

# Collaborating on Music for the First Communion Liturgy



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Preparations for first Holy Communion liturgies begin with the parish's Sunday celebration of the Eucharist.

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"That I may praise God's name in song and glorify it with thanksgiving." (Psalm 69:31, *New American Bible*)

In many dioceses, the weeks after Easter are given a name other than Easter Time. With much preparation and catechesis surrounding the reception of first Holy Communion during this period, these weeks often are called the "First Communion Season." This is a time of great joy for the families of those children preparing to receive Jesus for the first time. It is hoped that all will recognize the great gift that God is preparing the children to receive, for it is truly God working in them. It is also a

time of preparation on the part of the parish, for the celebration of first Holy Communion is a joyous time for the community. For a year or more, catechists have been preparing young children to receive Jesus in the Eucharist for the first time. The religious education office has been busy assigning children to particular celebrations, printing worship aids, putting names on first Communion certificates, perhaps choosing gifts for the children, and making sure everything is well prepared. In a parish like mine, with more than 300 children receiving first Communion every year, this can be daunting. It is important that all in the parish work together to make things go as

smoothly as possible. It should not be the sole responsibility of the director of religious education (DRE) and his or her staff and catechists. Communication and cooperation among the pastor, parochial vicars, deacons, the parish school, if there is one, the liturgy committee, and the music department are essential.

Since music is such an integral part of all liturgical celebrations, it is crucial that the DRE and the parish liturgy coordinator or the director of music ministries (DMM) work together to prepare the musical repertoire. Since this article deals with concerns over music, I will focus on the role of the DRE and the DMM, realizing that the liturgy director and DMM might be the same person. I also do not want to undermine the importance of the pastor in the preparations. It goes without saying that as chief liturgist of the parish, he should be involved in the preparation at all stages and consulted before anything is finalized. Keeping that in mind, in this article I hope to explore some of the problems that occur and offer some suggestions as to how those in charge of preparing liturgical celebrations can work together to make musical selections for the liturgy for first Holy Communion that will truly make it a memorable but also a faith-filled experience for the parish.

I write as a person who has fulfilled the role of parish coordinator of liturgy and who now serves as a director of religious education. I also had my hand in directing a children's choir, thus I have a broad perspective on the issue. In my role as DRE at our cathedral parish, I am very fortunate to work with two of the finest music ministers in our diocese. They have a great proficiency in both the art of music and the Church's liturgy. We work well together because we communicate and are open to hearing what the other has to say. In other words, we are not overly possessive of our particular ministry and we are not closed to considering other viewpoints or ideas.

Unfortunately this successful working relationship is not always present in a parish. There are many situations in which the DRE and liturgy coordinator or DMM, the pastor and the DRE, the liturgy coordinator and pastor, sometimes all of these, find themselves at odds with what should happen at pivotal sacramental celebrations. Sometimes a parish liturgy committee has input. When a parish school is involved, another group of people adds to the mix. Each comes armed with his or her ideas, with articles, with something heard at a workshop, or with various documents that make their point as to how the first Communion liturgy should be celebrated.

## COMMUNICATION, UNDERSTANDING OF LITURGY ESSENTIAL

Most often the planning of the first Holy Communion liturgy is left up to the DRE with input from the liturgy coordinator or music director. In some parishes, the DRE makes all the musical decisions for first Communion; in others, the DMM insists that it is his or her prerogative to choose the music. This can lead to disagreements or hostility among the directors and staffs of these parish ministries, when each director has his or her ideas, and each believes that what he or she wants is right and best. Problems also occur when one or both directors have a poor understanding of the Church's liturgy. In an ideal world, the DRE would have a good grasp of liturgical norms and be familiar with liturgical



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The celebration of first Holy Communion is not all about the children. It is about Christ and his giving his Body and Blood to us in the Eucharist.

documents, especially those dealing with sacramental celebrations. In the real world, even though a person may be a good DRE, he or she may not have a background in the study of the Church's liturgy beyond the basics. The same holds true for some music directors. He or she may be an excellent organist or choir director but lack the liturgical knowledge that is essential for providing appropriate music at certain liturgical celebrations. Lack of adequate knowledge of the liturgy is where problems begin.

