

MUSIC AND SINGING IN THE LITURGY: THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Abstract

This paper explores the theological dimensions of music and singing in the liturgy, highlighting their essential role as more than mere aesthetic or cultural expressions. Drawing on developments from ethnomusicology and liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the study situates liturgical music within a global and inclusive understanding of music as a cultural and theological phenomenon. The paper contends that while "music is music," liturgical music is set apart by its theological character, shaped by its function within worship and its role in mediating divine presence. Liturgical music is not simply music performed during liturgy but is integrally part of the liturgical act itself, serving as both theology and sacrament. Using Mary McGann's six theological dimensions—Trinitarian, pneumatological, sacramental, biblical, ecclesiological, and eschatological—the paper examines how music in worship participates in and reveals the mystery of God. It illustrates how music fosters communal participation (Trinitarian), invokes the Spirit (pneumatological), makes Christ present (sacramental), proclaims the Word (biblical), unites the Church (ecclesiological), and anticipates heavenly worship (eschatological). Through reflections on liturgical documents, theological texts, and experiential insights from worship, the study argues that liturgical music is an indispensable vehicle for theological expression and faith formation. Its ability to engage the senses, evoke divine presence, and enable communal response positions it as a privileged form of theological articulation within Christian worship. Thus, music and singing in the liturgy are not supplementary but constitutive of the Church's worship and witness to God's salvific work.

Keywords: Music, singing, liturgy, theology, culture

Introduction: Music, Culture and Liturgy

Music is music irrespective of its source, context, form, style, goals and aims. A statement such as the above is typical of ethnomusicologists - musical scholars who since early 1950s began to evolve a new way of thinking about music. Passionately concerned about the neglect of the music of other non-western cultures in the study of music, they took up the challenge of reformulating the concept of music. Their effort paid out in broadening the concept of music, which now includes the notion of music in culture and as culture.¹ Mainline of thought since the inception of ethnomusicology as a new field of study (in social science) concerns the understanding of music as a cross-cultural phenomenon. A rethink that perhaps did influence the liturgical musical reforms of the Second Vatican Council as articulated below:

In some places, in mission lands especially, there are people who have their own musical tradition, and this plays an important part in their religious and social life. For this reason their music should be held in due esteem and should be given a suitable role, not only in forming their religious sense but also in adapting worship to their native genius, as indicated in articles 39 and 40.²

¹ Some of these scholars and their works include, among others, C. Seeger, a student of Ethnomusicology, is very famous for devising methods in transcription and notation of music, which he distinguishes into prescriptive and 184-195. A.P. MERRIAM, *The Anthropology of Music*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston Illinois 1964; B. NETTL, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*, Schirmer Books, New York 1964; J. BLACKING, *How Musical is Man?*, University of Washington Press, Seattle 1973.

² *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 119.

Prior to this declaration of the Second Vatican Council, Latin Gregorian chant was the only officially accepted chant of the liturgy of Roman rite. Thus, in recognizing that there exists other musical cultures outside the Roman-culture-rooted Gregorian chant and in encouraging congregational chants for the liturgy, the Church acknowledged with the ethnomusicologists and the social anthropologists that music making is not a prerogative of western culture but a product of every culture and part of human behaviour.

Indeed, music is music irrespective of the person or culture that makes it. However, every music is different from the other in context, form, style and goals. Hence, there is always a distinction between sacred and profane or rather secular music, African and Western, Jazz and Blues. Just as an attempt to force a square peg into a round hole looks unusual and unworkable, so it is with trying to use any type of music in or for the liturgical celebration under the cloak of 'music is music'. For various musical types, there are always essential distinctive elements that make each type unique. In liturgical music,³ which together with religious music constitutes the two forms of sacred music, the basic principle of uniqueness stems from its theological character.

In this essay, we want to explore the essential theological perspectives that make liturgical music and liturgical singing completely different from other kinds of music and sung forms. This exploration takes as its starting point some reflections upon different levels of relationship between theology, liturgy and music.

