

# WHAT IS A CATHOLIC HYMN?

## A Doctrinally Grounded Definition for Parish Musicians

### Introduction

As Catholic musicians, we are entrusted with shaping the Church's sung prayer. The Catechism teaches that the sacred liturgy is the public worship of the Church, where Christ the Head and His Body offer praise to the Father<sup>1</sup>. In an era when missalettes draw from both Catholic and Protestant hymn traditions, we are invited to ask a foundational question: **what defines a Catholic hymn within the Church's own understanding of liturgical prayer?** The Catechism reminds us that liturgical music must express the faith of the Church, flow from her doctrine, and serve the dignity of the sacred rites<sup>2</sup>. **How well do we recognize the characteristics that distinguish Catholic hymnody, and can we identify those distinctions when selecting music for the liturgy we serve?**

A Catholic hymn is more than a religious song. It is a sung expression of the Church's faith, shaped by doctrine, rooted in tradition, and ordered toward the liturgical action of the Mass. This definition is grounded in three authoritative sources: the Catechism of the Catholic Church<sup>1</sup>, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal<sup>2</sup>, and the USCCB's 2020 document Catholic Hymnody at the Service of the Church<sup>3</sup>.

In developing this definition, we also reviewed the major Church documents that guide the Church's understanding of sacred music, including Sacrosanctum Concilium, Musicam Sacram, Tra le Sollecitudini, De Musica Sacra, the Roman Missal, and the Graduale Romanum. Each of these sources affirms the same core principles: hymns used in the liturgy must express Catholic doctrine clearly, serve the liturgical action of the Mass, participate in the Church's sacred musical tradition, and be approved by ecclesial authority. The definition presented here is fully consistent with these documents and reflects the Church's own understanding of authentic Catholic hymnody.

## 1. A Catholic Hymn Must Express the Truth of the Catholic Faith

Hymns used in the liturgy must faithfully express Catholic doctrine<sup>3</sup>, especially regarding the Trinity, the divinity and humanity of Christ, the Paschal Mystery, the Eucharist as sacrifice and real presence, the Church as sacramental and communal, and the life of grace<sup>1</sup>. Hymns that obscure Christ's identity, weaken Eucharistic doctrine, or reduce salvation to subjective experience are unsuitable for liturgical use<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. A Catholic Hymn Must Serve the Liturgical Action of the Mass

The GIRM teaches that sung texts are part of the liturgical action itself<sup>2</sup>. For example, the Entrance Chant must open the celebration, foster unity, introduce the mystery of the season or feast, and accompany the procession<sup>2</sup>. A hymn may be beautiful and doctrinally sound, but if it does not serve the ritual action, it is not functioning as Catholic hymnody<sup>2</sup>.

## 3. A Catholic Hymn Participates in the Church's Tradition of Sacred Music

Sacred music exists for the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful<sup>1</sup>. A Catholic hymn reflects the Church's sacramental worldview, draws from Scripture and tradition<sup>1</sup>, maintains continuity with the Church's musical heritage, and avoids styles or texts that prioritize performance or sentimentality<sup>3</sup>.

## 4. A Catholic Hymn Must Be Approved or Permitted for Liturgical Use

The GIRM requires that sung texts at the Entrance, Offertory, and Communion come from the Roman Gradual, the Simple Gradual, or another liturgical chant approved by the Conference of Bishops<sup>2</sup>. This means hymn texts must undergo doctrinal review<sup>3</sup>, hymnals must be approved by ecclesial authority<sup>2</sup>, and not every Christian hymn is suitable for Mass<sup>3</sup>.

## 5. A Catholic Hymn Reflects the Church's Ecclesial and Sacramental Identity

The USCCB identifies recurring issues in contemporary hymnody<sup>3</sup>, including overemphasis on individual experience, ambiguous references to Christ, weak Eucharistic language, and reduction of salvation to emotion. A Catholic hymn must present Christ clearly<sup>3</sup>, express the Church's communal identity<sup>1</sup>, reflect sacramental realism<sup>1</sup>, and support the faithful in entering the mysteries of the liturgy<sup>2</sup>.

### Authoritative Definition

A Catholic hymn is a sung text that faithfully expresses Catholic doctrine<sup>3</sup>, serves the liturgical action of the Mass as articulated in the GIRM<sup>2</sup>, participates in the Church's sacred musical tradition<sup>1</sup>, and is approved for liturgical use by ecclesial authority<sup>2</sup>.

## 6. Comparison Chart: Liturgical, Devotional, and Non-Catholic Hymns

This chart summarizes the essential differences between the three major categories of hymn texts encountered in parish life. It is designed for quick reference by parish musicians, catechists, and liturgy planners.