Before we even begin a discussion on music regarding the first Communion liturgy, we need to look at a few basics. First Holy Communion is not a separate sacrament in and of itself. There is only one Sacrament of the Eucharist, and that takes place whenever an assembly gathers with a priest to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. "The Eucharist is the ritual, sacramental action of giving thanks and praise to the Father. It is the sacrificial memorial of Christ and His Body, the Church and the continuing presence of Christ in his word and in his Spirit."<sup>1</sup> We need to help people stop thinking of the Eucharist as simply something they receive, but as the entire action of the Eucharistic celebration. The Eucharistic liturgy is the "source and summit of the Christian life."<sup>2</sup> As such the liturgy is also catechetical. "Through the Eucharist, the People of God come to know the Paschal Mystery ever more intimately and experientially."<sup>3</sup> Celebrations of first Holy Communion occur within the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy and ideally would occur at a Sunday Mass with people who have been worshipping together as a community of believers. However, if we are honest, we know that a good number of families of our first communicants do not regularly worship with us on Sundays. If we are brutally honest, first Communion is often more of a social event rather than a participation in the Paschal Mystery. If this is the case, then our job at preparing excellent first Holy Communion celebrations takes on a whole new dimension. Sacramental celebrations become tools for evangelization. We need to help our families grow in their relationship with Christ.

One of the biggest mistakes that takes place regarding celebrating first Holy Communion is regarding the liturgy as all about the children. The separate first Communion liturgy does not do much to help in this regard, yet in parishes where this has



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Just as in other celebrations, the music during the first Communion liturgy should draw the assembly into the Paschal Mystery.

been the norm for decades, or where extremely large numbers of children in the first Communion program make it difficult to keep the celebrations limited to the parish Sunday liturgies, the parish may not be ready to move to a Sunday Mass. Let us look for a moment at these separate liturgies. They are usually celebrated on a Saturday morning or afternoon and include the children who are to receive Eucharist for the first time and their parents and siblings. They also may include grandparents and any number of relatives and friends, most of whom are probably from out of town or at least not parishioners of the particular parish. The children process in before the ministers. The best readers in the class often “proclaim” the readings and petitions, and the Homilies are more or less geared toward the children. In some parishes, children are called up to stand around the altar during the Eucharistic Prayer or Lord’s Prayer, or may be brought up before the assembly to sing a special song following the Prayer after Communion. Over the years, including at my children’s first Communion liturgies, I have experienced a number of other unofficial “rites and rituals” performed by the children in the name of greater participation. In an effort to hold people’s attention, especially regarding children, it may happen that the liturgy is not celebrated well and focuses mostly on the externals and what is not essential to the celebration. Many times this takes away from the focus of what we are celebrating.

The truth is the celebration of first Holy Communion is not all about the children. It is all about Christ and his giving us his Body and Blood in the Eucharist. It is about us as a community of believers participating in his sacrifice and receiving him. As a parish, we join with the children in celebrating what should be a long-awaited desire to receive Jesus and become one with him. Adults need to model this. “The witness of adult believers can have a great effect upon the children. Adults can in turn benefit spiritually from experiencing the part that the children have within the Christian community.”<sup>74</sup>

There are no specific directives for receiving Holy Communion for the first time at Mass. Ideally, first Communion celebrations should not be much different than the regular Sunday liturgy. There may be a bit more pageantry, but the focus, as with any celebration of the Eucharist, is on offering praise and

thanksgiving to the Father and participating in the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

This brings us to the subject of music. The *Directory for Masses with Children* states, “Singing must be given great importance in all celebrations, but it is to be especially encouraged in every way for Masses celebrated with children, in view of their special affinity for music. The cultures of various peoples and the capabilities of the children present should be taken into account.”<sup>75</sup> We need to encourage singing at our first Holy Communion liturgies, and children love to sing, but we must be careful not to make it into a performance. We need to keep in the forefront the reason why we are gathering. We also must be aware that, for the most part, the majority of the assembly will be adults. “The role of music is to serve the needs of the Liturgy and not to dominate it, seek to entertain, or draw attention to itself or the musicians . . . the primary role of music in the Liturgy is to help the members of the gathered assembly to join themselves with the action of Christ and to give voice to the gift of faith.”<sup>76</sup>

### CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING MUSIC

*Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* gives us the criteria for judging the suitability of music for the liturgy. There are three considerations: the liturgical, the pastoral, and the musical.

