Guidelines for Music at First Holy Communion and Confirmation Liturgies with Children

Archdiocese of New York

Prepared by the
Office of Liturgy and
Liturgical Music Commission

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 preeminence is that, as sacred song united to the words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy. Therefore sacred 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.

-Second Vatican Council,
Sacrosanctum concilium, 112

Introduction

The celebrations of First Holy Communion and Confirmation liturgies with children are times of great joy in the life of a parish. These events are significant spiritual milestones for those who receive these sacraments, and they also serve as opportunities for a renewal of faith amongst family, friends, and the entire parish community. Music plays a special and memorable role in these celebrations, and parish leadership and staff frequently seek assistance in the proper selection of music for these liturgies. This document seeks to provide guidance to parishes, answering some of the particular questions that may arise when preparing First Communion and Confirmation celebrations with children.

The Role of Music in the Liturgy

In the sacraments of initiation, children are given nourishment and strengthened in their Christian pilgrimage toward eternal life. Members of the Body of Christ share in the joy of these occasions by witnessing the fruit of those labors to provide formation in the faith, as they rejoice in seeing others advance on their journey to the heavenly Jerusalem.

In these moments of gladness, the gathered community naturally expresses itself in song. The psalms regularly call for the earth to rise up in joyful song, and to praise and thank the Lord for all His benefits (cf. Ps 28:7; 33:3; 43:4; 47:1; 66:1; 71:23; 95:1; 98:4-6; 100:1-2). The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* connects this musical expression with liturgical celebrations, reminding us that "singing is a sign of the heart's joy" (39). The *Directory for Masses with Children* similarly 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" (30). Thus, it is fitting for the faithful to unite in songs of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord at important moments in the life of the parish, including First Communion and Confirmation liturgies.

First Communion Liturgies - Liturgical Considerations

In her study of the historical development and current celebration of First Communion Masses, Dr. Donna Eschenauer observes that "liturgy with children should reflect a profound sense of sacred time and have as its goal that all life is imbued with the Paschal Mystery" (*First Communion Liturgies: Preparing First-Class First Celebrations*, 7). The liturgy, with its sacred language and symbols, will naturally engage the minds and imaginations of young children as they learn to offer themselves in union with Christ's Paschal sacrifice. Parish leaders involved in planning celebrations of First Communion should keep in mind that the selection and use of liturgical elements will have a lasting influence on the spiritual development of the young people who attend these liturgies.

Those entrusted with preparing First Communion liturgies occasionally wish to adjust elements of the First Communion Mass for the sake of fostering active participation amongst children. The *Directory for Masses with Children* is sometimes even used to justify the introduction of certain liturgical elements that are markedly different from what is usually experienced at a "typical adult Mass." While the *Directory* does, in fact, point to ways to engage children within the flexibility outlined by the Order of Mass, "it is always necessary to keep in mind that these eucharistic celebrations [should] lead children toward the celebration of Mass with adults" (21). In view of this, any attempt to introduce practices that would turn the liturgy into a catechetical presentation more appropriate for the classroom, or even a form of entertainment, should be strictly avoided.

All who are tasked with planning these celebrations should be equally reminded that the Christian faithful have a right to experience the Church's liturgy, bearing in mind that the Church's "law of prayer" is also her "law of belief." As such, First Communion Masses should be celebrated as described in the official liturgical books. Only approved options foreseen by the Church may be employed, and these should be chosen based on pastoral need. When preparing these celebrations, the following principle of the Second Vatican Council must always be observed: "Regulation of the sacred liturgy depends solely on the authority of the Church, that is, on the Apostolic See and, as laws may determine, on the bishop.... No other person, even if he be a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority" (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 22.3).

