

# Celebrating the Spirit of the Liturgy

Address by  
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I am very grateful and deeply honored to be invited to address this 23<sup>rd</sup> colloquium on sacred music sponsored by the Church Music Association of America. I am especially happy to be here in this beautiful Cathedral of the Madeleine in Salt Lake City, a place where I have had the delight of concebrating and celebrating the sacred liturgy on many occasions during my summer trips to this beautiful city to visit my sister, Marti, who lives here. I am happy that she is with me today, although I warned her that her brother might bore her to death today in this talk!

I would also like to acknowledge my long acquaintance with the CMAA extending over many years back to the 1980's when I came under the tutelage of the great Msgr. Richard Schuler, former editor of the periodical, *Sacred Music*. I lived with him for a year at the Church of St. Agnes in St. Paul, MN while pursuing philosophy studies at the College of St. Thomas in preparation for the seminary. I sang in the Gregorian *schola cantorum*, and it was there that I experienced my first true formation in the sacred liturgy. I dedicate this talk to Msgr. Schuler with deep gratitude for all he taught me, by word and example. May he forever rejoice with the choirs of angels in the heavenly liturgy.

I would like to start my presentation by giving four examples in my own pastoral experience that illustrate the point I hope to make today.

1. After a diocesan wide youth conference, the comment was made to me that we lost the spirit that we had going once we began the Mass. We had the standard praise and worship music for the young people throughout the conference, i.e. with contemporary instruments, drums, electric guitars, loud amplification and a lively beat. But when it came time to celebrate the Mass, I insisted that the music be appropriate for the sacred liturgy. The comment went something like this: "We had the kids all fired up and excited, and then came the Mass and we hit the wall. The boring music that was more reverential, slower and more meditative killed the spirit we had going."
2. I recently saw a catechetical exercise that was very well intentioned but, in my mind, missed the mark. The intent of the exercise was to help young people realize that the Mass is in itself a very powerful and awesome thing, even if it was not "exciting"

on a human level. It went something like, “Even though not every Mass can be considered “exciting,” nevertheless the paschal mystery is present and that is in itself is an awesome thing.” The reason I think it missed the mark a bit is that there was an implied assumption that ideally the Mass should be exciting on a more human or emotional level, especially for young people.

3. A very fine pastor of a parish that has an annual Polka Mass once told me that it is actually done very reverently and that the musicians are very devout. I do not doubt their sincerity and good will.
4. At a conference where I was presenting to parish musicians, one of the persons present, who was not at all impressed with the move toward chanting the antiphons of the Mass, asked “But isn’t the Mass supposed to be a celebration?” The implication was that the use of chant was inimical to the customary joyful and celebratory nature of the music at Mass with which this person was familiar.

All of these examples illustrate the point that for far too long we have been trying to make the sacred liturgy do something it was never intended to do. The second Vatican Council, reiterating the long tradition of the Church, reminded us that the purpose of the divine worship accomplished through the sacred liturgy is to give glory to God and to sanctify the faithful.

Instead we have far too often imposed from the outside a meaning, purpose and even perhaps our own agenda onto the sacred liturgy. This we have allowed to happen instead of allowing the true inner and essential meaning of the sacred liturgy express itself in word, ritual action, beauty, art, decorum and music.

That is my central thesis here today. We must rediscover in the Church, or for many perhaps discover for the first time, the true “spirit of the liturgy.” Once we understand on a much deeper and profound level what the liturgy actually is, then we will know how to celebrate it.

The examples I have given seem to try to impose another purpose on the sacred liturgy. In the first example of the youth conference, apparently the liturgy is supposed to “fire up” the congregation and keep them at a spiritual fervor throughout. In the second example of well-intentioned catechesis, it seems the ideal for the liturgy is that we find it “exciting” (read “entertaining”) on a human emotional level. In the example of the Polka Mass, as long as the musicians are devout and reverent, then we can celebrate the liturgy in a style more appropriate for the dance hall. Perhaps it is supposed to be a cultural expression of the Polish culture. Well, I’m half Polish, and I love a good polka, but not at Mass!