Relationship between Theology, Liturgy and Music

The magisterial clarification of the nature of sacred music as constituting an integral part of liturgical actions⁴ is fundamental to understanding the relationship between theology, liturgy and music. To describe the nature of sacred music (or liturgical music) in these terms means, as Jan Michael Joncas would say liturgical music "is of the liturgy, rather than simply in or occurring during the liturgy."⁵ It is in this sense that the definition of liturgical music by Edward Foley merits mention here: music "which weds itself to the liturgical action, serves to reveal the full significance of the rites and, in turn, derives its full meaning from the liturgy."⁶ Just as the essence of liturgical music comes from the liturgy so also is the theology of liturgy the theology of liturgical music. Before exploring the theology of liturgical music and singing through other ways music and singing relate to liturgy, we want to examine first the meaning of theology and then its relation to liturgy.

Meaning of Theology

Theology is the English translation of the Greek *theologia* (θεολογία) which derived from *Theos* (Θεός), meaning "God," and *-logia* (λογία) meaning utterances, sayings, or oracles. *logia* is related to another Greek word *logos* (λόγος), meaning "word, discourse,

³ "Music is liturgical when the Church admits it both in law and in practice, to the celebration of her official and public worship which, strictly understood, is the liturgy". In other words, "music is liturgical only when the Church recognizes it as *her* prayer." Cf. J. GELINEAU, *Voices and Instruments in Christian Worship*, Liturgical Press, Minnesota 1963, 60, 61.

⁴ See PIUS X, *motu proprio*, *Inter sollicitudinis* 1903. This Encyclical remains the first ever and the most impressive magisterial intervention in the field of sacred music and is usually known by its Italian title, *Tra le sollicitudini*.

⁵ J.M. JONCAS, «Liturgy and Music» in A.J. Chupungco, *Handbook for Liturgical Studies II*. Fundamental Liturgy, Liturgical Book, Minnesota 1998, 282

⁶ E. FOLEY, «Liturgical Music», *A New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, 855.

account, or reasoning”. Thus, Greek philosophers of fourth century BC such as Plato used the word theology to designate “discourse on god.”⁷ Early Christian notion of theology—a rational discourse on God’s self-revelation, self-disclosure and self-communication through the prophets (Old Testament) and in the fullness of time (Kairos) through his son Jesus Christ (New Testament) and in the power of the Holy Spirit was probably an expansion of the platonic concept. As an academic discipline, theology is a study of God and creation (theology proper). Its branches include, Christology (study of Christ), Pneumatology (study of the Holy Spirit and work of sanctification), biblical theology (study of the Bible), redemption (soteriology), man’s relation to God (theological anthropology), Angelology (study of angels), Hamartiology (study of sin), ecclesiology (study of the church) and eschatology (study of the second coming).

Revelation as written down in the Bible constitutes the object of study for theology. However, with the reforms of Second Vatican Council, the monopoly of the scriptures (*sola scriptura*) as the only source for theological reflections (biblical theology) came to a stop. The study of liturgy as theology gained an important status and recognition by the Council Fathers as science. Thus, the study of Liturgy as science and theology is a new development. While biblical theology studies the divine revelation as contained in the Sacred Scriptures, liturgical theology studies its celebration in the liturgy. Thus, liturgical theology is the sacramental actualisation of God’s revelation in the here and now celebration in liturgical rites and songs. In other words, theology is faith reflected upon, while Liturgical theology is faith celebrated or relived in the liturgical signs and symbols. Music of liturgy is one of these signs and symbols.

Theology of Music and Singing in the Liturgy

The theology of music stems from the theology of liturgy. Congruent with the nature and aims of liturgy – primordial objective [of liturgy] is doxological, giving glory to God, and other objectives are the sanctification and edification of the faithful – the theology of liturgical music and singing is not different from the theology of liturgy.

Song and music... are "more closely connected...with the liturgical action,"²² according to three principal criteria: beauty expressive of prayer, the unanimous participation of the assembly at the designated moments, and the solemn character of the celebration. In this way they participate in the purpose of the liturgical words and actions: the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful.⁸

Liturgical “music belongs to the orders of both creation, redemption and sanctification,”⁹ and hence to the order of theology “Liturgical theologians underscore that Christian worship is not only about God; more importantly, it is of God,¹⁰ and therefore a “profoundly theological act.” We want to explore liturgical music and singing as theology using the six perennial theological dimensions of Christian worship outlined by Mary E. McGann: theological-Trinitarian, pneumatological, sacramental, biblical, ecclesiological, and eschatological.¹¹ Being an integral part of the theology embodied in liturgy, music is theology.