### Liturgical Hymns

- Texts that belong to the liturgy itself (e.g., the Gloria, Sanctus, Agnus Dei, sequences, and the Liturgy of the Hours hymns).
- Their wording is fixed by the Church and cannot be altered.
- They express the Church's prayer in an official, juridical sense.
- They are universal: the same text is used throughout the world.
- They are not optional "songs" but integral parts of the rite.

### Devotional Hymns

- Texts that arise from the Church's devotional life rather than the liturgy.
- They express approved Catholic devotions: Marian, Sacred Heart, angels, saints, Eucharistic adoration, etc.
- They may be used at Mass when doctrinally sound and pastorally appropriate.
- They support the faithful's participation but are not part of the liturgical books.
- They vary by region, culture, parish tradition, and religious communities.

### Non-Catholic Hymns

- Texts originating outside Catholic tradition or expressing non-Catholic theology.
- May contain ambiguity, incomplete doctrine, or ideas inconsistent with Catholic teaching.
- Require careful discernment before use in a Catholic liturgy.
- Not automatically excluded but must be evaluated for doctrinal clarity.
- Should never replace liturgical texts or obscure Catholic identity.

### Key Principle

Liturgical hymns belong to the rite itself. Devotional hymns support the rite and express Catholic spirituality. Non-Catholic hymns must be evaluated carefully and used only when they clearly express the Catholic faith.

## 7. The Historical Use of Devotional Hymns at Mass

Although the Church defines a liturgical hymn as a text belonging to the sacred rites themselves, the lived tradition of the Roman Rite reveals a broader musical practice. For centuries, Catholic parishes have incorporated devotional hymns into the celebration of Mass, not as liturgical texts, but as expressions of the Church's devotional life that support the faithful's participation. This practice developed especially from the 17th century onward and became a defining feature of parish life across the English-speaking Catholic world.

### A. Why Devotional Hymns Were Used at Mass

The Church has always recognized the value of approved Catholic devotions such as Marian devotion, the Sacred Heart, the angels, St. Joseph, the saints, and Eucharistic adoration. Hymns expressing these devotions were permitted at Mass when they were doctrinally sound, expressed Catholic faith clearly, supported the people's prayer, and harmonized with the liturgical season or feast. These hymns were not liturgical texts, but they were authentically Catholic and served as a bridge between the devotional life of the faithful and the liturgical action.

### B. A Common Practice Across Catholic Countries

This was not a local or isolated custom. Hymnologists and researchers consistently report that the same patterns were found in the United States, England, Ireland, and Canada. In all these regions, devotional hymnody formed a shared Catholic culture. Parishioners learned the liturgical year, the saints, and the mysteries of the faith through the hymns they sang.

### C. Pre-Mass Devotional Hymns: A Universal Parish Tradition

One of the most widespread expressions of Catholic devotional hymnody was the singing of devotional hymns before Mass. This musical prelude was not part of the liturgy itself, but it served an important pastoral and catechetical purpose: it prepared the faithful spiritually and connected them to the rhythm of the liturgical year.

This custom was practiced across the Catholic world, and your own parish, St. Mary's in Akron, Ohio, embodied it beautifully. Before Mass, the choir regularly sang older Marian hymns from before the 1960s, hymns to the Guardian Angels, hymns to St. Joseph, and hymns to saints whose feasts were approaching. These hymns were intentionally chosen to announce upcoming feasts, honor the saint or mystery of the approaching day, foster recollection and devotion, and prepare the congregation for the sacred mysteries. This was not merely a musical prelude; it was catechesis through hymnody, forming the devotional imagination of the parish and strengthening Catholic identity.

Researchers and hymnologists consistently report that this same pattern was found throughout English-speaking Catholicism. St. Mary's was participating in a shared, trans-Atlantic Catholic culture, where devotional hymnody supported the liturgical life of the parish without being part of the liturgical texts themselves.

#### D. Examples of Devotional Hymns Historically Used at Mass

- Sacred Heart hymns (“O Sacred Heart, O Love Divine”)
- Marian hymns (“Mother Dear, O Pray for Me”)
- Eucharistic devotional hymns (“Veni Jesu, Amor Mi”)
- Hymns to the angels (“Beautiful Angel from Heaven So Bright”)
- Hymns to the saints (“Dear Guardian of Mary”)
- Mission and parish hymns (“O Holy Name of Majesty and Power,” hymn of the Holy Name Society)
- Hymns from religious orders — especially those whose sisters staffed Catholic schools and shaped parish devotional life:
  - **Sisters of Notre Dame**
  - **Sisters of St. Joseph**
  - **Sisters of Mercy**

These communities produced some of the most beloved devotional hymns sung in American parishes, and their influence was especially strong in places like **St. Mary's in Akron, Ohio**, where their hymnody formed generations of Catholic children and shaped the parish's devotional imagination.