It is the final example, however, which I find most interesting. Isn’t the Mass supposed to be a celebration? Yes, of course. But the real question is, “What are we celebrating?” Are we celebrating just for the sake of having a happy, joyful celebration? Are we celebrating for the purpose of giving us an emotion “feel good” experience? Are we celebrating, in other words, simply for the sake of celebration? Is the sacred liturgy directed to God or to

us?

What are we celebrating? If we don't know that, we are already in big trouble when it comes to how we celebrate the Mass. It reminds me of the priest who likes to tell a joke at the end of every Mass, with the intended purpose of leaving the people smiling. People will remember the joke, but forget what was said in the homily. The purpose of the Mass has been overshadowed by another intention.

The point is, unless we know the true meaning and purpose of the sacred liturgy, unless we profoundly understand what we are accomplishing, or more importantly what Christ is accomplishing in the sacred liturgy, then our celebrations will reflect that ignorance. Having lost its mooring in this essential inner reality, it will be cast about on the sea of differing interpretations reflected in often less than edifying celebrations.

Pope Benedict XVI drew our attention to this most important point. Understanding the true inner meaning and purpose of the sacred liturgy determines how it should be celebrated. I am sure that most of us here are familiar with Pope Benedict's writings and work on the sacred liturgy. I would like to draw particular attention to his work entitled "The Spirit of the Liturgy." In this monumental work we get a glimpse into Pope Benedict's (at the time Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's) view of the cosmic nature of the liturgy.

After a thorough and theologically rich exposition on the true spirit of the liturgy, our Pope emeritus makes practical application of this understanding in how the liturgy is actually celebrated. He discusses issues such as the significance of church architecture, the altar and the direction of liturgical prayer, the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament, sacred time, sacred images and of course music and the liturgy.

Pope Benedict further discusses the liturgical form. He makes application of the fundamental principles to matters of the rite such as the sign of the cross, liturgical posture, gestures, the human voice, vestments and other matter of the liturgy.

Again, the message to take from all of this is that how we fundamentally understand and appreciate the true meaning, purpose and spirit of the sacred liturgy shapes the decorum and manner in which we carry out the liturgical action itself. In the examples I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation, can we really say that the true inner meaning and spirit of the liturgy is adequately and faithfully being expressed in the rite itself, especially as regards sacred music? I think not, and I hope to illustrate that by exploring the true meaning of the sacred liturgy.

Before moving on, however, to that discussion, I wish to make an important point. It is my contention, and that of many others, that the renewal and reform of the sacred liturgy is absolutely key and essential to the work of the new evangelization. I have long been of the opinion that if the Church is going to fulfill her mission in the modern world, we need to get three things right. One is catechesis and faith formation, for children, young people and

adults. The other is the renewal of the sacred liturgy, which is not at all unrelated to the need for a deeper catechesis of our people. The third is our work of charity and service to the poor and the marginalized, which is the living out of the mystery celebrated in the sacred liturgy.

But, until we get the celebration of the sacred liturgy and all other forms of divine worship in the Church right, I fear we will be largely spinning our wheels trying to give the new evangelization traction in our modern culture. The Church teaches us, as reiterated at the Second Vatican Council, that the liturgy is the source and summit of the Christian life. This means that it is the most important thing that we do as a Church. All of the other sacraments of the Church, and all of her other apostolic works and endeavors, flow from the sacred liturgy and lead us back to it. Since this is true, all the more important it is for us to get the act of divine worship correct according to the mind and ancient tradition of the Church. This seems fairly obvious to me.

So allow me to return to the question of what it is that we are celebrating in the sacred liturgy, specifically in the holy Mass. The Mass is indeed a celebration, but what we are celebrating is the profound mystery of our salvation in Jesus Christ. We are celebrating the Paschal Mystery. We are specifically making present sacramentally and in an unbloody manner the once for all sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, which conquered death and opened for us the way to eternal life. We used to say with regularity that we celebrate the holy sacrifice of the Mass. Perhaps we should use such terminology more often.

