting, consoling, and uplifting the participants, helping “to create in them a spirit of hope in Christ’s victory over death and in the Christian’s share in that victory.”<sup>1</sup> The following guidelines are meant to assist family and friends of the deceased, music directors, and celebrants in the selection of music for funeral liturgies that will reflect Christ's Paschal Mystery and the Church’s hope in eternal life.

### *ACTIVE PARTICIPATION*

The Second Vatican Council’s *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* states that full, conscious, and active participation is the right and duty of every baptized person, and is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. By means of this participation, the liturgy also functions as the “indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit”.<sup>2</sup>



Singing and listening to sacred music is one of the principal means by which active participation can take place within the liturgy. This form of participation:

- (a) should be above all *internal*, in the sense that by it the faithful join their minds to what they pronounce or hear and cooperate with heavenly grace;
- (b) must be, on the other hand, *external* also, that is, such as to show the internal participation by... the acclamations, responses, and singing. The faithful should also be taught to unite themselves interiorly to what the ministers or choir sing so that by listening to them they may raise their minds to God.<sup>3</sup>

Pope Saint John Paul II summarized the Church’s understanding of active participation this way:

<sup>1</sup> *Order of Christian Funerals [OCF]*, 31.

<sup>2</sup> Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Musicam sacram* (March 5, 1967), 15.

In gesture, word, song, and service, all the members of the community take part in an act of worship, which is anything but inert or passive. Yet active participation does not preclude the active passivity of silence, stillness, and listening; indeed, it demands it. Worshippers are not passive, for instance, when listening to the readings or the homily, or following the prayers of the celebrant, and the chants and music of the liturgy. These are experiences of silence and stillness, but they are in their own way profoundly active.<sup>4</sup>

This description of active participation reflects the reality at Christian funerals that some who are present may be inspired to sing, while other mourners may be inclined to prayerfully listen to a cantor, soloist, or choir.<sup>5</sup> The music that is chosen for the funeral rites should ideally allow for both forms of participation, bearing in mind the diverse needs of a grieving community.

## MUSIC SELECTION

### Qualities of Sacred Music

The Church has indicated that music must have three qualities in order to be considered sacred and suitable for liturgy. It must be *holy*, and therefore must exclude all which is not sacred in character. It must be *true art*, and have a goodness and beauty of form. And it must, at the same time, be *universal*, so that “nobody of any nation may receive an impression other than good on hearing”<sup>6</sup> this music. These three



<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, (Address to Bishops of the Northwest Provinces of the USCCB), in *Ad Limina Addresses: The Addresses of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Bishops of the United States, February 1998-October 1998* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998), no.3.

<sup>5</sup> *OCF*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> Pius X, motu proprio *Tra le sollecitudini* (November 22, 1903), 2.

qualities enable sacred music to “express and interpret the [sacred] text correctly and make it more meaningful.”<sup>7</sup>

The Church has indicated that the style of music which best exemplifies the three qualities of sacred music is Gregorian chant which, by virtue of its intimate connection with the Word of God, is recognized as “especially native to the Roman liturgy. Therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services.”<sup>8</sup> Classical polyphony and modern music also have a valued place in Catholic worship, provided that this music corresponds “to the spirit of the liturgical action and . . . fosters the participation of all the faithful.”<sup>9</sup>

No matter what style of music is selected for the celebration of the Church’s funeral rites, it is “necessary... to emphasize that music destined for sacred rites must have *holiness* as its reference point.”<sup>10</sup> That is, such music should be intimately linked to the liturgical action and possess the qualities of prayer, dignity, and beauty. When this occurs, sacred music will serve to make “the liturgical prayers of the Christian community more alive and fervent so that everyone can praise and beseech the Triune God more powerfully, more intently and more effectively.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Popular Music**

Family and friends of the deceased sometimes wish to include secular songs or instrumental works within Christian funerals. Even when such works have special meaning to the deceased or the mourners, they still may be inappropriate for use in liturgical celebrations when thoughtfully and carefully considered in light of the focus of the Church’s funeral liturgies and the purpose of sacred music.