**Liturgical:** The first criterion is liturgical. The music must be appropriate for the particular liturgical celebration. The following must be asked: “Is this composition capable of meeting the structural and textual requirements set forth by the liturgical books for this particular rite?”<sup>77</sup> Are the pieces chosen appropriate for Mass or are they basically songs that are catechetical and better restricted to the classroom? This is one of the areas of disagreement that could occur between the DRE and DMM. There are many songs that are suggested or recommended to be part of a religious-education program. Here is where good communication between the DRE and the music director is important. If there is a musical component that accompanies the parish’s religious-education text series, it is beneficial for the DRE to provide the DMM with a copy of the music or the CD. The program we use in our parish has a theme song. Our DMM schedules this song frequently at our Family Mass and it is one of the favorites of our children’s choir. We use it at many liturgies involving both the school and religious-education children, and it is also scheduled for Sunday celebrations. However, not all of the songs in our program are appropriate for the liturgy. They do not fit the criterion of being liturgical. Musical selections should fit the specific liturgical action at the part of the Mass when they will be used. The Entrance song should evoke a sense of gathering the assembly to prepare to celebrate the liturgy. During the procession to receive Holy Communion, the texts should support the action of receiving the Eucharist. “A certain balance among the various elements of the Liturgy should be sought, so that less important elements do not overshadow more important ones. Textual elements include the ability of a musical setting to support the liturgical text and to convey meaning faithful to the teaching of the Church.”<sup>78</sup>

**Pastoral:** The second criterion is the pastoral judgment. “The pastoral judgment takes into consideration the actual community gathered to celebrate in a particular place at a particular



time. Does a musical composition promote the sanctification of the members of the liturgical assembly by drawing them closer to the holy mysteries being celebrated? Does it strengthen their formation in faith by opening their hearts to the mystery being celebrated on this occasion or in this season? Is it capable of expressing the faith that God has planted in their hearts and summoned them to celebrate?”<sup>9</sup> This judgment is probably the most important to consider when preparing first Holy Communion liturgies, because included in this judgment is the ability of the children to sing and understand the songs. It is in this area where some conflicts might arise. *Sing to the Lord* states, “One should never underestimate the ability of persons of all ages, cultures, languages, and levels of education to learn something new and to understand things that are properly and thoroughly introduced.”<sup>10</sup> Music directors, especially those who direct children’s choirs, know that children, even at a young age, can sing and understand pieces that others might think are beyond the capability of this age group. The key is in the introduction of the music to the children. Since music has the ability to open people’s hearts to Christ, the music planned for first Communion should also be considered among the catechetical resources utilized in the religious-education program. The assistance of the DMM is imperative here. Also, if the parish is bilingual or includes different cultures, that should be considered with regard to the choice of music.

**Musical:** The final criterion is musical. The music must be good, well prepared, and well performed. “Is the music technically, aesthetically, and expressively worthy?”<sup>11</sup> This judgment is basic and primary and should be made by competent musicians. Only artistically sound music will be effective in the long run. “To admit to the Liturgy, the cheap, the trite, or the musical cliché often found in secular popular songs is to cheapen the liturgy, to expose it to ridicule, and to invite failure.”<sup>12</sup>

Many times a DRE or an inexperienced music director might assume that since the celebration involves children, the music should be geared toward children. They choose music that is childish or cliché. Music lines may be excessively simple or basic and the texts lacking any real theology. When good liturgical music is chosen and taught to the children, we are aiding them in developing a love of liturgical music and good music, in general, and it is hoped that will remain part of them for the rest of their lives. We do children a disservice to limit their repertoire to music that is trite or part of the latest fad. Good music, whether it is traditional or contemporary, stands the test of time.

When choosing music, however, we must consider the ability of the assembly to participate in singing. It is important to choose music that the assembly will be familiar with, and refrains that are easy to follow. Introducing new music at a celebration of first Holy Communion will guarantee that the assembly will not sing. What kind of accompaniment will there be? The DRE might be partial to piano or guitars, but is that what the parish community is used to hearing on Sunday? Is the parish repertoire traditional or contemporary, or is it a mix of both? These are important questions that must be considered when deciding on music for all parish celebrations, and especially sacramental celebrations.



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Parish staff need to trust each other to fulfill the roles of their specialty.

## KNOWLEDGE OF THE CHURCH’S LITURGY

Those responsible for preparing music for the celebration of the Eucharist in accord with the three preceding judgments must have a clear understanding of the structure of the Liturgy. They must be aware of what is of primary importance. They should know the nature of each of the parts of the Mass and the relationship of each part to the overall rhythm of the liturgical action.<sup>13</sup>

It goes without saying that those responsible for preparing first Holy Communion liturgies must be very familiar with the Church’s liturgy. This point cannot be stressed enough. While it is necessary for the DMM, it is also essential that the DRE be more than casually aware of what is contained in the liturgy documents, especially since in his or her capacity, he or she will be more or less responsible for many aspects of sacramental liturgical celebrations and other liturgical gatherings with children and parents. The DRE should have copies of the liturgy documents in their library along with catechetical documents. Documents on music, such as *Sing to the Lord*, are important to help a DRE make informed decisions regarding to music used in the program. The National Association of Pastoral Musicians offers workshops in music and the liturgy and often conducts sessions on music for children and for sacramental celebrations at their national conventions or regional workshops. Many dioceses offer liturgical classes and music workshops that will assist not only music directors and musicians but anyone responsible for various liturgical celebrations in a parish, including first Holy Communion. Diocesan faith formation offices can also offer workshops on music for DREs and catechists.