One of the typical “poll questions” that is asked of Catholics to ascertain their knowledge of Catholic doctrine is to ask them about their belief in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the holy Eucharist. Typically the pollster will present several options to the Catholic, each representing a different way of understanding the reality of the real presence. Only one of them is correct. In a recent Gallup poll of this sort, less than a third of Catholics polled identified the correct belief concerning the real presence of Christ in the holy Eucharist.

As disturbing as that is, I would be afraid to see the results of such a poll on the essential meaning of what is celebrated in the action of the holy Mass. What percentage of Catholics would have any understanding at all of the essential nature of the Mass as the sacrifice of Christ being truly re-presented on the altar? I suspect very few. But herein lies the problem. If we don't know what we are celebrating, how are we ever going to know how to celebrate it?

And just so no one accuses me of returning to an understanding of the Mass that belongs to a different time in the past, the Second Vatican Council reminded us in the strongest of terms of the ancient theology and meaning of the holy Mass. The Council taught that he who once offered himself on the altar of the Cross, Jesus Christ, now offers himself through the hands of priests in a sacramental manner on the altars of our Churches, perpetuating his once for all sacrifice through the ages until he comes again in glory. It is also a sacred

banquet, for we receive from Christ's sacrifice of love and self-offering his very Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity as nourishment for our souls.

Allow me to delve deeper into this understanding by turning to Pope Benedict XVI's explanation of the cosmic liturgy. I know that when we first hear that it may sound a little "new age," but Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's explanation of the sacred liturgy in this way is profound and deeply faithful to the Church's tradition, as one would certainly expect from the future successor to St. Peter.

It is a very deep and theologically rich explanation of the liturgy. It is not easy to fully grasp, and one will find oneself reading it over and over again to mine its depths. Allow me an attempt at a simplified explanation that even I can understand.

During any celebration of the holy Mass, three realities are essentially taking place all at the same time. We are celebrating and making present what has already happened, what has been accomplished in Christ's saving death and resurrection. Secondly, we are already looking forward to that which is yet to come, Christ's return in glory at the end of time to judge the living and the dead. And while these two realities are being celebrated, we are simultaneously participating in the heavenly liturgy which goes on continuously in the sight of almighty God.

That is a lot to absorb! Let us examine each of these to expand our understanding of the sacred liturgy.

As I mentioned, we are making truly present in an unbloody and sacramental manner the once for all sacrifice for our salvation that Jesus offered on the altar of the cross. How is this possible, and how does it happen? First we need to understand that the central act of our redemption, Christ's offering of himself on the cross, is an act of the eternal Son of God. It is an act of the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity. It is an act of God himself. As act of the eternal God, who has no beginning or end, this act then transcends time and space. It is not bound to the moment in time on Calvary when Jesus breathed his last.

We know this is true through the mystery and dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Mary, the Mother of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ, was preserved from the first moment of her conception from all stain of original sin and personal sin. But that does not mean that Mary did not need a redeemer or that she was not saved by Jesus Christ. We explain it in this way. Mary was given what is called a "prevenient grace." This means that the fruits of Christ's sacrifice that would one day be accomplished on the altar of the cross for the salvation of the world, were applied beforehand to his holy Mother, even before Jesus himself became incarnate in her womb. It was with a view toward the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that she was allowed to participate in the fruits of redemption beforehand.

We also see the "timelessness" of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross in the institution of the

holy Eucharist at the Last Supper, the “first Mass,” so to speak. There in the upper room, on the night before he would offer himself on the altar of the cross, he made that saving sacrifice yet to be accomplished already present under the sacramental signs. “This is my Body which is given for you. This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many.” Notice the present tense. Not what will be given for you or what will be poured out, but what is given and poured. In that moment Jesus established the holy Eucharist, the ministerial priesthood and the Eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood.

In the same way that the sacrifice could be sacramentally present before the moment on Calvary, so too it come to us across time and space and becomes present for us in every Mass so that we may receive anew the saving fruits of our redemption. It is the same sacrifice of Calvary because it is the same victim and the same priest. Jesus Christ, the victim of the altar, is truly present under the signs of bread and wine, but truly present, Body Blood, Soul and Divinity. But it is also the same priest, for the priest we see standing at the altar acts in the very person of Christ, having been sacramentally configured to him in ordination.