The *Order of Christian Funerals* indicates that the music selected for funeral rites should express Christ's Paschal Mystery and a Christian's participation in that Mystery.<sup>12</sup> As well, “the texts intended to be sung [at the liturgy]... should be drawn chiefly from Holy Scripture and from liturgical sources.”<sup>13</sup> In sum, “music should

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<sup>7</sup> Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy of the United States Catholic Conference. *Music in Catholic Worship* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1972), 32.

<sup>8</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 116.

<sup>9</sup> *General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM]*, Liturgy Documentary Series 14 (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), 41.

<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, *Chirograph for the Centenary of the Motu Proprio “Tra le sollecitudini” on Sacred Music* (November 22, 2003), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Pius XII, *Musicae sacrae disciplina* (December 25, 1955), 31.

<sup>12</sup> *OCF*, 30.

<sup>13</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 121.



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.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Pre-recorded Music**

The bishops of the United States have indicated that pre-recorded music “lacks the authenticity provided by the living liturgical assembly gathered for the Sacred Liturgy.”<sup>15</sup> It is not pre-recorded music, but rather, the “lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work [which are to be] united with those of Christ and so acquire a new value”<sup>16</sup> through the celebration of the liturgy. For this reason, pre-recorded music should not, as a general norm, be used within the Church’s funeral rites.

### **Musical Instruments**

Instruments which are used to accompany the singing of the congregation or to provide instrumental accompaniment to liturgical actions should be suitable for sacred use. In the Catholic Church, the pipe organ “is the traditional musical instrument” because it can “most effectively elevate people’s spirits to God and things above.” However, other wind, string, or percussion instruments may be used, “provided they are truly suitable for sacred use or can be made suitable.”<sup>17</sup>



<sup>14</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2007), 248.

<sup>15</sup> *Sing to the Lord*, 93.

<sup>16</sup> CCC, 1368.

<sup>17</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 120.

## *The Vigil*

The *Order of Christian Funerals* indicates that music is an integral part of the *Vigil for the Deceased*. The rite makes provision for an opening song following the greeting.<sup>18</sup> The responsorial psalm may be sung.<sup>19</sup> An option is also given to conclude the vigil with a song, either in place of or in conjunction with a period of silent prayer.<sup>20</sup>

When some portion of the Office for the Dead is celebrated during the vigil liturgy, the singing of the hymn, psalmody, and gospel canticle is strongly encouraged.<sup>21</sup> The other parts of the Office may be sung, as circumstances may suggest.

When the Vigil is celebrated in a funeral home which lacks a suitable musical instrument, the choice of music should be guided by the principles of simplicity and adaptability. Many liturgical publishers produce small booklets for the Vigil which may be useful in aiding the assembled mourners to sing the ritual dialogues and hymns.<sup>22</sup>

## *The Mass of Christian Burial*

The *Order of Christian Funerals* indicates that, within the Mass of Christian Burial, "preference should be given to the singing of the acclamations, the responsorial psalm, the entrance and communion songs, and especially the song of farewell at the final commendation."<sup>23</sup> What follows are guidelines and suggestions which may assist the mourners, music director, and celebrant in choosing appropriate music at these and other times within the liturgy. These indications are also applicable to the celebration of a *Funeral Liturgy Outside of Mass*, where appropriate.

### **Family Involvement in Music Selection**

Family members are encouraged to play a role in the planning of the music for the funeral Mass.<sup>24</sup> Many pastors and pastoral associates have found it helpful to provide the mourners with a simple guide to selecting music for this liturgy. This guide may include a list of antiphons, psalms, and hymns which are appropriate for the funeral

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<sup>18</sup> OCF, 70.

<sup>19</sup> OCF, 75.

<sup>20</sup> OCF, 81.

<sup>21</sup> OCF, 372.

<sup>22</sup> OCF, 372.

<sup>23</sup> OCF, 157.

<sup>24</sup> OCF, 17.

liturgy. Sample lists of music are available from the archdiocesan Office of Liturgy and the archdiocesan Commission on Liturgical Music.

### **Prelude Music**

As the congregation gathers, it should be greeted by music which invites a sincere and sober reflection on the sacred mysteries which will be celebrated. Chorale preludes based upon the hymn tunes to be sung during the Mass are often an excellent means of familiarizing worshippers with the melodies that will be sung during the liturgy.

### **The Entrance Procession**

The purpose of the entrance is to “open the celebration, foster the unity of those who have been gathered, introduce their thoughts to the mystery of the liturgical time or festivity, and accompany the procession of the priest,”<sup>25</sup> other ministers, and mourners.

