

CRISIS

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Fourteen Easy Ways to Improve the Liturgy

By Arlene Oost-Zinner and Jeffrey Tucker

Boredom during liturgy is something all Catholics have felt from time to time, and it is never justifiable. No matter how mundane the architecture, how dull the homily, or how bad the music, what is taking place on the altar is a miraculous sacrifice that gives us grace to obtain salvation. That reality should be enough to gain and keep our attention, and keep us actively participating through prayer.

And yet, boredom is a reality that good liturgy can assist in fighting. Many parishes attempt to do so through inventing every manner of new enticement: brighter and larger banners, forced attempts to create an upbeat environment of friendliness and community, big bowls of incense carried by special ministers, and Donahue-style homiletics.

The attempt to jazz up the liturgy mostly takes the form of musical enhancements, and nearly always means more instruments and rhythms drawn from popular music. The rationale is not complicated. Liturgists are frustrated as to why people don't get as excited about religion as they do about the pop divas and music videos, and they conclude that they need ever more musical pyrotechnics to make the difference.

These approaches often backfire because the rationale for them is flawed at its root. Community feeling and fun are fine, but if the liturgy doesn't offer a setting conducive to prayer and contemplation on eternal mysteries, it has failed to achieve its first aesthetic aim.

In any case, Catholics can't compete with the local evangelical community centers for inspiring a toe-tapping community feeling. The latest Gallup poll of Catholics shows that weekly Mass attendance (45% do so) continues to slip, and for the first time has slipped behind protestant churches (at 48%). The defectors from the Roman Rite include people who flee to Indults, Eastern liturgies, or just drop out.

There may be many reasons for this (demographic, cultural, theological), and liturgists do not deserve all blame. And yet, the decline in the desire to attend coincides with de-emphasis on solemnity and the advance of mundane art forms in liturgy, with the popularization of music being the most conspicuous shift. People may say they love to hold hands, dance, and tap their toes at Mass but this wears thin over time and eventually undermines the rationale for steady devotion. In fact, a 1981-1989 Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life concluded that unrelenting attempts to get people to sing, especially attempts that employ guitars, actually increase boredom.

There are, however, ways to break with routine and inspire steadfastness and personal attachment to the liturgy. What follows are some very simple steps for repairing the musical hotspots that ail many US liturgies. Professional liturgists resist them because of the prevailing bias against anything that smacks of restoring any sensibility that predates the 1960s. Nonetheless, the following suggestions are born of experience, and a conviction that first aim of liturgy is to aid inner reflection which leads to salvation for the individual believer. The suggestions begin with the most simple and costless and move to the more elaborate. They need not be implemented all at once. Small changes week-by-week can make a huge difference over time.

1. Turn down the volume. It's hard to imagine this today, but Christian liturgy thrived for 1,950 years without microphones, electronic keyboards, amplifiers, mixers, sound technicians, and surround-sound speakers. These days, conventional guidebooks on liturgy emphasize "proclaiming" and broadcasting one's voice. Cantors use microphones as if they are music-video performers.

Beyond just being heard, the goal of all of these contraptions and behaviors is to make the liturgy ever louder, and the

results are more often than not earsplitting, creating a sort of stupor. People feel that they are being imposed upon. Most of this, of course, comes about in reaction against the traditional use of the "Sotto Voce," the under voice, which has been derided by modern liturgists as silence or whispering so that the people couldn't hear what was going on. Ironically, experts in the advertising world have found that the low voice actually draws out the attention of the listener.

The virtue of silence has been rediscovered in recent years, with many statements by the Pope and Vatican officials praising its ability to convey meaning in an always-noisy world. The musical counterpart to silence is not in-your-face pop, but distant sounds of contemplation. Turn down the mics and sing as if the human voice alone is responsible for filling the space. This will diminish the electronic presence in the liturgy and increase the god-given one as a means through which we are worshipping God.

2. Chant for a prelude. If you have ever been to an evangelical service, you know that the ten minutes before the service are social time. For Catholics it is different: a time for prayer and preparation. Keyboard music is common during this time, but imagine something different: simple Latin chant, sung calmly, without affectation, with silence between verses. The simple sounds inspire prayer. An objection runs that people can't understand the words. And yet this is not the time for pedagogy. It is a time for reflection, to begin to hear the voice of angels who speak in an unfamiliar tongue. The meaning is conveyed in the line of notes. People entering the church know are reminded by holy sounds that they are in a holy place.