This brings up an important point. It is principally Christ who acts in the sacred liturgy. We are only his instruments. Every Mass, even one celebrated by a priest in the absence of the faithful (not desirable), is an act of Christ and of the whole Church. It is not ours. It belongs to Christ and the universal Church. Jesus Christ determines the meaning and purpose of what we celebrate in the sacred liturgy, not us.

So every Mass celebrates and makes present that which has already been accomplished in Christ’s life-giving death and glorious resurrection. At every Mass, we are in the upper room, we are at the foot of the cross, we are at the empty tomb, as these events come to us sacramentally and mystically across time and space.

But in the sacred liturgy, we also mystically anticipate that which is yet to come. We look forward with joyful hope to the coming of Christ in glory at the end of time. There is then an essential orientation of the sacred liturgy toward the future fulfillment in Christ of God’s eternal plan of salvation, when the world as we know it will pass away and there will be new heavens and a new earth completely transformed by Christ’s glory.

That is why Pope Benedict XVI speaks of the eastward orientation of the sacred liturgy. In the scriptural and mystical theology of the Church, Christ will come again in glory from the east, the direction of the rising sun. The Son of God will come riding on the clouds of heaven and we symbolically look east for his coming. With our feet firmly planted on the earth, our eyes and our hearts turn to the Lord, anticipating his return in glory. Think of the beautiful Advent hymn as we look forward to the coming of the Savior, “People Look East.”

That is why the Church’s liturgy has traditionally been oriented toward the east, or at least the liturgical east if the architecture of the church building would not admit of an actual eastward orientation. Priest and people, united in prayer and in the offering of the once for

all sacrifice of Christ to the Father, looked together to the east in offering this act of divine worship. It was never that the priest “turned his back to the people.” It was always that priest and people together looked east in the sacred liturgy, watching and waiting for the Lord’s return. This eschatological orientation of the sacred liturgy must be recovered in some way if we are to recapture the true spirit of the liturgy.

Finally, while we celebrate that which has been accomplished and look forward to that which is to come, we at the same time participate in the eternal wedding banquet of the Lamb, the heavenly liturgy. At the altar, heaven is joined to earth as we enter into the eternal mysteries. Christ, now risen from the dead, gloriously triumphant and exalted at the right hand of the Father, intercedes for us. He continually shows his glorious wounds to the Father, the price of our salvation, and all the saints and hosts of heaven bow down and worship before the Lamb once slain who lives forever.

We have a foretaste of eternal life and the pledge of future glory in the sacred liturgy, even when celebrated in its simplest and most unadorned manner. We join ourselves to the heavenly liturgy. We express this beautifully in the conclusion to each preface of the Eucharistic prayer as we prepare to sing with the angels in heaven the Sanctus. What we have been talking about is especially heard in the second preface for the Holy Eucharist. Listen carefully. We pray:

It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation,  
always and everywhere to give you thanks,  
Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God,  
through Christ our Lord.

For at the Last Supper with his Apostles,  
establishing for the ages to come the saving memorial of the Cross,  
he offered himself to you as the unblemished Lamb,  
the acceptable gift of perfect praise.

Nourishing your faithful by this sacred mystery,  
you make them holy, so that the human race,  
bounded by one world,  
may be enlightened by one faith  
and united by one bond of charity.

And so, we approach the table of this wondrous Sacrament,  
so that, bathed in the sweetness of your grace,  
we may pass over to the heavenly realities here foreshadowed.

Therefore, all creatures of heaven and earth  
sing a new song in adoration,  
and we, with all the host of Angels,

cry out, and without end we acclaim:  
Holy, holy holy...

How is that for *lex orandi, lex credenda*? The law of praying is the law of believing.

Okay, that is a lot of theology of the sacred liturgy. Perhaps it is quite a bit for us to absorb. In fact, we can never exhaust the depths of this mystery celebrated in the sacred liturgy. But what does that have to do with our purpose for gathering here and the promotion of sacred music for the liturgy?

