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# PASTORAL MUSIC

WHERE TWO  
OR THREE  
ARE GATHERED





# SINGING THE (DAILY) MASS

By: Orin Johnson



“Sure, I’m quite happy to help with music for Thursday’s Mass,” you reply to a fictional anonymous priest (or teacher, or campus minister, or...). “Thanks for asking. Is there anything in particular I need to know?”

“Oh,” he muses back, “it’s just a daily Mass. Readings of the day. So, it doesn’t need to be much, maybe just an opening and a closing hymn.”

Does the above dialogue sound familiar? Have you ever thought to yourself, “That answer doesn’t seem quite right, but I can’t figure out exactly why.” I know I have had countless exchanges like that one above: regarding school Masses, or retreat Masses, or various parish liturgies. Masses on Sundays and solemnities are perhaps normative in our ministries, but of course they are not even the majority of Masses which the Church celebrates over the course of a year. More frequently these days we music ministers are called upon to help with daily Masses in a variety of contexts, so we would do well to understand how these liturgies are similar to and different from a Sunday liturgy, and how these differences should impact music ministry at them. The foundational documents that guide our liturgies speak to the varying musical needs that different Masses desire. Further, it’s helpful to know some of the growing number of resources available to those of us called upon to musically assist at midweek Masses.

## Understanding Progressive Solemnity

We are all—hopefully—familiar with the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* and its call that “full and active participation” be the “aim to be considered above all else” when praying liturgically.<sup>1</sup> “To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence,” the document continues.<sup>2</sup> Take another look at that listing: acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphonal, and songs. These items, in this order, are not listed accidentally. They are specific, and in a specific arrangement, owing to an oft-overlooked facet of the Church’s liturgical life: progressive solemnity.

The notion itself isn’t new—some may still recall the pre-Vatican II language of high and low Masses. While the Church no longer uses that language, there is still a ranking of various liturgical days and celebrations, in five categories, listed here in descending importance:

- Solemnities
- Feasts
- Memorials (Obligatory or Optional)
- Seasonal Weekday (in Advent, Christmastide, Lent, or Eastertide)
- Ferial (Weekday Mass which is not one of the above)

There is a bit more detail to all this, but in broad strokes, all Masses fall into one of these various categories. An excellent primer on this—and more—is Fr. Paul Turner’s recent publication *Sacred Times* from Liturgical Press, a primer that should be on every liturgist’s and music minister’s bookshelf.

Progressive solemnity desires, simply, this: that a more solemn celebration (that is, one higher on the list) receives more attention and liturgical “embellishments” than does one lower on the list. Think about meals in your day-to-day life. There are differences between putting together a quick summertime lunch for the family, throwing a small dinner party for you and your neighbors, and preparing a massive Thanksgiving feast for your large, extended family. Different amounts and types of food, using paper plates or the fine china, setting out decorative tablecloths and candlesticks: each of these mark, in different ways, the differing “solemnity” of each type of meal. So too should the Church, among its varying celebrations, utilize progressive solemnity to distinguish one rank of liturgical gathering from another.

There is no hard and fast rule or guideline for enacting progressive solemnity, but “we know it when we see it,” so to speak. The church building is more richly adorned; there are perhaps more candles at the altar and a finer altar cloth, too; the priest is in a more lavish vestment; there is incense used at the appropriate liturgical moments. These facets of the liturgy tell our senses and our souls that the celebration we are at must be one of a more solemn rank.



Musically speaking, we can now return to the listing of music from the CSL: acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs. These are listed in this order to, in a way, pair up with progressive solemnity, least to most solemn. It's not a one-for-one pairing, mind you. Rather, the Church envisions that the simpler celebrations—ferial Masses—would at a bare minimum have the acclamations and responses sung, then as the solemnity of a celebration increases, so too are sung more of the items on the list, in order.