Confirmation Liturgies - Liturgical Considerations

Whereas First Communion liturgies should express a certain continuity with future celebrations of the Eucharist for children, the Sacrament of Confirmation is a liturgy that is unique in the life of a Christian. Over the past century, the rite of Confirmation has undergone changes that have emphasized different aspects of one's life in Christ. Timothy Gabrielli, in his book *Confirmation: How a Sacrament of God's Grace Became All About Us*, outlines this transformation, noting that, at the start of the 1900s, Confirmation was a rite that was frequently celebrated apart from the Eucharist. Confirmation was known widely as the "sacrament of Catholic Action," where a Christian "moved from being inward-focused to being outward-focused" so as to "restore all things in Christ" (xvi). The Second Vatican Council, however, called for a revision of the rite of Confirmation "so that the intimate connection of this sacrament with the whole of Christian initiation may more clearly appear" (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 71). This goal was achieved in the revised rite (1971), which both introduced the renewal of baptismal vows into the celebration, as well as the instruction that the rite should normally take place within Mass, thus connecting the celebration of Confirmation more closely with the Eucharist. (*n.b.* During the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has sometimes become necessary to celebrate Confirmation outside of Mass, even multiple times in the same day, given the large number of candidates for Confirmation, and in light of reduced seating availability in parish churches.) In the reform of the rite's prayers and ritual actions, a focus was also placed on the person of the Holy Spirit and the gifts received by the confirmand.

In the decades following the rite's revision, catechetical textbooks and Confirmation liturgies have sometimes stressed the idea of an individual *choosing* the faith, or even concluding one's spiritual formation at the time of Confirmation (as is sometimes expressed by the wearing of red graduation gowns at Confirmation liturgies). These types of approaches can regretfully give the mistaken impression that one's journey of faith and growth in virtue is not a lifelong undertaking. In his 1971 apostolic constitution on the sacrament of Confirmation, however, Saint Pope Paul VI encouraged the Church to place its focus on the *Spirit* given in Confirmation, noting, "the anointing with Chrism well represents the spiritual anointing of the Holy Spirit, the advancement that the Spirit fosters along one's Christian pilgrimage toward heaven" (cf. *Divinae consortium naturae*). In short, the Holy Spirit's role in the Sacrament should be the preeminent focus of catechesis and liturgical celebrations, for it is by the Spirit that confirmandi are bound closer to Christ and His Church and given the strength to be witnesses of the faith (*CCC,* 1303). In gratitude for so great a gift, the gathered faithful unite in joyful song to praise the Lord and to encourage each other to live out their baptismal call with the strength that the Spirit provides.

Theological Considerations for Hymn Selection

Special liturgies often pose additional challenges for parish musicians beyond those of an ordinary Sunday Mass. The music chosen should always reflect the theological significance of the sacraments being received, while also remaining appropriate to the liturgical context of a parish celebration that welcomes Catholics and non-Catholics, regular attendees and visitors alike. Songs that are well known and easily sung are usually fitting choices for these liturgies.

When selecting music for these celebrations, special attention should be given to the conformity of musical texts with Catholic doctrine. Recently, the USCCB's Committee on Doctrine offered some guidance in this area. In its 2020 document, *Catholic Hymnody at the Service of the Church: An Aid for Evaluating Hymn Lyrics*, the Committee encouraged pastors and pastoral musicians to ensure that hymn texts are always reflective of Catholic doctrine, and are expressed using images and a vocabulary that is consistent with Scripture and the public liturgical prayer of the Church.

In its commentary, the Committee stated that particular attention should be given to hymn texts relating to the Eucharist, noting that such songs should avoid language "that implies that the elements are still bread and wine after Consecration" or "that the bread and wine are merely symbols of another reality or person." As well, "poetic license should conform to customary usage of Scripture and liturgical Tradition. For example, 'Bread,' 'Bread of Life,' etc., are scriptural idioms for the Eucharist itself, and so are permitted; however, 'wine' is not used in the same way, and to call the consecrated element 'wine' gives the impression that it is still wine" (5).

The resource section at the end of this document offers examples of hymns whose use is encouraged, and also those which may be deficient in their presentation of Catholic doctrine.