I return to my central point. Once we understand and appreciate on a very profound level the inner meaning of the holy sacrifice of the Mass; once we understand what the sacred liturgy accomplishes; once we understand what we are doing (what Christ is doing) in the sacred liturgy, only then will we be able to properly celebrate and express that meaning and purpose of the liturgy itself.

So everything we do on the celebration of the Mass must draw out and reflect the essential meaning and purpose of the sacred liturgy itself. Everything in the liturgy which touches us on the level of the senses must express the inner meaning of the holy mysteries we celebrate. Everything we see, hear, and even smell should draw us deeper into the profound mystery of God's love and mercy shown to us in his Son, Jesus Christ.

That is why everything in the sacred liturgy must be as beautiful as we can make it, drawing upon the gifts of the people of God, especially artists in the area of the sacred arts including, of course, sacred music. The architecture of the church building, the visual art and iconography adorning the temple, the decoration of the sanctuary, the vestments worn by the sacred ministers, the sacred vessels and other things used in the sacred liturgy, and the music which accompanies the liturgical action must all be beautiful, reflecting the infinite beauty and goodness of God, to whom our divine worship is directed.

But all of these things must not become ends in themselves – beauty for the sake of beauty – but must be seen as means to an end, drawing us in and making us profoundly aware of the awesome mystery we are celebrating. They must express and show forth the meaning of the Mass itself, for the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful.

I apologize if I seem to be belaboring this point, but I believe it is critically important that we get this right in the Church. I believe not understanding this point has gotten us into the trouble we are in, resulting in less than worthy liturgies in far too many instances.

If we do not get this part of the discussion correct, we will continue to see the imposition of other meanings, purposes and “styles” on the sacred liturgy. We will continue to have the Polka Mass, the Folk Mass, the Rock Mass, the Contemporary Mass, the Traditional Mass, etc...



Doing what the Church asks us to do in the celebration of the sacred liturgy, what some would surely call more traditional, cannot be seen as simply imposing another “style” on the sacred liturgy, i.e. one style in a list such as I have just given. Doing what the Church asks of us is meant to draw out and express what the Mass is in and of itself.

Applying this to the area of sacred music, we see that the music that is used in the celebration of the sacred liturgy must also contribute to the fuller expression of the mystery being celebrated. This is especially true in the singing of the Mass texts themselves, especially the antiphons, whether in English or in Latin. It has been pointed out that, just as the Church gives us the selections from sacred scripture for a particular Sunday, weekday or feast, and just as she gives us other common and proper texts, such as the ordinary of the Mass and the prayers and preface, so too she gives us the texts for the antiphons, which harmonize and further express the particular celebration.

As I said in my recent pastoral letter on sacred music, only repeating what has been said by so many of you in the past, we must “sing the Mass,” not “sing songs at Mass.” This is at the heart of what must be recovered as it concerns music for the sacred liturgy. This is what will help draw out and express the inner meaning of the sacred liturgy as we have been discussing.

Finally, I would like to touch briefly on those qualities of music that are necessary in order for it to be considered suitable for the sacred liturgy. What is sacred music?

The three essential qualities are known to all of you. They are universality, artistic quality (beauty) and sacredness. What has sadly happened in recent time is that, as long as the words of the songs talk about God or us and our relationship to God, then the music has been considered “sacred” and therefore acceptable for the liturgy. This is how we get to admitting music to the sacred liturgy that is not appropriate and, far from expressing the essential mystery being celebrated, distract from that purpose and even impose other intentions on the liturgy.

There is a difference between religious songs and music and “sacred music” in the Church’s tradition. What might be appropriate for a religious youth rally or a charismatic prayer meeting may not be suitable for divine worship in the holy sacrifice of the Mass.