The first option given for sacred music at the entrance of the Mass is the antiphon from the *Roman Missal* or the antiphon and its psalm from the *Roman Gradual*.<sup>26</sup> Other settings of the antiphon, other psalms or antiphons, or even hymns approved by the bishops of the United States may also be used during the Entrance. In addition, the *Order of Christian Funerals* offers the option of using any of the alternative texts for the Song of Farewell during the entrance procession.<sup>27</sup>

The entrance song should not be sung only by the cantor. Rather, it may be sung alternately by the choir or cantor along with the people or entirely by either the people or choir.<sup>28</sup>

### **Psalm**

The psalm “fosters meditation on the Word of God.”<sup>29</sup> It is preferred that the psalm be sung rather than spoken, as the psalms were written as hymns for the people of Israel. The psalmist or cantor is to sing the verses of the psalm from the ambo or another suitable place. The response to the psalm is sung by the congregation unless the psalm is sung straight through without a response.

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<sup>25</sup> *GIRM*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> *GIRM*, 48.

<sup>27</sup> *OCF*, 403.

<sup>28</sup> *GIRM*, 48.

<sup>29</sup> *GIRM*, 61.

Because the texts of Scripture in the *Order of Christian Funerals* are interchangeable,<sup>30</sup> the psalm which is selected should “most closely reflect the particular circumstances and the needs of the mourners.”<sup>31</sup> However, “songs or hymns may not be used in place of the Responsorial Psalm”<sup>32</sup> as set forth in the liturgical books.

### **Sequence**

It should be noted that there is no Sequence (*e.g.*, the *Dies irae*) in Masses of the Dead in the Ordinary Form of the Roman Rite.

### **Acclamation before the Gospel**

The Alleluia or Verse Before the Gospel (depending on the liturgical season) is sung in order to welcome and greet the Lord in the Gospel. A cantor or choir should lead the singing of the Acclamation by the congregation, while the cantor or choir alone sings the Verse.<sup>33</sup> If the Acclamation is not sung, it may be omitted when there is only one reading before the Gospel.<sup>34</sup>

### **Gospel**

The Gospel may be chanted by the deacon or priest, if no deacon is present.<sup>35</sup>

### **Universal Prayer (Prayer of the Faithful)**

This prayer, in which the faithful “offer prayers to God for the salvation of all,”<sup>36</sup> may be sung by a deacon or cantor if no deacon is present. The congregation may also respond in song.

### **Preparation of the Gifts**

During this rite, the bread and the wine are brought to the altar. This action is accompanied by the Offertory Chant, “which continues at least until the gifts have

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<sup>30</sup> See Part III of the *OCF*.

<sup>31</sup> *OCF*, 344.

<sup>32</sup> *GIRM*, 61. See also Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (March 25, 2004), 62.

<sup>33</sup> *GIRM*, 62.

<sup>34</sup> *GIRM*, 63.

<sup>35</sup> *GIRM*, 38, 40.

<sup>36</sup> *GIRM*, 69.



been placed on the altar.”<sup>37</sup> Suitable sacred music for this procession may be selected by following the norms for the Entrance Chant (*i.e.*, an antiphon, psalm or suitable song approved the bishops of the United States).<sup>38</sup> The length of this, or any chant, should not excessively delay the action of the liturgy or make the liturgy to appear secondary and at the service of the music.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Eucharistic Prayer**

The three acclamations during the Eucharistic Prayer are the *Sanctus* (Holy, Holy, Holy), Memorial Acclamation, and Great Amen. These acclamations do not accompany any liturgical action; they are the prayer of the liturgy and they are to be sung or said by all the people with the priest.<sup>40</sup>

It is not unusual today for the congregation at a Mass of Christian Burial to include worshipers who have little or no experience of Catholic liturgy. In such cases, it may be advisable to use a simple English chant setting of the ordinary which may be easily sung by the gathered faithful. Another option is to use a setting of the ordinary whose common melodic material ties together the three acclamations during the Eucharistic Prayer.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Lord’s Prayer**

The Lord’s Prayer is sung or said by all the faithful.<sup>42</sup> It should never be sung by a soloist alone.