⁷ See PLATO, *The Republic* Book II, Ch. 18.

⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church, art. 1157.

⁹ A. NICHOLS, «A Theological Perspective on Church Music», *Usus Antiquior*, Vol. 1 No. 1 January 2010, 26.

¹⁰ See A. CAVANAGH, *On Liturgical Theology*, 96-121.

¹¹ M.E. MCGANN, *Exploring Music as Worship and Theology. Research in Liturgical Practice*, the Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota 2002, 67.

The above six dimensions and other qualities such as faith inspiring and morally edifying are the characteristics that make liturgical music theological and distinct from all other kinds of music or art of singing. In this write-up, we shall discuss for now the first four.

Liturgical Music as Theological-Trinitarian

Liturgical celebration is a ritual re-enactment of the salvific work of God in creation and his desire to communicate himself to man. It evokes anew within time and space the action of triune God accomplished in the person of Jesus Christ and sanctified by the power of the Spirit. This action is mediated through complex forms of human communication and action. Music is one of the means and forms through which liturgy re-enacts the divine presence and encounter. As Mary McGann suggests, “music, as one of the many “languages” of ritual action, can evoke a sense of “presence”- of God, of Christ, or the Spirit; it may communicate intimations of “Godliness” or holiness.”¹² Corroborating McGann’s view Frank Burch identifies musical performance as one of the primary ways through which a liturgical assembly or community “accesses a God who wills to approach and be approached,” and thus is of profound theological significance.¹³

The image of triune God implored by contemporary theologians is striking. God-in-three-persons is understood as God-in-relation. This image of the interrelatedness of the three persons in one God is similar to the term *perichoresis* used by early Christians to express the interrelatedness of divine persons. The Greek word *perichoresis* (περιχώρησις *perikhōrēsis*, "rotation") in the words of Catherine Mowry LaCugna means:

Being-in-one-another, permeation without confusion....To be a divine person is to be *by nature* in relation to other persons. Each divine person is irresistibly drawn to the other, taking his/her existence from the other, containing the other in him/herself, while at the same time pouring self out into the other.... There is no blurring of the individuality of each person. There is also no separation. There is only the communion of love in which each person comes to be what he/she is, entirely with reference to the other.... *Perichoresis* provides a dynamic model of persons in communion based on mutuality and interdependence.¹⁴

This re-echoes the key principle of Vatican II’s liturgical reform “*participatio actuosa*” active participation of persons in the liturgical celebration. Thus liturgical performance, music or singing, is theologically Trinitarian in character as much as it enables persons to enter into deeper and conscious communion with the triune God and with the other participants in the celebration. To be able to accomplish this objective, such performance or musical composition must be structurally interactive and dynamically communal in character, facilitating a dynamic and rhythmic flow of vocal, verbal, and gestural communication among participants.

It is a common practice in Nigeria to conclude a liturgical musical composition with a verse or section on praise of the Trinity as one observes in many traditional prayers of the church, like in the Eucharistic prayers, which usually conclude with “through him, with him and in him.” Concluding with doxology, such musical compositions highlight and affirm the basic tenet of Trinitarian theology. Such concluding form makes a musical composition not far from being an act of profession of faith.

¹² M.E. MCGANN, *Exploring Music as Worship and Theology*, 67.

¹³ F.B. BROWN, *Religious Aesthetics. A Theological Study of Making and Meaning*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1989, 125.

¹⁴ C.M. LACUGNA, *God for us. The Trinity and Christian Life*, Harper Collins, San Francisco 1991, 271.