Performance Music

The primary focus of First Communion and Confirmation liturgies should be on the reception of the sacraments and on the celebration of the liturgical action as a whole. For its part, the music used in these liturgies should be chosen to support these aims (USCCB, *Sing to the Lord*, 68). By contrast, any form of "performance music" should be avoided (*Musicam sacram*, 43). Performance music may be defined as those times when a choir, those receiving the sacrament, or anyone else, offers a musical presentation which does not have as its goal the accompaniment of the liturgical action. In some parishes, for example, an emphasis is placed on having those who are receiving First Holy Communion or Confirmation perform a song together as a group for their families. While this may, in fact, be a longstanding custom, attention should be given to reconsidering the merits of this practice, bearing in mind the intended focus of the celebration, which is God's work of offering sacramental grace to His People and their expression of gratitude for His Divine gifts. Those tasked with sacramental and liturgical preparation should be made aware of the danger of confusion that arises when a focus is placed on musical performance rather than the outpouring of God's gifts and the worship offered to God by the community.

If, for pastoral reasons, it is not possible to end an established practice of performance music at a particular parish, it is advisable to find a more suitable venue for these songs. For example, parishes may wish to include such performances as a prelude prior to the beginning of the Mass, following the close of Mass at the time appointed for photography, or in the classroom at the conclusion of the final class before reception of the sacraments.

Selecting Music

The music selected for First Communion and Confirmation Masses should include the following:

Entrance Song
The Mass begins with the entrance song. This normally accompanies the procession of the sacred ministers to the altar. In most places, it is customary to sing a hymn at the beginning of Mass. If a hymn will be sung, an entrance chant may be intoned when the celebrant reaches the altar to begin Mass, particularly if there is to be an incensation of the altar. It is also possible to sing an entrance chant before an opening hymn (*GIRM*, 48).

Penitential Act and Kyrie
The Penitential Act follows the Greeting. There are several options for this action, but if the *Kyrie* (Lord Have Mercy) is not included in the Penitential Act, it must immediately follow it. On Sundays, especially during Easter time, the Rite of Sprinkling can be substituted for the Penitential Act (*GIRM*, 52).

Gloria
The Gloria is sung on all Sundays outside of the seasons of Advent and Lent. It is also sung for various ritual Masses, including those of Confirmation, even when the sacrament is not being celebrated on a Sunday (*GIRM*, 53).

Responsorial Psalm
After the Collect and First Reading, the Responsorial Psalm follows. The text of the psalm must be taken from the *Lectionary* or another translation of the psalms approved for liturgical use, and should be sung whenever possible. Hymns, songs, and secular texts may never be substituted for the Responsorial Psalm (*GIRM*, 61).

Gospel Acclamation
Before the Gospel and following either the Second Reading or the Responsorial Psalm (depending on if there is both a first and second reading for the day), the Gospel Acclamation is sung (*GIRM*, 62). Especially on solemn occasions such as the celebration of First Communion and Confirmation, it is most fitting that the Gospel be sung, rather than spoken.

Music during the Conferral of Confirmation (For Confirmation Liturgies)
During Mass at which the Sacrament of Confirmation is to be celebrated, it is customary to have quiet, meditative music after the Gospel and Homily. It is particularly appropriate to sing a chant, such as *Veni Creator Spiritus,* at this time.

Offertory Chant
If the Mass takes place on a Sunday, the Presentation of the Gifts/Offertory will follow the singing or recitation of the Creed and the Universal Prayer. If the Mass takes place on a day other than Sunday or other solemnity, this action will follow the Universal Prayer. During this time, an Offertory chant or hymn is sung.

Eucharistic Prayer
During the Eucharistic Prayer, the *Sanctus*, the Memorial Acclamation, and the Amen should be sung, if possible. In parishes where many language groups are represented, it may be appropriate to sing the *Sanctus* using a simple Latin chant, as a way of encouraging all present to participate in singing this hymn together.

Our Father
Following the Eucharistic Prayer, the Communion rite begins. During these actions, the priest invites the faithful to join him in praying the Our Father. Following its conclusion, the priest recites the embolism alone, and the faithful recite the doxology. On solemn occasions, such as the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, it is very appropriate to sing these texts (*GIRM*, 81).

Agnus Dei

After the Our Father and Rite of Peace, the *Agnus Dei* follows. There are many settings in different languages available. In parishes where several language groups are represented, if may be appropriate to sing the *Agnus Dei* using a simple Latin chant as a way of encouraging all present to participate in singing this litany together.