3. Curb the announcements. In an age when the secular world lays claim on most of our time, making a few announcements has become a pastoral necessity. It is only at Sunday Mass that the pastor has the chance to make inform his flock concerning parish and community life. Few are lucky enough to have schedules which permit them to do go to daily mass, much less have their children attend Catholic schools, and gone are the days where the parish or church plays a central role in the life of the village at large.

This being the reality, it is wise to adhere to adhere closely to the General Instruction's directive, inserting announcements after the liturgy of the Eucharist and before the dismissal, where they have the least chance of interrupting the framework of prayer set up by the liturgy. As for welcoming statements issued by cantors or others before the procession even begins: these are statements that have nothing to do with the rite themselves, and are most likely utterances contrived for the purpose of artificially engaging the attention of the congregation. Announcements should not be made before Mass begins, save concerning

matters absolutely necessary to the people's understanding of that particular Mass itself or other issues prudentially suggested by the Pastor.

Mass doesn't begin because a cantor gets up and proclaims when and where and how it is to happen. Mass begins when the priest enters the church, with or without a cross bearer, book bearer, lector, or deacon.

4. Choose plain, traditional hymns for processional. The first Christian hymns were Psalms, the text of which was already 500 years old when first used, and the melodies handed down from Jewish and Greek traditions. The principle is the same today: hymns should bespeak the long tradition of the faith, whether in Latin or in English, in form or at least style. Music that mimics the sound of that in the secular world should be left outside of the church, which is a sacred space.

Singable hymns with familiar meters and cadences will tie members of the congregation together in adoration and prayer, and to the experience of the whole body of Christ, the Universal church, in all times, and all places. Music that is exclusively tied to current times and styles cannot accomplish this. More importantly, the sights and sounds of the Mass, although communal in once sense, must ultimately point the individual conscience to the mystery unfolding on the altar before it.

Processional music can also employ the choir alone, a stately piece of polyphony that permits people to put down their hymnbooks and watch as the celebrant and altar servers walk forward carrying the crucifix. People should not be so busy with their hands and eyes as to not notice this beautiful sight. In any case, liturgists make a great mistake in believing that people come to Mass only because they want to sing or that active participation can only take one form.

5. Sing the Kyrie. One of the earliest and most recognizable parts of the Mass is not in Latin but Greek: the Kyrie. It has long been a living symbol of the unity of Eastern and Western Christendom. And yet for all the bits of music in the Roman Rite, the "Lord, Have Mercy" is most often said, not sung, by the priest and answered by the people. This beautiful passage of the penitential rite begins and is over in less than a few seconds.

The "Kyrie" seems to have taken on such a shrunken role in the liturgy, but it is not too much to ask that a bit more time be taken in this expression of penance at the outset of the liturgy? If active participation in singing is what we desire, the Kyrie can be easily sung by even the least-musical priest or cantor, and answered by the faithful. It can be sung in the original Greek. Everyone knows the words. By introducing new music settings according to the liturgical season,

variation can be brought into the Mass. It serves at the outset as a reminder of why we have gathered at Mass as a community.

6. Choose a plainer Gloria. So many thousands of settings of the Gloria are available today that it is a wonder how most parishes are habituated into using pop versions filled with frippery and faux exuberance. An about face is in order: toward the simplest settings, without a beat, that can be easily learned and sung by all. A simple, English version can tap into a traditional, chant-like sensibilities, and do much to restore dignity and beauty to this song of praise.

A timeless Latin Gloria remains unmatched for the purpose of praising God in the liturgy. If your parish is one where a Latin ordinary is feared, however, as is the case in many parishes across the country, there is still something that can be done. Attempting the Gloria in Latin can be part of your reformist plan, but it is best to start on a small scale. Congregations can be easily overwhelmed when faced with something the length of the Gloria. The Latin will come in time, should you choose to keep working toward it.

An English Gloria may well fit the needs of the congregation on most occasions. Not to be forgotten, however, is that the GIRM does permit a Gloria sung by the choir alone, and you might want exercise this option and do a plain Latin Gloria on certain feast days only, or perhaps even pull out all of the stops and do a polyphonic version, if rehearsal time and resources permit.