Liturgical Music as Pneumatological-Theological

One of the merits of contemporary theology is the rediscovery of the pneumatological character of liturgy – the active role of the Holy Spirit in the liturgy. Through the working of the Spirit that cries in the baptised “Abba” father (Romans 8:15), the assembly gathered for worship is animated and prompted to take its constitutive role in the liturgical action¹⁵. As Don Saliers succinctly puts it, “without the life-giving, memory-conferring, and priestly-prophetic power of the Holy Spirit, no true thanks and praise will arise.”¹⁶ The Spirit of God inspires every believer to incessant praise of God and good works. The awakening of faith in the people gathered for worship is a pneumatological action.

“When the Holy Spirit awakens faith, he not only gives an understanding of the Word of God, but through the sacraments also makes present the “wonders” of God which it proclaims. The Spirit makes present and communicates the Father’s work, fulfilled by the beloved Son. “¹⁷ By the working of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine presented by the Faithful are transformed into body and blood of Christ, an action known in liturgical terms as epiclesis.¹⁸ Thus, the Church prays in her liturgy, “You are indeed Holy, O Lord, and the fount of all holiness. Make holy, therefore, these gifts, we pray, by sending down your Spirit upon them like the dew fall, so that they may become for us the Body and ☩ Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. ...”¹⁹

The Spirit, through a well-composed, theologically sound liturgical song or musical performance, can affect powerfully the singer/singers and other liturgical participants, prompting them to Spirit-orientated actions. The participants often try to describe this experience of the awakening of the Holy Spirit or the Spirit’s animation through a well-composed song, with images such as alive, causing fire, energy, heat and movement, unity of voices and mind. These images, according to Mary McGann, are remarkable signs depicting the biblical experience of the action of the Spirit, most particularly the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit of God described in the Acts of the Apostles.²⁰ Choristers, liturgical assembly or individual Christian often confessed that a musical piece sung during a celebration moved them to tears of sorrows and conversion or made them experience a certain inexplicable divine powers of healing or prophecy. St Augustine readily comes to our mind here. “How I wept, deeply moved by your hymns, songs, and the voices that echoed through your Church! What emotion I experienced in them! Those sounds flowed into my ears distilling the truth in my heart. A feeling of devotion surged within me, and tears streamed down my face - tears that did me good.”²¹ Thus, the pneumatological dimensions of worship and the role of the Holy Spirit in the liturgy has much to offer liturgical music theology.

¹⁵ M. Collins, «Eucharist and Christology Revisited. The Body of Christ», *Theological Digest* 39:4 (1992) 321-5.

¹⁶ Saliers, *Worship as Theology*, 136.

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition, art. 1155.

¹⁸ The epiclesis (also spelled epiklesis; from Ancient Greek: ἐπίκλησις "invocation" or "calling down from on high") is the part of the Anaphora (Eucharistic Prayer) by which the priest invokes the Holy Spirit (or the power of His blessing) upon the Eucharistic bread and wine in Western and in some Eastern Liturgies. Cf. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*.

¹⁹ See the Eucharistic Prayer II in the *New Roman Missal*. The new English translation.

²⁰ M. McGann, *Exploring Music as Worship and Theology*, 71.

²¹ ST. AUGUSTINE, *Confession*. 9, 6, 14: *Patrologia Latina* 32,769-770. Cf. United States Catholic Conference, Inc., English Translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church for the United States of America*, 1997.

Liturgical Music as Sacramental-Theological

Liturgical music is sacramental in character because of its close affiliation with liturgy. A good understanding of this statement requires a further clarification of the sacramental nature of liturgy. In the Liturgy, the presence of Christ is re-enacted under sacramental signs and symbols. As stated in the Encyclical on Liturgy *Mediator Dei*, in and through the sacred liturgy the work of our redemption in Christ is continued. “Christ acts each day to save us, in the sacraments and in His holy sacrifice.”²² Thus, the sacramental nature of liturgy is evident. The closer the affinity liturgical songs share with liturgy the more sacramental the songs are. In other words, the more the songs assist in making Christ present to the faithful, or as *Mediator Dei* puts it, “can lift the mind to higher things and foster true devotion of soul,”²³ the more indisputable its sacramentality is.

Sacramental presence of Christ in the liturgy and by extension in the liturgical actions (such as singing and music making) takes place in four ways. Christ is present in the Eucharistic bread (and wine) broken and shared, in the person of the minister (the priest-celebrant), in the word of God read or sung and in the liturgical assembly gathered for worship.²⁴ Thus, we see that liturgical songs not only help in making Christ presence felt but that Christ is present in the word of God, whether read or sung.

