

## What are the Propers?

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You may have sometimes wondered: what are those chants that are occasionally sung before Mass, at the beginning of the offertory, and at the beginning of Communion? Why are they being sung? These chants are called the Propers of the Mass, and they are as old as the Mass itself.

From the earliest days of the Church, Christians sang the Psalms as part of the Mass. St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians: **“Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making music to the Lord with all your heart.”** (Ephesians 6:18-19). As the Mass developed over the centuries, it became customary to chant Psalms, or occasionally other passages from Scripture, at five designated times during the liturgy: at the entrance, between the readings, before the Gospel, at the offertory, and at Communion. The Church developed an official songbook, called the *Gradual*, which contained all the Psalms prescribed for Mass. So now, just as each Mass throughout the liturgical year has its own set of readings during the Liturgy of the Word, so each Mass also has its own set of Psalms to be sung at the designated times. The Church’s intention is that the Psalms she has chosen for each Mass will present certain themes and Scriptures that she desires the faithful to meditate upon during that particular Mass. Unlike the “Glory to God” or the “Lamb of God” which remain the same at every Mass, the Psalms change from day to day, and each Mass has its own set which are “proper” to it. Hence the name: Propers. Some Masses have even come to be known by their Propers. Gaudete Sunday in Advent and Laetare Sunday in Lent are called those names because “gaudete” and “laetare” are the first words of their respective entrance propers.

The Propers were a regularly-sung part of the Mass for at least 1500 years, but in the early to mid-20th century, they began to be dropped in favor of other hymnody. The Church, still desiring the faithful to participate in the Proper texts of the Mass, was concerned about this trend and hoped to reestablish the use of these texts so that, even if other music was also used, the faithful would still get to hear and meditate upon these actual words of the Mass itself. This concern was addressed in the Second Vatican Council, which stated: **“The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as sacred song united to the words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy...The treasure of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with great care...The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services.”**<sup>1</sup> Since the vast majority of the Church’s Gregorian chant and sacred music treasury consisted of the Propers, the Council clearly intended that the use of the Propers should be recovered and maintained going forward. Just a few years later, the question of the Propers was explicitly brought to the attention of the Consilium, the group of bishops and experts tasked with the forming of the New Mass. They responded: **“What must be sung is the Mass, its Ordinary and Proper, not ‘something,’ no matter how consistent, that is imposed on the Mass... To continue to replace the texts of the Mass being celebrated with motets that are reverent and devout, yet out of keeping with the Mass of the day amounts to continuing an unacceptable ambiguity: it is to cheat the people... Thus texts must be those of the Mass, not others, and singing means singing the Mass, not just singing during Mass.”**<sup>2</sup> This is an important distinction: singing or listening meditatively to the Propers is a participation *in the Mass itself*, just as reading or listening attentively to the readings is a participation in the Mass itself. Other hymnody, while beautiful and helpful, is something additional sung *during* Mass.

Given that the Church obviously wished for Propers to be included in the New Mass, one may rightfully wonder why they are not heard more often. We do customarily hear the Proper between the readings (Responsorial Psalm) and the Proper before the Gospel (Gospel Acclamation), but the others have mostly dropped by the wayside. Why is this? The answer is largely historical: as the reforms of the Mass were beginning to get underway, the Second Vatican Council desired the Gradual (the songbook of Propers) to be slightly modified in order to conform better with the New Mass: **“The typical edition of the books of Gregorian chant is to be completed; and a more critical edition is to be prepared of those books already published since the restoration by St. Pius X.”**<sup>3</sup> This modification process took about 10 years, though - and in the interim, due to necessity, other music was used at Mass instead of the Propers. When the modification was complete, however, the songs originally meant as temporary substitutes had become entrenched in the Mass, and as a result the Propers continued to be largely overlooked. This is somewhat of a sad irony considering that the New Mass was designed to include the Propers precisely so that the faithful might participate more fully in the Mass itself.