Communion Song

The singing of the Communion song begins as soon as the celebrant begins receiving the Blessed Sacrament. It may be followed by additional hymns or appropriate instrumental music, as is necessary to cover the time of reception of Holy Communion by the faithful *(GIRM*, 87). Post communion songs should ordinarily be sung by all, and not solely by a cantor or other group (88).

Recessional/Postlude

The Mass ends with the blessing and dismissal. It is customary for music to accompany the liturgical ministers in their procession out of the church. In many parishes, it is a tradition to sing a hymn at this time. If a hymn is to be sung, it would be best for the celebrant to remain in the sanctuary for a period to join in the singing, since the congregation often begins to depart as soon as the celebrant leaves the church. For special celebrations, it would be appropriate for any instrumental music to reflect the joyful and solemn mood of the occasion.

Seasonal Considerations

In the Archdiocese of New York, many First Holy Communion and Confirmation celebrations are celebrated during the Easter season, and the music may be chosen to reflect this season. Additionally, at every Eucharistic celebration, the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Our Lord are celebrated, and so music which reflects the Paschal Mystery is always appropriate. For the reception of the sacrament of Confirmation, music which recalls the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit is fitting.

Because these sacraments are often celebrated on Saturdays, or during the month of May, hymns and pieces dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary are also suitable. Marian music often works well during the preparation of the gifts and following the reception of Holy Communion. The use of a seasonal Marian antiphon or other Marian hymn is fitting for a closing or recessional hymn. The seasonal Marian antiphons have traditionally been sung at the following times in the liturgical year:

- Advent through the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord – *Alma Redemptoris Mater*
- After the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord and during Lent – *Ave Regina Cælorum*
- Easter Season – *Regina Cæli*
- End of Easter Season until Advent – *Salve Regina*

Special Circumstances and Additional Considerations

Additional questions regarding the celebration of First Communion Masses and Confirmation liturgies may be referred to the archdiocesan Office of Liturgy or members of the archdiocesan Liturgical Music Commission.

Suggested Hymns for Use in the Sacred Liturgy

(The following are generally available in hymnals of major publishers - OCP, GIA, WLP)

General Hymns - English
All Creatures of Our God and King
At the Lamb's High Feast
Christ is Made the Sure Foundation
Dona Nobis Pacem
Faith of Our Fathers
Holy God We Praise Thy Name
Let All Things Now Living
Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee
O God Beyond All Praising
Now Thank We All Our God
Praise My Soul the King of Heaven
Praise to the Holiest in the Height
Praise to the Lord, the Almighty
The King of Love

Confirmation Hymns - English
Breathe on Me, Breath of God
Come Down, O Love Divine
Come Holy Ghost, Creator Blest
Come, Holy Ghost, Our Souls Inspire
Come Gracious Spirit, Heavenly Dove
Creator Spirit, By Whose Aid
Holy Spirit, Lord of Life
Like the Murmur of the Dove's Song
Love Divine All Loves Excelling
O Breathe On Me, O Breath of God
O Holy Spirit, Come to Us
O Spirit, All-Embracing
Veni Creator Spiritus

General Hymns - Spanish
Bendigamos al Señor
Cantemos al Amor de los Amores
Cantemos al Señor
Demos Gracias
Himno de Alegría
Juntos Como Hermanos
Oh, Criaturas del Señor
Porque Nos Invitas
Pueblo de Reyes
Te Den Gracias
Tu Reinaras
Unidos Señor
Vamos Cantando al Señor
Vayamos Jubilosos
Vienen con Alegría

Confirmation Hymns - Spanish
En Nuestro Ser
Envía Tu Espíritu
Envía, Señor, Tu Espíritu
Espíritu Consolador
Espíritu de Vida
Espíritu Santo Ven
Ven Creador
Ven, Espíritu Santo, Ven a Iluminar
Ven Espíritu Santo (Lourdes Montgomery)
Ven, Santo Espíritu

