Music Ministry at Publicly Celebrated Mass during the Coronavirus Pandemic

These liturgical music directives are in effect temporarily and will be updated as new information becomes available. Please continue to refer to this document on the diocesan website as we move forward with Christ in the public celebration of Mass.

A cry from deep within our being, music is a way for God to lead us to the realm of higher things. Music is therefore a sign of God’s love for us and of our love for him. ... By its very nature song has both an individual and a communal dimension.¹

The communal dimension of music ministry demands that we consider first and foremost the common good of our brothers and sisters in Christ. The following guidelines for music at publicly celebrated Masses during the coronavirus pandemic take this first principle very seriously.

Various scientific studies have shown that singing dramatically increases the transmission of viruses.² ³ A recent webinar to discuss these scientific findings was hosted by the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA), Chorus America, Barbershop Harmony Society, and Performing Arts Medical Association (PAMA). Dr. Lucinda Halstead, MD, an otolaryngologist at the Medical University of South Carolina, stated unequivocally during this webinar that under current coronavirus pandemic conditions, there is no way for congregations or choirs to

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¹ USCCB, Sing to the Lord, 2007, no. 2.
³ Sara Austin, “Why Singers Might Be Covid-19 Super-Spreaders,” Elemental.medium.com, May 6, 2020, accessed May 13, 2020. “When you exhale, mucosal fluid forms a film deep in your contracting lungs. When you inhale and your lung walls expand, the film bursts, creating aerosol particles that are then breathed out into the world. “The rate at which you inhale or exhale affects the number of particles you emit, he says. Deep, slow breathing followed by a fast exhale would produce the fewest particles. The greatest number would come from quick inhalation (causing a more violent film burst) followed by slow and prolonged exhaling. “That’s kind of a description of singing,” Ristenpart says.”
safely sing together. Dr. Halstead further explained that masked singing is also unsafe, and that humming is, unfortunately, no different in terms of contagion spread than singing.⁴

**In light of this scientific and medical information, congregational singing and choral singing at public liturgies is strongly discouraged, and church choir rehearsals should not take place until further notice.**

“The Great Commandment states, ‘You shall love the Lord your God ... and love your neighbor as yourself’ (Matt. 22:37–39). During this pandemic, love for ourselves is expressed in the ways we protect ourselves from getting infected. In the same way, love for our neighbor is expressed in the ways we protect them from getting infected.”⁵

In keeping with this directive, the psalms, acclamations, dialogs, and responses of the Mass should be spoken, not sung, during public liturgies for the time being. As heart-breaking as this is for church musicians and for all who love the liturgy, responsible stewardship and the common good should move pastors and music directors to encourage the assembly’s spoken participation, instrumental music, and prayerful listening during public liturgies in the interim. For further information, please watch the webinar “A Conversation: What do Science and Data Say about the Near-Term Future of Singing,” (LINK) and read the articles referenced in the footnotes.

A physically isolated cantor/vocal soloist may be used; however, the goal of full, conscious, and active participation is defeated if a cantor/vocal soloist replaces the congregation. If used, a cantor/vocal soloist in physical isolation should only sing the elements of the liturgy that the assembly would not normally sing or that may be relegated to a schola. In addition, the cantor/vocal soloist should not sing familiar songs, to avoid the congregation singing along. For example, a vocal soloist might sing an unfamiliar psalm at the Entrance, Offertory, or Communion processions, but would not sing unfamiliar settings of the responsorial psalm or the Mass ordinary – these should instead be spoken by the entire assembly.

Solo or small instrumental ensembles might assist with adding musical prayer to liturgies. Keyboard, string, or percussion instruments are encouraged for such ensembles. Brass or wind instruments are not encouraged. Instrumentalists should maintain a minimum of six feet physical distancing from one another and from the assembly. Instrumentalists should be masked, both during any joint rehearsals and during the liturgy.

Pastors and music ministers might consider adding hymn singing to their online and/or livestreaming outreach to their parishioners, both to meet the very human need to sing together, and to continue to

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⁴ “A Conversation: What do Science and Data Say about the Near-Term Future of Singing,” c.f. 59:00:00, 1:20:00, and 1:22:00; (see also the slides from Dr. Halstead’s presentation at this LINK).

practice the music of the Church’s liturgy, preparing for the time we can again sing “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in [our] hearts to God.” (Col. 3:16)

Until that time, let us pray for the sick and for one another:

In the hour of trial and confusion
   Give us your Spirit, O Lord

In temptation and fragility
   Give us your Spirit, O Lord

In the fight against evil and sin
   Give us your Spirit, O Lord

In search for true good and true joy
   Give us your Spirit, O Lord

In the decision to remain in You and in Your friendship
   Give us your Spirit, O Lord

“In closing, I want to remind us of one certainty. The COVID-19 pandemic in its present form will pass. One day we will look back on this time and see clearly that God was with us and was working in our midst for good. Knowing this, we can turn to him today and ask him to give us the discernment, compassion, and faith to make the right decisions for our churches at this time.”

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