### ***Agnus Dei***

The *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God) accompanies the Fraction Rite during which the priest breaks the host(s). It is “usually sung by the choir or cantor with the congregation replying; or at least recited aloud.”<sup>43</sup> “It is not permitted to substitute other chants for those found in the Order of Mass, for example, at the *Agnus Dei*.”<sup>44</sup> As well, it is not permitted to use versions of the text of the *Agnus Dei* which differ from those given in the *Roman Missal* (*e.g.*, *Agnus dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona eis requiem*).

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<sup>37</sup> GIRM, 74.

<sup>38</sup> GIRM, 74.

<sup>39</sup> *Tra le sollecitudini*, 23.

<sup>40</sup> GIRM, 79.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. GIRM, 385.

<sup>42</sup> GIRM, 81.

<sup>43</sup> GIRM, 83.

<sup>44</sup> GIRM, 366.

## Holy Communion

“While the priest is receiving the Sacrament, the Communion Chant is begun, its purpose being to express the spiritual union of the communicants by means of the unity of their voices, to show gladness of heart, and to bring out more clearly the ‘communitarian’ character of the procession to receive the Eucharist. The singing is prolonged for as long as the Sacrament is being administered to the faithful.”<sup>45</sup>

The first option given for the Communion chant is the antiphon from the Roman Missal or the antiphon with its psalm from the *Roman Gradual*.<sup>46</sup> As with the Entrance chant, other settings of the antiphon, other psalms or antiphons, or hymns approved by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops may also be used during the Communion of the congregation. If instrumental music is played during the reception of Holy Communion, then the antiphon in the *Roman Missal* is recited or sung.

After the reception of Holy Communion by the congregation, a psalm, canticle of praise, or other hymn may be sung.<sup>47</sup>

## Song of Farewell

Following the Prayer after Communion, the Mass of Christian Burial continues with the Final Commendation. At this time, the Song of Farewell is sung. This song “should affirm hope and trust in the Paschal Mystery, [and] is the climax of the Rite of Final Commendation. It should be sung to a melody simple enough for all to sing. It may take this form of a responsory or even a hymn.”<sup>48</sup> Most hymnals and liturgical music resources offer settings of the proper texts which utilize well-known melodies.

It should be noted that one may also choose from any one of the alternative texts offered in Part V of the *Order of Christian Funerals* or use some other suitable song.<sup>49</sup>

## Procession to the Place of Committal

As the final procession makes its way to the doors of the church, one of the texts listed in the rite may be sung.<sup>50</sup> The singing may continue during the transition to the place

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<sup>45</sup> *GIRM*, 86.

<sup>46</sup> *GIRM*, 87.

<sup>47</sup> *GIRM*, 88.

<sup>48</sup> *OCF*, 147.

<sup>49</sup> *OCF*, 174.

<sup>50</sup> *OCF*, 176.

of committal. Provision is made for the substitution of other songs in place of these texts.<sup>51</sup>

### *The Rite of Committal*

The *Rite of Committal* observes that the "singing of well-chosen music at the Rite of Committal can help the mourners as they face the reality of the separation.... A hymn or liturgical song that affirms hope in God's mercy and in the resurrection of the dead is desirable at the conclusion of rite."<sup>52</sup> Appropriate songs may be found in Part V of the *Order of Christian Funerals*. It should be noted that a song also may be added to the beginning of the *Rite of Committal* if the funeral liturgy was celebrated on a different day or in a different community.<sup>53</sup>

### *Special Circumstances*

The introduction to *Funeral Rites for Children* states, "If children will be present at the funeral rites, those with requisite ability should be asked to exercise some of the liturgical roles. During the funeral Mass, for example, children may serve as readers, acolytes, or musicians."<sup>54</sup> Celebrants and parish musicians are encouraged to exercise pastoral discretion when asking children to serve as musicians at funeral liturgies in light of the burden that the exercise of this ministry might place on a child at a time of great emotion and loss.

The archdiocesan Office of Liturgy and the members of the archdiocesan Commission on Liturgical Music may be contacted for answers to additional questions and concerns that may arise in the life of a parish.

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<sup>51</sup> *GIRM*, 176; 403.

<sup>52</sup> *OCF*, 214.

<sup>53</sup> *OCF*, 211.

<sup>54</sup> *OCF*, 242.