Despite the rarity of hearing the Propers at Mass, a brief look at the Church’s present-day liturgical documents and instructions shows that they are still desired. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM), the Church’s book of instructions on how the Mass is to be celebrated, says: **“In the Dioceses of the United States of America, there are four options for the Entrance Chant: (1) the antiphon from the Missal or the antiphon with its Psalm from the Graduale Romanum, as set to music there or in another setting; (2) the antiphon and Psalm of the Graduale Simplex for the**

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<sup>1</sup> Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), #112, 114, 116

<sup>2</sup> Consilium’s *Notitiae* 5 (1969), emphasis in original

<sup>3</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium* #117

liturgical time; (3) a chant from another collection of Psalms and antiphons, approved by the Conference of Bishops or the Diocesan Bishop, including Psalms arranged in responsorial or metrical forms; (4) another liturgical chant that is suited to the sacred action, the day, or the time of year, similarly approved by the Conference of Bishops or the Diocesan Bishop.”<sup>4</sup> The first three options listed here all refer to the Proper chants or to Psalms similar to them, in various different musical settings. Only lastly does the Church grant permission for other appropriate “chants” to replace the Propers. In order of preference, though, the first three spots are all given to the Propers and to similar Psalms, a clear indication of the importance the Church gives them. The text contains similar instructions pertaining to the offertory and Communion chants.<sup>5</sup> With regard to the timing of the Communion Proper, both the GIRM and the rubrics of the Missal state: **“While the Priest is receiving the Sacrament, the Communion Chant is begun.”**<sup>6</sup> This is to ensure that the faithful hear the Scriptural texts which the Church wishes them to meditate on as preparation for the reception of Communion.

In recent years there have also been statements from the Church’s bishops regarding the use of the Propers. In a 2007 document the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops stated: **“Proper antiphons from the liturgical books are to be esteemed and used especially because they are the very voice of God speaking to us in the Scriptures.”**<sup>7</sup> In 2012, Bishop Thomas Olmsted of Phoenix wrote: **“The texts of the Proper form perhaps one of the most immense and deeply rich treasure troves in the sacred music tradition...[they] form a substantial and constitutive element of the liturgy, and I encourage a recovery of their use today. We are blessed to have in our day a kind of reawakening to their value...I strongly encourage parishes to take up the task of singing the antiphons and psalmody contained within the liturgical books, and to rediscover the immense spiritual riches contained within the Proper of the Mass.”**<sup>8</sup> In 2013, Bishop Alexander Sample, then of the Diocese of Marquette, MI, and now Archbishop of Portland, OR, wrote about the Propers, saying: **“These are found in the Graduale Romanum [the Gradual mentioned earlier], the Missal and the Graduale Simplex [a simpler form of the Gradual], and are intended to be sung in Latin or the vernacular. Using the texts and musical settings for these chants is the first and preferred option.”**<sup>9</sup>

The GIRM lists several options for singing the Proper antiphons that envision congregational participation: **“This chant is sung alternately by the choir and the people or similarly by a cantor and the people, or entirely by the people, or by the choir alone.”**<sup>10</sup> In light of this, the Propers will be made available to the people for anyone who wishes to join in on the antiphons. Everyone is invited and warmly welcome to participate in the singing of the Propers.

None of this is to deny the real value of singing hymns and other songs at Mass. Many hymn texts are inspiring and edifying, and add much rich additional material for the faithful to sing and contemplate during the celebration of Mass. The Church is blessed to include these in her treasury of sacred music. But given the ancient history and deep importance of the Proper texts of the Mass, along with the Church’s encouragement of their use all the way up through the present day, it seems desirable for the Propers to be included in the celebration of Mass more often, in addition to hymnody, so that their treasures may continue to be made available to the faithful today. It is the Church’s hope that, as so many countless saints down the ages heard and were formed by these ancient texts of the Mass every week, so we too may be inspired by them and take their message to heart.

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<sup>4</sup> *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (2010), #48

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, #74 and 87

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, #86

<sup>7</sup> *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (2007), #117

<sup>8</sup> *Singing the Mass: Liturgical Music as Participation in Christ* (May 2012), by Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted

<sup>9</sup> *Rejoice in the Lord Always* (January 2013), by Bishop Alexander K. Sample

<sup>10</sup> *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, #48