Eucharistic Hymns - English
Alleluia, Sing to Jesus
Ave Verum Corpus
Draw Near and Take the Body of our Lord
Gift of Finest Wheat
Godhead Here in Hiding/Adoro te Devote
I Am the Bread of Life
I Receive the Living God
Jesus My Lord, My God, My All
Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee
Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence
O Food of Exiles Lowly
O Jesus, We Adore Thee
O Lord I Am Not Worthy
Panis Angelicus
Sing My Tongue the Savior's Glory

Shepherd of Souls
Soul of My Savior
Taste and See
Ubi Caritas
Where Charity and Love Prevail

Marian Hymns – English
Be Joyful, Mary, Heavenly Queen
Daily Daily Sing to Mary
Hail Holy Queen
Immaculate Mary
O Mary Our Mother
O Sanctissima | O Most Holy One
On This Day, O Beautiful Mother
Salve Mater Misericordia
Sing of Mary
Sing We of the Blessed Mother
Stainless the Maiden

Eucharistic Hymns - Spanish
Alma de Cristo
Alma Mia
Altissimo Señor
Ante ti mi postro
Bendito, Bendito
Cantemos al Amor de los Amores
Donde Hay el Amor y la Caridad
Mi Dios y Mi Todo
Oh Buen Jesús
Oh Jesús, Oh Buen Pastor
Pan de Cielo
Pan de Vida Eterna
Que la Lengua Humana Cante
Un Mandamiento Nuevo
Una Espiga
Vengo a Ti Jesus Amado
Yo Soy el Pan de Vida

Marian Hymns - Spanish
Adiós, Reina del Cielo
Ave Maria
Canto de María
Como Estrella en Claro Cielo
Del Cielo Ha Bajado
Dios Te Salve, Maria
Feliz de ti, Maria
Oh Maria, Madre Mia
Oh Santísima
Pues Concebida

The USCCB's Committee on Doctrine has indicated that the following hymns include examples of deficient or incomplete presentations of Catholic doctrine (cf. *Catholic Hymnody at the Service of the Church; An Aid for Evaluating Hymn Lyrics*):

All Are Welcome
As a Fire is Meant for Burning
Canticle of the Sun
God Beyond All Names
God is Here! As We His People
Led by the Spirit
Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees
Now in This Banquet
O Crucified Messiah
Sing a New Church
The Lord of the Dance
The Play of the Godhead

Additional, Free Musical Resources

Responsorial Psalms and Gospel Acclamations

- Chabanel Psalms - https://www.ccwatershed.org/completed/
- Garnier Psalms - https://archive.ccwatershed.org/garnier/

Proper Chants (Entrance, Offertory and Communion Chants)

- Corpus Christi Watershed - https://www.ccwatershed.org/completed/
- Simple English Propers, Adam Bartlett - https://musicasacra.com/additional-publications/sep/
- Simple Choral Gradual, Richard Rice - https://shop.musicasacra.com/product/simple-choral-gradual-richard-rice/
- Source & Summit, formerly Illuminare Publications - http://www.sourceandsummit.com
- Saint Meinrad Entrance and Communion Antiphons for the Church Year, Columba Kelly, OSB - https://www.ocp.org/en-us/collections/dg/401/saint-meinrad-entrance-and-communion-antiphons-for-the-church-year#more-details
- The Proper of the Mass for Sundays and Solemnities by Fr. Samuel F. Weber O.S.B. - https://sacredmusicus.wordpress.com; https://www.ignatius.com/The-Proper-of-the-Mass-for-Sundays-and-Solemnities-P1975.aspx
- Hostia Laudis: English Chant for the Modern Roman Missal, Richard Rice - https://www.lulu.com/en/us/shop/richard-rice/english-chant-2020/paperback/product-1rzvzgk9.html
- Spanish Proper Chants - http://castraponere.com/janet/spanish-propers-project/

Archdiocese of New York
Office of Liturgy
Father Matthew S. Ernest, S.T.D., Director
201 Seminary Avenue
Yonkers, NY 10704
914-968-6200, ext. 8177
liturgy@archny.org
nyliturgy.org