## Progressive Solemnity in Action

The fullest description, musically, of progressive solemnity is found in the 2007 USCCB document *Sing to the Lord* (STTL). This too is a resource that ought to be on your bookshelf. In paragraphs 110-117, STTL details a musical vision of progressive solemnity that we won't detail fully in this space; that ground has largely been covered above. For this article, one lengthy passage does need to be extracted, however. STTL instructs that, for music at daily Mass, the priority, musically, is to follow this order:

... dialogues and acclamations (Gospel Acclamation, Sanctus, Memorial Acclamation, Amen); litanies (Kyrie, Agnus Dei); Responsorial Psalm, perhaps in a simple chanted setting; and finally, a hymn or even two on more important days. Even when musical accompaniment is not possible, every attempt should be made to sing the acclamations and dialogues.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps you are now suddenly thinking to yourself, "Wait a moment. When there is music at Mass, I should start with the dialogues? You mean, like, 'The Lord be with you' 'And with your spirit' and 'The word of the Lord' 'Thanks be to God'—those things? We don't even sing those on Christmas or Easter, let alone daily Mass."

You would not be alone in thinking that, I would guess. Indeed, at least at liturgical celebrations in the United States, most places seem to have, musically speaking, an upside-down approach to progressive solemnity: start with the hymns, and then head backward down the list. Have you heard the maxim, "We Catholics don't sing at Mass, we *sing the Mass*"? That's a folksy way of getting at the same thing that progressive solemnity points us toward. We should start with dialogues and acclamations and build up the musical solemnity from



that entry point. STTL says so (no. 115a), as does both the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (no. 40) and *Musicam Sacram* (nos. 7, 16).

## Singing the Mass

“But,” I hear you now protesting, “the priest at my parish can’t carry a tune in a wheelbarrow, let alone a bucket. And you expect me to tell my readers of the Word that they need to now sing those dialogues as well?”

Well, brusquely, you’re wrong, and yes. But let me elaborate.

The small bits of melody required for these short elements of the liturgy are just that: very small bits. In fact, calling them *melodies* might be a bit generous. As STTL puts it, “Even the priest with very limited singing ability is capable of chanting *The Lord be with you* on a single pitch.”<sup>4</sup> Surely this challenge can be applied to your readers as well! So, if your priest and your readers must, have them sing a single pitch, at least to start with. More advanced—so to speak—singers could level up and try the “doorbell” (or “air ball”) descending minor third, an interval so stereotypical of chant anyway.

Why are these dialogues and acclamations so important to our liturgical prayer? At its core, this is the “full and active participation” that the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (no. 14) was envisioning. STTL, quoting the GIRM, adds, “The dialogues of the Liturgy are fundamental because they are not simply outward signs of communal celebration but foster and bring about communion between priest and people.”<sup>5</sup>

For the people in the pews, acclamations are just as important, as they “arise from the whole gathered assembly as assents to God’s Word and action.”<sup>6</sup> Teach your assembly the relatively simple chants of the missal, or even the “melodies” described just above.

Time and time again I make sure, when practicing liturgical music with singers and instrumentalists, that they know the primary musical instrument of the liturgy is the assembly’s voice. And perhaps you’ve noticed that, thus far, the music detailed for a simple, daily Mass needs very little, if anything, from what we would normally think of as a liturgical music minister. That’s because the whole of the gathered Church, together, are the music ministers, at least as envisioned in our Church’s guiding liturgical documents.

## Effective Psalmody

How often have we music ministers agreed to provide music ministry at a daily Mass, and then, when we’ve sat down to plan it, we turn to the readings for the Mass, only to discover: “Psalm 37? Gah, there’s no Psalm 37 in our hymnals! Great, now what do I do?”

Never fear! For this next rung up the ladder of progressive solemnity, there are plenty of convenient and approachable options. Some of them are ready to go, right “out of the box,” and some have a little “assembly required.” And one option is closer to you right now than you might imagine.