So, let us look at these essential qualities. The sanctity of sacred music:

Turning to the teaching of Pope St. Pius X, which has had a significant impact on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in this regard, we read:

*[Sacred music] must be holy, and must, therefore, exclude all profanity not only in itself, but in the manner in which it is presented by those who execute it.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. I:2

Vatican II emphasized the sanctity of sacred music in these terms:

*(S)acred music is to be considered the more holy in proportion as it is more closely connected with the liturgical action, whether it adds delight to prayer, fosters unity of minds, or confers greater solemnity upon the sacred rites.<sup>2</sup>  
(emphasis added)*

The intrinsic beauty (artistic goodness) of sacred music

Since everything associated with the Mass must be beautiful, reflecting the infinite beauty and goodness of the God we worship, this applies in a special way to the music which forms an essential and integral part of our divine worship. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI:

*Certainly, the beauty of our celebrations can never be sufficiently cultivated, fostered and refined, for nothing can be too beautiful for God, Who is Himself infinite Beauty. Yet our earthly liturgies will never be more than a pale reflection of the liturgy celebrated in the Jerusalem on high, the goal of our pilgrimage on earth. May our own celebrations nonetheless resemble that liturgy as closely as possible and grant us a foretaste of it!<sup>3</sup>*

Pope St. Pius X spoke of the artistic value of sacred music, another way of considering its intrinsic beauty:

*[Sacred music] must be true art, for otherwise it will be impossible for it to exercise on the minds of those who listen to it that efficacy which the Church aims at obtaining in admitting into her liturgy the art of musical sounds.<sup>4</sup>*

The universality of sacred music

Finally, the third essential quality of sacred music must be considered, i.e. its universality. This quality means that any composition of sacred music, even one which reflects the unique culture of a particular region, would still be easily recognized as having a sacred character. The quality of holiness, in other words, is a universal principle that transcends culture.

*While every nation is permitted to admit into its ecclesiastical compositions those special forms which may be said to constitute its native music, still these forms must be subordinate in such a manner to the general character of sacred music, that nobody of any nation may receive an impression other than good on hearing*

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<sup>2</sup> SC 112

<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict to priests at the Cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris, September 13, 2008

<sup>4</sup> Pius X: Op. cit. I:2

*them.*<sup>5</sup>

This articulation of the essential qualities of sacred music is necessary because there is often a lack of understanding or confusion as to what music is proper to the Mass and worthy of its inclusion in divine worship. As I have said, not every form or style of music is capable of being rendered suitable for the Mass.

That is why the *Gloria* of the Mass set to a Polka beat or in the style of rock music is not sacred music. Why not? Because such styles of music, as delightful as they might be for the dance hall or a concert, do not possess all three of the intrinsic qualities of sanctity, artistic goodness (beauty) and universality proper to sacred music. We are not at Mass to be entertained but to render glory to God and to be sanctified by the sacred mysteries.

Going back to what we looked at earlier about what the essential meaning and inner mystery of the Mass actually is, we can see that these styles of music, and others as well, are not capable of expressing the awesome mystery of the sacred liturgy and therefore cannot be rendered suitable. Knowing that at every Mass we stand at the foot of the cross and make present the sacrifice of Christ for our salvation, could you imagine singing a Polka or having rock drums or electric guitars there before this tremendous mystery?

In conclusion, then, we have seen that the *ars celebrandi*, the art of celebrating the sacred liturgy must always draw out, express and show forth the mystery being celebrated. The true spirit of the liturgy must be communicated in everything that we do in the celebration of holy Mass. This is a tangible example of the functional principle of the sacred liturgy: *lex orandi, lex credenda* – the law of praying is the law of believing. What we pray and do in the sacred liturgy and how we do it must always express what we believe about what Christ is doing in the liturgy.

Just as important is that what we pray and how we pray also forms us and catechizes us about these same realities. That is why we need to get this right for the formation and catechesis of the future generations in the work of the new evangelization.

Sacred music plays a critical and irreplaceable role in this ongoing effort at liturgical reform and renewal. I thank the members of the Church Music Association of America for your tireless perseverance in this great effort. Never grow weary or become discouraged. We are on the brink of a profound renewal of divine worship, and you are helping lead the way. God bless you and may he prosper the work of your hands, hearts and voices!

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<sup>5</sup> Pius X: Op cit. I:2