Liturgical Music as Biblical-Theological

The relationship between Bible and liturgy looks natural and simply understood as the presence of the Bible in the liturgy and the liturgy in the Bible. According to Renato De Zan this simple understanding presents a weak relationship between the two because of two reasons. First “studying Jewish and Christian liturgical data is not the same as studying how much Scripture there is in the liturgy,” second “the link between Bible and liturgy is present not only in our celebrations today. It is present in its own way at the beginning of salvation where the foundational saving Event took place.”²⁵ Therefore, the proposal of De Zan on how best to understand the relationship between Bible and liturgy is a threefold form of relationship: “the liturgy in the Bible, the *intratextual continuum* “Bible and Liturgy”²⁶ (foundational saving Event) and the *extratextual continuum* “Bible and Liturgy” (the Bible in the liturgy).”²⁷

The Bible is not just one of the components of the liturgy but the essential sustaining element. The Liturgy document expresses that as follows: “Sacred scripture is of greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For from it are drawn the lessons which are read and which are explained in the homily; from it too come the psalms which are sung. It is from Scripture that the petitions, prayers and hymns draw their inspiration and their force, and that

²² PIUS XII, Encyclical on the Sacred Liturgy, *Mediator Dei*, 1943, 29.

²³ PIUS XII, *Mediator Dei*, 1943, 193.

²⁴ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 7.

²⁵ R. DE ZAN, «Bible and Liturgy», in *Handbook for Liturgical Studies 1. Introduction to the Liturgy*, ed., A.J. Chupungco, Liturgical Press, Collegeville Minnesota 1997, 34.

²⁶ The adjective „intratextual“ is used to indicate that the elements of the subject are all found in Scripture. The adjective „extratextual“ is used to indicate that the elements are found outside the biblical text and within the liturgical ritual practice, and later in the celebration. Cf. R. DE ZAN «Bible and Liturgy» 35.

²⁷ R. DE ZAN «Bible and Liturgy» 35.

actions and signs derive their meaning.”²⁸ Hence, sung liturgical texts (such as Ordinary of the Mass, prayers) or psalms (like in the Proper of the Mass such as introductory antiphon, gradual or Communion antiphon) are liturgical music par excellence and suitable place for theologizing. Other musical pieces composed on paraphrased biblical texts are on the second level of liturgical music and then followed by the third level, which includes personally composed texts rich in biblical allusions or images of the Lord as “my Light and my Salvation”, “Alpha and Omega”, “worthy is the Lamb” or “Bread of heaven”.

Conclusion

Liturgy is the public worship of the Church, the mystical body of Christ, rendered to the Father through Christ the Head of the body.²⁹ In other words, „the liturgy is the work of the whole Christ, head and body. Our high priest celebrates it unceasingly in the heavenly liturgy, with the holy Mother of God, the apostles, all the saints, and the multitude of those who have already entered the kingdom.“³⁰ A musical composition or art of singing is judged theologically sound and appropriate for liturgy to the extent it possesses the six outlined theological characteristics, aids liturgy as real handmaid (*ancilia liturgiae*), aids the exegesis of the liturgical texts as against fostering textual obscurity, and is a prayer or sung rites.

In the conclusion, we want to draw some insights from two theological perspectives that were highlighted in the two similar definitions cited above. The ecclesiological and the eschatological dimensions of liturgy is a theological pointer to the ultimate goal of sacred music. As envisioned in the Book of Revelation (Rev.7, 9-11 and 19,1), the whole Church³¹ from every tribe, colour and race will gather at the heavenly banquet, at the feast of the Lamb, to sing with one voice to the glory of God crying out hallelujah, glory, honour, praise and worship be unto him forever and ever. Amen.

²⁸ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* no. 24.

²⁹ Cf. *Mediator Dei*.

³⁰ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 1187.

³¹ The «whole Church» implies the pilgrim Church on earth, the suffering Church- souls in purgatory, and the triumphant Church- the saints in heaven.