First, some ready-to-go options. Online publisher Simply Liturgical has found a niche in offering responsorial psalms for nearly every date on the liturgical calendar. You can look these up on their website by title, scripture reference, or most usefully, by the celebration itself (i.e., Thursday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time, Cycle I). Pieces can be accessed by subscription or à la carte and are yours for life, to make as many copies as you wish, or better yet, to load up on a digital tablet.<sup>7</sup>

Another pair of resources for this need can be found at Liturgical Press, in offerings from Brother Anthony Ruff, OSB, and Father Michael Joncas. Joncas’s “Simple Psalter” is technically for Sundays mostly but does have a volume for “Solemnities, Feasts, and Other Celebrations,” and of course not infrequently a “Sunday Psalm” will also appear on a weekday. The collection from Ruff is more specifically for daily Masses, offering simple chants for the psalms along with assembly reprints, which may be helpful to you. Notably, Ruff’s settings use the eight modes of Gregorian chant found in the Saint Meinrad Archabbey psalm tones. With repetition, these settings will become familiar and facile for psalmist and assembly alike.

Psalm tones provide most anyone, with a little effort and imagination, a more flexible, “some assembly required” approach to psalmody. There are many different tones out there. The Saint Meinrad psalm tones are easy to find online, as are the Conception Abbey psalm tones, and both are beautiful for their purposes. Howard Hughes, SM, has a lovely set of similar tones used widely, as does Michel Guimont. Even the *Liber Usualis* has tones available, if one wishes.

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Psalm tones like the Meinrad, Conception Abbey, Hughes, or Guimont take a little getting used to but are much easier to navigate than they first let on, even for a novice. Once one is used to the structure, patterns, and rules, they practically sing themselves. Perhaps most importantly, they work equally well *a cappella* or accompanied.

Lastly, don't count out your own imagination! Have confidence in yourself that you could create a lovely, simple, memorable melody for a refrain, and some simple monotones or sequential melodies to serve as tones for the psalm verses. It's worth noting that all these techniques for psalmody also work equally well for any of the proper antiphons of the Mass, themselves growing in usage, as one continues up the ladder of musical progressive solemnity.

### Moving Forward

With all this information in hand, the next time your invitation to assist at Mass includes the suggestion that it only need be "a hymn or two," perhaps your response could be a bit nuanced. "I can do that, but would you mind if we included a few other bits of music? I promise they won't add any time to the length of the Mass." In the name of assembly participation and progressive solemnity, the approaches outlined above are a path forward toward truly "singing the Mass," regardless of location, assembly, ministers, day of the week, or the day's liturgical rank.

### Simplifying Psalm Tones

The Meinrad, Conception Abbey, Hughes, or Guimont psalm tones (or ones like them) offer several short chant melodies across four (or sometimes up to six) measures for singing psalms or other texts of most any length. There is a bit of preparation involved in "pointing" the phrases and determining which of the supplied measures might be omitted or doubled, depending on the prescribed refrain or verses of a psalm, but by and large both tasks are easier than they seem at first, and quickly become simpler with repetition and practice.

A pointed text is one where some printed word or syllable in each line is made to look different: perhaps in bold, or italics, or underlined, etc. That's usually the syllable where you first change pitches following a longer reciting tone matched with the words that precede the pointed syllable. The rule of thumb is to place the last stressed syllable of a line on the last note of a measure and work backward from there. It sounds complex, but once you try it, you'll quickly discover how natural it feels.

Omitting or doubling bars is usually straightforward as well. When omitting measures from a four-bar phrase, first omit the third measure, then the second measure if needed. When doubling measures, start usually by repeating the last measure, or the last two measures if needed. There is a bit more complexity to all these elements, but the exceptions are infrequent, and these are by far the most typical details to work out.

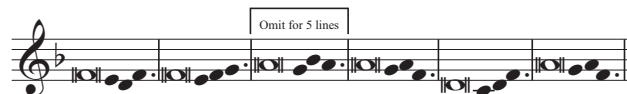
Here is one example, from the Meinrad Psalm tones, showing Mode 6. You will notice that there are two different keys, lower and higher, as well as four measure and six measure instances. We will be looking at the four-measure iteration. The brief scriptural example used is Psalm 37 with verse 9a as the refrain and verses 3-4 as the first stanza, drawn from Friday of the Third Week in Ordinary Time, Cycle I.

