

# MUSIC DURING ENGLISH MASSES: REFLECTIONS ON THE “OFFERTORY” SONG

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Here in Vietnam, many seminaries and religious houses of formation have an English Mass, usually once a week, to familiarize their young men and women with the liturgical responses and prayers of the international language of Asia. But in many communities the level of English of the seminarians, sisters, and brothers is still developing and attempting to sing four English songs is a burden. The following reflection will explain that the ‘Offertory Song’ is not an important part of the Mass and the assembly is not even required to sing during this part of the liturgy. Silence or instrumental music is acceptable during the Preparation of the Gifts. This reflection will then continue on choices of songs for the Preparation of the Gifts and a cautionary reminder on selecting appropriate songs.

What follows are recommendations for English Masses in Vietnam; liturgical guidelines for other countries may be based on similar liturgical principles.

## 1. Updating terminology: from “Offertory” to “Preparation of the Gifts” Song

A full understanding of Preparation of the Gifts can be found in studying *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM #72 – #77) and the *Introduction to the Order of Mass: A Pastoral Resource* of the United States Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy (IOM #100 - #105). While most Catholics think that we are ‘offering’ during this time, actually the assembly is merely ‘preparing’ to be “joined to Christ in offering his sacrifice to the Father” that will take place during the Eucharistic Prayer (IOM #111). A full explanation of this topic can be found in *Thay Đổi Cách Nhìn Và Thực Hành Liên Quan Đến Dâng Lễ - Bài Ca Tiến Lễ* by Rev. Joseph Phạm Đình Ái, SSS. After decades of theological and liturgical reflection, the term ‘Preparation of the Gifts Song’ is gradually replacing the term ‘Offertory Song’ in the USA. Here in Vietnam, a similar updating of terminology can be found in *Hướng Dẫn Mục Vụ Thánh Nhạc*, in the use of ‘Tiến Lễ’ instead of ‘Dâng Lễ’ (#162). If you are collaborating with foreigners in a Sunday English Mass in Vietnam, the term ‘Preparation of the Gifts’ might still be unfamiliar to them and you might hear them still referring to the ‘Offertory Song’.

## 2. The Preparations of the Gifts is not a high point in the liturgy to be emphasized

Most Vietnamese choir directors and musicians still follow a standard four-song understanding of the Mass. They believe their primary duty is to sing: Ca Nhập Lễ, Ca Dâng Lễ, Ca Hiệp Lễ, and Ca Kết Lễ. They have not yet attended workshops about or intensely studied *Hướng Dẫn Mục Vụ Thánh Nhạc*, released by the Ủy ban Thánh Nhạc, Hội Đồng Giám Mục Việt Nam. That music document stresses that these moments of the liturgy are the most important for singing: the Mass ordinary, the responsorial psalm, the entrance song and the communion song. Singing by the assembly is not an essential part of the Preparation of the Gifts. In fact, no liturgical document even requires the choir or assembly to sing a song during the Preparation of the Gifts. This liturgical insight can be applied to two pastoral situations in Vietnam.

In the daily Mass of a seminary or religious house of formation, always singing four songs, every single day, needs to be evaluated. The most important songs are the Entrance and the Communion Songs. During the Preparation of the Gifts, no song is necessary and there can be silence (allowing the assembly to reflect more deeply on the Liturgy of the Word) or an instrumental (see #174 of *Hướng Dẫn Mục Vụ Thánh Nhạc*). This option is especially useful when applied to the weekly English Mass, if the local seminarians or religious community members only know a few English hymns. How relieved they will be to learn that they do not need to sing anything at all during this time of the Mass, freeing them from the burden of learning new songs, or repeating over and over again the few English songs that they already know.

For a Sunday English Mass with foreigners, many options exist. Depending upon the skills of the assembly to learn new music, the established repertoire of the choir and music ministers, the season of the liturgical year, and other pastoral considerations, there could be a rotation between many choices from Sunday to Sunday: (1) A song sung by the assembly, as led by the choir, (2) A 'choir anthem' sung only the choir, as inspirational listening for the assembly, (3) a solo song by a cantor, (4) instrumental music, no singing, (5) silence, which would be especially appropriate during the Lenten season.

### **3. The Preparation of the Gifts Song does not have to be about "Offertory"**

Immediately after Vatican II, with liturgical theology still developing, music leaders presumed that we 'offered' ourselves up during the 'offertory' time and hence they presumed they needed to sing a song about 'offering' bread and wine, or 'offering' themselves. That is an outdated liturgical understanding. The offering takes place during the Eucharistic Prayer. (See Fr. Ai's article referred to on page one.) Consider the guidelines by the Catholic Bishop's Conference of England and Wales in their 2005 Pastoral Introduction: *Celebrating the Mass* on the purpose of music during this part of the liturgy:

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*The purpose of any music at this point is to accompany the collection, the procession, and the presentation of gifts, particularly when these will occupy a considerable period of time. Sung texts need not speak of bread and wine, nor of offering. Texts expressing joy, praise, community, as well as the spirit of the season, are appropriate. Since the presentation of gifts is preparatory, instrumental music or silence may often be more effective. Care should be taken that the musical elaboration of this part of the Mass does not emphasize it to the detriment of the great act of thanksgiving that follows it.*

Some users of OCP's *English Missal Songbook* have questioned why categories for Gathering, Communion, Sending Forth, the various liturgical seasons, various solemnities and feasts are included, but no 'Offertory' section is found in the hymnal. Since many possible songs, especially those particular to a liturgical season, are allowed during the Preparation of the Gifts, the *English Missal Songbook* does not wish to limit the music director's choices by having a specific 'Offertory Song' section. This also applies to seminaries and religious communities during their weekday Masses. If they do choose to sing a hymn during this part of the Mass (which would be very appropriate on feast days in the understanding of "Progressive Solemnity", see #98 – 102 of *Hướng Dẫn Mục Vụ Thánh Nhạc*), they are not limited or required to sing lyrics that speak only of 'bread and wine' or about 'offering'.

### **4. Not all English songs are appropriate for Liturgy**

Some music directors of seminaries and religious houses of formation and some lay student leaders of Sunday English Masses search the web for new repertoire. Usually they do not have the experience or skills to know if the song they discover on YouTube is a well-known Catholic song, more common to the Protestant tradition, or a general "Praise and Worship" song from the Evangelical tradition. (Best if they search the websites of Catholic publishers or select songs from a standard Catholic hymnal or resource to ensure they are integrating well-known Catholic repertoire.) For the Preparation of the Gifts many Catholic songs are available. However there is one old song that has been introduced into the repertoire of religious communities and student English Masses in Vietnam that is not appropriate.

Avoid using *Blest are You, Lord of All Creation* (by Aniceto Nazareth), also known as *Blessed Be God* from the first line of the refrain. The text of this song, composed many decades ago, was based upon the ritual texts spoken by the priest during the Mass. For the assembly to sing these words of the priest is not appropriate since these are prayers particular the priest, not ritual texts of the assembly. These prayers are not even a ritual text that should be highlighted (as singing a text elevates its importance), as the rubrics in the GIRM clearly states (#23 - #25) that the priest would "say in a low voice", and "the Priest may speak these words aloud." Perhaps this song has become very popular in Vietnam because choirs think this song fulfills the need for 'Offertory'. As stated above, that focus is not required. Best if this song would be removed from the seminary, religious community, and Sunday English Mass repertoire and replaced with other appropriate songs. But again, even singing a song during the Preparation of the Gifts, especially for a daily Mass in a seminary or religious house of formation, is not necessary or required.

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

• I am the music director at my seminary and wish to begin having silence during our Preparation of the Gifts, since it is so brief, not having any collection or procession with the gifts. We barely have enough time to even sing through one refrain and one verse of a song. Makes no sense to me for us to sing a song. But the other seminarians say we must sing a song. What should I do?

Consider giving them copies of *Hướng Dẫn Mục Vụ Thánh Nhạc*, and remind them as future priests that they should be following the directives of the Vietnamese Bishop's Conference on Liturgy and Music. Confer with the director of liturgy at your seminary and ask him to present these reflections to all the seminarians.

• I am music director at my convent and we have an English Mass once a week. We tried having silence last Wednesday during the Preparation of the Gifts and it felt very strange. We were all uncomfortable, not having a song. Some sisters are asking me to lead a song next week. What should I do?

Any change is difficult, especially for religious institutions. Also in Vietnamese prayer style, any moment of silence is rare, with the inclusion of devotion prayers immediately before and after the Mass. Often there is not one second of silence in the entire liturgy. So having silence during the Preparation of the Gifts will feel unusual at first. Ask your formation director to have a session with all the sisters reflecting on the role of silence during the liturgy (*Thinh Lặng Trong Cử Hành Phụng Vụ* by Fr. Ái) Be patient; after several months you will grow to appreciate the silence during those Masses that you choose to not sing an 'Offertory Song'. But remember, on some feast days and some more festive seasons (Octave of Christmas, Octave of Easter) you may wish to sing a song during this time of the Mass.

• I lead music on Sundays for a small group of foreigners in my city. My choir of Vietnamese university students loves singing *Blest Are You*, but now I understand we should remove that song from our repertoire, and why it is not found in the OCP songbook. Do you have other suggestions from the *English Missal Songbook* that speak of 'offering' when we do sing a 'choir anthem' during the Preparation of the Gifts and wish to have the lyrics focus on that topic?

Your students have probably enjoyed singing the two part harmonies to *Blest Are You*. If so, I suggest *Christify* by Manoling Francisco. (The harmony descant can be found in your guitar accompaniment book.) Also consider *Take and Receive*, *These Alone Are Enough*, *My God and My All*, and *Take My Hands* as possible new songs for your choir to learn.

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