#### E. The Key Principle

Devotional hymns may be used at Mass when they are doctrinally Catholic, express the Church's faith, and support the people's participation, even though they are not liturgical hymns by definition. This historical reality helps parish musicians today understand the full landscape of Catholic hymnody: liturgical hymns, devotional hymns used in liturgical contexts, and non-Catholic hymns.

#### F. Discernment of Parish Musical Traditions

Every parish carries a musical story — hymns that have been sung for generations, melodies that shaped childhood faith, and devotional songs that became part of the parish's spiritual “family history.” These traditions deserve genuine respect. They often reflect the devotion of the people, the influence of teaching sisters, and the lived Catholicism that formed so many of us.

At the same time, the Church invites us to look at these traditions with loving discernment. Not every hymn that is familiar is necessarily suitable for Mass, and not every cherished song expresses the fullness of Catholic faith. Discernment does not mean rejecting our past; it means **honoring what is good** and **gently refining what needs clarity**.

When evaluating parish musical traditions, we look for hymns that express Catholic teaching clearly and beautifully, draw the faithful toward prayer rather than sentimentality, reflect the mysteries of the liturgical year, strengthen Catholic identity, and help the whole community pray with one heart.

This kind of discernment allows a parish to treasure its musical heritage while ensuring that everything sung at Mass truly serves the sacred liturgy. In this way, tradition and liturgical integrity work together — preserving what has nourished the faithful and passing on what is best to the next generation.

### Companion Document

For a fuller pastoral reflection on how these principles shape parish life and musical choices, see the companion document, ***A Pastoral Look at the Hymns We Sing: The Parish Hymnody Study***.

# Pastoral FAQs for Parish Musicians

## 1. Why can't we just sing any hymn we like at Mass?

Because the Mass has its own texts and prayers given by the Church. Hymns can support the liturgy, but they cannot replace the liturgy's own words. Our goal is to choose music that helps the whole parish pray with the mind of the Church.

## 2. What makes a hymn "Catholic"?

A hymn is Catholic when its text expresses the Church's faith clearly and fully. This includes devotion to Mary, the saints, the angels, the Sacred Heart, the Eucharist, and the mysteries of Christ. Catholic hymnody is rooted in Scripture, doctrine, and the Church's devotional life.

## 3. Are devotional hymns allowed at Mass?

Yes. Devotional hymns have been used at Mass for centuries, especially before Mass and at certain points where the Church permits a suitable hymn. They are not liturgical texts, but they can support the people's prayer when they express Catholic faith clearly.

## 4. Why did we sing certain hymns before Mass when I was growing up?

Many parishes, including St. Mary's in Akron, had strong devotional traditions shaped by teaching sisters and parish missions. These hymns prepared the faithful for Mass, taught the mysteries of the faith, and connected the parish to the liturgical year.

## 5. What about hymns from other Christian traditions?

Some may be usable, but they must be evaluated carefully. If a hymn expresses incomplete or non-Catholic theology, it may not be appropriate for Mass. Our goal is always to strengthen Catholic identity and clarity of faith.

## 6. How do we balance parish tradition with liturgical integrity?

We honor what has nourished the parish while also ensuring that every hymn used at Mass expresses Catholic faith clearly and supports the liturgy. This means preserving what is good, refining what needs clarity, and helping the parish pray with one heart.

For a fuller explanation of how the Church understands different kinds of hymns and how parish traditions fit into this, see Sections 6 and 7 of this handout.

## ENDNOTES (Quick-Reference Version)

### 1. Catechism of the Catholic Church — core teachings for hymn selection:

- CCC 1066–1075 — What the liturgy is; Christ the Head and His Body offering worship.
- CCC 1124–1125 — Lex orandi, lex credendi: liturgy must express the Church’s faith.
- CCC 1156–1158 — Sacred music as integral to liturgy; must express doctrine.
- CCC 1674–1676 — Popular piety and devotions in harmony with the liturgy.

### 2. General Instruction of the Roman Missal — norms governing sung texts:

- GIRM 39–41 — Purpose of sacred music in the Mass.
- GIRM 47–48 — Entrance Chant: purpose and function.
- GIRM 74 — Offertory Chant: unity and ritual action.
- GIRM 86–87 — Communion Chant: expressing unity and joy.

### 3. USCCB, \*Catholic Hymnody at the Service of the Church\* (2020) — doctrinal criteria:

- Christological clarity — hymns must clearly confess Christ.
- Eucharistic realism — hymns must reflect sacrifice and real presence.
- Ecclesial identity — hymns must express the Church as communal and sacramental.
- Doctrinal review — hymns must be evaluated for theological accuracy.