#### Mode 6

##### Lower Key



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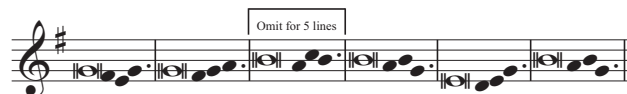


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##### Higher Key



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To point these texts, I first divided the refrain line into two “sense” phrases. The pointing here is indicated by the ***bold and italicized*** word, though in many instances the pointing would indicate only one syllable of a word. I determined the pointed word by finding the last stressed syllable of each line—which would go on the last note of each measure. Then I worked backward two syllables, so that I would be indicating the first syllable on which one would change notes after the longer reciting tone, the first note in each measure. As the refrain now has two “lines” of text, one would sing it using only the first and fourth measure.

Many psalms have four-line stanzas, as does this example, though you will find anywhere from two to six lines in various psalms. With four lines, we then use each measure of the four-measure example.

Friend and expert chant instructor Brother Joel Blaize, OSB, a monk of Saint Meinrad Archabbey, would be most displeased with me if I did not take a moment to remind you not to sing these chants robotically, but rather to sing the phrases with speech-rhythms and stresses, varying the pacing as you would if you were reciting these texts, and also not to linger on the final notes of each phrase.

That’s it! I invite you to look up today’s responsorial psalm and give it a try yourself. I think you will be surprised, if you have not experienced these psalm tones before, how innate they quickly become and how simple they can be to work with.

Refrain: The salvation ***of*** the just / comes ***from*** the Lord.

Stanza 1: Trust in the LORD ***and*** do good,  
that you may dwell in the land and be fed ***in***  
security.  
Take delight ***in*** the LORD,  
and he will grant you your ***heart’s*** requests.

The St. Meinrad Psalm Tones are free to download and use! For the tones in modern notations and accompaniments, visit [saintmeinrad.org/media/1485/modal-psalm-tones-mod.pdf](http://saintmeinrad.org/media/1485/modal-psalm-tones-mod.pdf) and [saintmeinrad.org/media/1486/modalpsalmtones-organ.pdf](http://saintmeinrad.org/media/1486/modalpsalmtones-organ.pdf).

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, Vatican website, no. 14, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html), accessed 2/4/25.
- <sup>2</sup> CSL, no. 30.
- <sup>3</sup> USCCB Committee on Divine Worship, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2008), no. 116.
- <sup>4</sup> STTL, no. 115a.
- <sup>5</sup> STTL no. 115a (quoting GIRM, no. 34).
- <sup>6</sup> STTL, no. 115a.
- <sup>7</sup> Full disclosure, 178 of my psalm settings (and hundreds more from other composers) are available via Simply Liturgical.



Orin Johnson is Director of Music and Liturgy at St. Margaret of Scotland Parish in the Shaw neighborhood of St. Louis. Originally from Tyler, Minnesota, Orin received his B.A. in Music and Folklore & Mythology from Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts; his M.A. in Music Performance, with Choral Conducting emphasis, from Radford University in Radford, Virginia; and his M.A. in Theology from Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, Missouri. He is a composer and musical artist, with pieces published with ECS, GIA, OCP, and others. As half of Oddwalk Ministries, with Shannon Cerneka, he travels the country leading prayer, giving concerts, offering workshops and retreats, and more. He has resources on prayer and liturgy published with Twenty-third Publications, GIA Quarterly, Liguori, and Liturgical Press. Orin is also an accompanist and music director at Congregation Shaare Emeth in Creve Coeur, Missouri. He is an Assistant Director of and a singer with the St. Louis Chamber Chorus. He is active with Catholic youth summer camps such as Youth Sing Praise (for which he has co-written a full two-act musical) and One Bread, One Cup, and at various other churches and schools in the St. Louis area as a musician and director. He resides in St. Louis with his wife Erin.