7. Fix the Psalm. St. John Chrysostom reports that the Christians sang the Psalms unceasingly, and it was the earliest part of scripture translated into Latin. Their centrality in Christian worship cannot be overestimated. The development of the sung Psalter is central to the development of all Christian music and music itself. What has happened to the Psalms today? Many settings as published today sound like miniature version of jazz ballads, and they are pre-printed in the missalette, giving the impression that these are an ecclesiastical requirement when they are not.

The goal might be the restoration of the Latin Psalter (via the *Graduale* or the *Simplex*) but that is not viable at most parishes today, nor is any English rendering of the elaborate Gregorian chant readily available. What is viable is that they be done in radically reduced in melodic form, without strange intervals or leaps. A simple line consisting of just a few notes is a fitting transition to using psalm tones or something more elaborate. It might seem intimidating at first, and downright frightening to abandon the printed line of music. The method is to sense the need for solemnity, and let the ear guide you.

The Psalm should begin not with an instrument but a confident single voice. His or her line of notes should be simple enough to be repeated by the people. The verses themselves should not be sung by the entire choir (which makes them sound muddy) but, again, by a single voice, who should think of it as a sung text. That means the singer must enunciate clearly and modulated the voice in a way that uses the space well.

8. The Offertory as Preparation. During the offertory, the bread and wine are brought forward to prepare us for the Eucharistic Prayer and the Consecration. The music therefore should not overshadow what follows but rather point to the coming Sacrifice and prepare us mentally and spiritually.

Something quiet and beautiful (again, employing the human voice) is the way. Have the congregation sing a simple hymn, beginning with accompaniment if necessary, allowing the final verse or two to be sung a capella. The keyboard might be of assistance in getting people to sing, but, in the long run, the congregation will become more confident if allowed to experience the beauty and mystery of their own voices joining together in preparation for the feast.

The offertory is also a good time to familiarize people with the great Latin hymns of the faith. Over the course of a year, the goal can be to cover only a modest number: Ave Maria, Jesu Dulcis, Ave Maris Stella, Ubi Caritas, Attende Domine, Ave Verum, and seasonal chants like Veni Creator and Regina Caeli. These can be learned by anyone with enough repetition. They really should become part of the life of the faith again.

9. Reduce and simplify the "Mystery of Faith" and the "Great Amen." The settings of these used in parishes are most commonly those put out by the big publishing houses. These usually have Broadway-type orchestration, are overdrawn, and appear suddenly and without warning. Jarring at best, their drama, distilled into 5 seconds, can compete with mystery of the Consecration itself. Simple chants sung by the people in a manner that extends from silent prayer do belong.

The "Mystery of Faith" as a part separate from the Consecration was never part of the "old" Mass, and there exists therefore no authentic precedent to light our way. What can be done, however, is to reduce the "Mystery of Faith" to a single, unrepeatable line without accompaniment. For that matter, the Amen need not be "great" but rather just two notes.

10. Shorten the "Sign of Peace." Let's be frank: this part of the liturgy, once very formal and reserved to the deacons and subdeacons, can be enormously disconcerting. The minutes

after the consecration just seems like a bad time to be required to greet people with a friendly hello or a kiss. The choir can do something about this. Don't let the "Peace" go on and on. Just begin the "Lamb of God" right away. Most people will be grateful.

11. Begin the communion chant (a simply Latin Hymn will do) after the priest receives. What's to do while waiting for communion? In parishes, there is no choice: watch in silence as the celebrant gives communion to the lay people who have been selected as official "Eucharistic ministers." It is best to introduce some music as a way of diffusing attention from all this activity and turning toward inward prayer. The General Instruction recommends that the Communion song begin when the priest receives. So it should. And by the choir alone.

12. Don't force people to sing during communion. Various attempts have been made over the years to get people to sing while they are standing in line or receiving. But these have been a failure. It is just a fact that people don't want to sing during communion. Here is the archetype when active participation means something other than singing a song. It means receiving the body of Christ. This is the outstanding time for the choir to develop a sense of singing in a sacred manner, quietly and beautifully. Again, chant and polyphony are best, but don't overlook the possibility of a quiet organ piece as well. It should be prayerful, not boisterous. Mostly, people will be glad just to be left alone.