## DEALING WITH DISAGREEMENTS

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to join themselves with the action of Christ and to give voice to the gift of faith.<sup>14</sup>

Whenever any number of people is involved in preparing liturgical celebrations, whether for Sunday Mass, school liturgies, funerals, or various sacramental celebrations, disagreements are bound to surface. Many times these disagreements are over music. The first step in dealing with these disagreements is to head them off; in other words, to be proactive in avoiding problems before they arise or escalate. The second step is to communicate. The following suggestions focus on music but also can pertain to other ministries and aspects of our liturgical celebrations

**Know when and where to begin:** Preparations for first Holy Communion celebrations must begin with the parish's Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. It is in the Sunday liturgy where most of our parishioners encounter Christ. There should be ongoing evaluations by the parish staff and the liturgy committee, if there is one, concerning the music that is used on Sunday. It is the place to begin when choosing music for first Holy Communion. It might even be a good idea to have a representative of the religious education program on the parish's liturgy committee. Suggestions for music should be discussed among the principal people involved early in the school year, or even during the time immediately following the previous year's first Holy Communion celebration.

**It's not "my ministry":** There is no place in parish ministry for territorialism. As parish ministers, the DRE and liturgy director or DMM are all in service to the People of God in the parish. We do not own our particular ministry. The pastor, in order to provide a necessary service to the People of God, entrusts us as ministers to do what the Church calls us to do as servants. At times, we may have to put aside our ideas of how something should be done for the sake of the overall good of the parish and of the proper celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy.

**Recognizing our area of expertise and our limitations:** Most DREs are not trained musicians, and most DMMs probably do not have much experience in running a religious education program. I am qualified to serve as a DRE, and although I have experience singing in choirs and even in leading a children's choir, I would fail miserably as a DMM. The music directors at our parish have advanced degrees in liturgical music and years of experience in organ, choral conducting, and preparation of liturgies. Although they engage in liturgical catechesis and prayer as part of their rehearsals, they would not want to be in my shoes, especially when it comes to preparing the curriculum and educating catechists and parents. We each do what we do best, and we recognize the expertise that we have in our particular fields. Most of all, we know our limitations and when to ask others to assist us in areas where we lack the knowledge or experience.

**Asking the right questions:** Just because someone wants to do something in the liturgy doesn't mean it is appropriate. When certain questions come up, we need to either know the answers or where to find them. For example, in some parishes the children perform a song while standing in the sanctuary. This can be a major source of contention between the DRE and music director. The questions that must be asked are: Does this

musical performance serve the assembly to grow closer to Christ? How does this draw us into the Paschal Mystery? Who is it serving? Where does it draw our focus? Knowing where to find the answers and engaging in non-judgmental discussions on issues such as this, lead people on both sides to grow in their knowledge of liturgical norms.

**Knowing when to back down:** There are times when, despite the fact that we are armed with all the right documents and reasoning why the music we believe is appropriate should be used at first Holy Communion, we must recognize that the battle is best saved for another time. Perhaps the DRE, DMM, school principal, or even the pastor insists on a particular hymn or choice of service music or psalm. This often happens when a piece of music becomes part of the "tradition" of the parish. If these issues have not been discussed early on, the month before first Holy Communion is not the time to take a stand. The issue does not need to be dropped but perhaps put on the table for a year-end evaluation.

**Bring it to prayer:** Above all, liturgical and catechetical ministers must be people of prayer. When disagreements occur, we need to bring the situation before the Lord and pray for the wisdom and knowledge that God's will be done, not ours. After all, we are doing the Lord's work. ♦

#### Notes

1. *National Directory for Catechesis* (NDC), 123.
2. *Sacrosanctum Concilium (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy)*, 47.
3. NDC, 33.
4. *Directory for Masses with Children* (DMC), 16.
5. DMC, 30.
6. *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (STL), 125.
7. STL, 127.
8. STL, 128.
9. STL, 130.
10. STL, 132.
11. STL, 134.
12. STL, 135.
13. STL, 137.
14. STL, 125.

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