13. Allow for silence after communion. One of the remarkable aesthetic aspects of the Roman Rite is how quickly and suddenly it ends. Only a few minutes pass between the reception of communion and the time of departure. This a wonderful time for silence: no music, announcements, children's blessings, or anything. Just prayer.

14. Don't attempt a rousing goodbye. Mass ends with the words "Mass is ended" and so nothing that happens after that should upstage what came before. The recessional, which is not mandatory, can be exuberant of course. But many parishes have the problem of a great deal of talking and saying hello taking place after Mass, and upbeat recessionals can only make the problem worse. If the goal is to send people out into the world with a sense of what just took place, a recessional that recalls the quiet power of the whole liturgy is best.

More elaborate suggestions: There are other methods for enhancing the sense of solemnity, which really means creating sights and sounds that remind people they are in Church. The choir can be in an inauspicious place. Carpet can be pulled up to eliminate the deadness in a room that

compels the use of microphones. Traditional polyphony is a great way to add texture to a liturgy dominated by chant. Starting a children's choir is an investment in the future generation of singers, and can dispel the impression that Latin is anachronistic or unsingable. Banners can be taken down and replaced with beautiful art and statues from Christian history.

All of these changes help a liturgy become rooted in the broad range of Christian experience through the ages, and convey the sense that the individual is part of something far larger than one parish or one age.

Conclusion

Catholic Liturgy, by its nature and structure, cannot provide an imitation form of popular entertainment anymore than the rock concert can suitably provide a good medium to encourage a sense of penance and the presence of the sacred. The unrelenting attempt to try and try again can have the unintended effect of causing people to feel manipulated.

What's more, the clamor for ever more innovative liturgical enticements is wholly unnecessary. The *General Instruction* is a worthy guide for achieving solemnity at Mass, and 2,000 years of tradition provides experience enough to prove it. Further proof comes when the liturgy again begins to entice the spiritual imagination, and compel belief in the substance of the reason we are there.

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Musical Reminders from the General Instruction

PURPOSE

The Christian faithful who gather together as one to await the Lord's coming are instructed by the Apostle Paul to sing together psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (cf. Col 3:16). Singing is the sign of the heart's joy (cf. Acts 2:46). Thus Saint Augustine says rightly, "Singing is for one who loves." There is also the ancient proverb: "One who sings well prays twice."

GOAL

[All elements of the Mass] should form a complete and organic unity, clearly expressive of the unity of the entire holy people. The character and beauty of the place and all its appointments should foster devotion and show the holiness of the mysteries celebrated there.

STYLE

All other things being equal, Gregorian chant holds pride of place because it is proper to the Roman Liturgy. Other types of sacred music, in particular polyphony, are in no way excluded, provided that they correspond to the spirit of the liturgical action and that they foster the participation of all the faithful.

ASSEMBLY

Since the faithful from different countries come together ever more frequently, it is fitting that they know how to sing together at least some parts of the Ordinary of the Mass in Latin...

CHOIR/CANTOR

Among the faithful, the schola cantorum or choir exercises its own liturgical function, ensuring that the parts proper to it, in keeping with the different types of chants, are properly carried out and fostering the active participation of the faithful through the singing. It is fitting that there be a cantor or a choir director to lead and sustain the people's singing. When in fact there is no choir, it is up to the cantor to lead the different chants, with the people taking part.

MASS PARTS

The singing at [at the *entrance*] is done either alternately by the choir and the people or in a similar way by the cantor and the people, or entirely by the people, or by the choir alone.... Since [the *Kyrie*] is a chant by which the faithful acclaim the Lord and implore his mercy, it is ordinarily done by all, that is, by the people and with the choir or cantor having a part in it.... The *Gloria* is intoned by the priest or, if appropriate, by a cantor or by the choir; but it is sung either by everyone together, or by the people alternately with the choir, or by the choir alone... It is preferable that the responsorial Psalm be sung, at least as far as the people's response is concerned.... The *Alleluia* constitutes a rite or act in itself. It is sung by all while standing, and led by the choir or cantor.... The supplication *Agnus Dei*, is, as a rule, sung by the choir or cantor with the congregation responding. While the priest is receiving the Sacrament, the Communion chant is begun.... The singing is continued for as long as the Sacrament is being administered to the faithful. ... This is sung either by the choir alone or by the choir or cantor with the people.