

Understanding Mass Propers

A Brief History of Music for the Mass

The word “Proper” is used in the liturgy to denote the texts that can change from Mass to Mass. This stands in opposition to the “Ordinary” of the Mass, which refers to the parts that are the same at every celebration of the Holy Mass. So, we can refer to parts that are *Ordinary* (unchanging) and *Proper* to a liturgical day or celebration.

Prior to the reform of the liturgy following the Second Vatican Council, the Mass Ordinary contained five parts: *Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus & Benedictus, and Agnus Dei*. These texts were chanted by the choir alone. During the Middle Ages the chanters would often stand around one very large book that included the various chants (*see photo*).

For the first eight or nine centuries of Christianity the music at Mass was chanted as a single, distinct melody without accompaniment or harmony (monophony). We often refer to these melodies as plainchant or Gregorian chant. Around the 10th century a technique called *organum* was developed in which another voice was added, mimicking the chant melody at a set interval (for example, a perfect fifth). Later developments added more complex forms of organum using even more voices. Eventually a style of choral writing arose in which many voices, usually of equal importance, sang different notes and rhythms. This was called polyphony. Composers would write settings of individual parts of the Mass Ordinary.

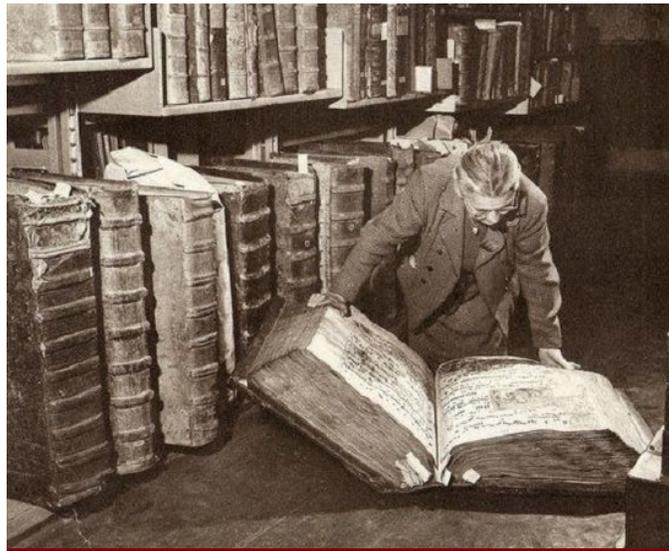
In the 14th century, a French poet and composer named Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300-1377) wrote a polyphonic setting of all of the Mass Ordinary. It was the first time that all five movements of the Ordinary were conceived as a unified whole. Within a century this was common practice and some of the most glorious music ever composed was created. The art was perfected in the 16th century by composers whose names live on to this day: Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (c. 1525-1594), Tomás Luis de Victoria (c. 1548-1611),

William Byrd (1543-1623), and many others wrote Mass settings that are still part of the choral repertoire. Even in the vernacular liturgy of today composers often write Mass Ordinaries which are linked through melody, rhythm, and musical style.

Since the New Order of Mass (*Novus Ordo Missae*) was promulgated by Pope Paul VI, some practical aspects of the Ordinary and Proper have seen developments and

changes (*see charts on next page*). However, these words can still accurately describe the parts of the Mass.

On a related note, the pre-Vatican II Mass, called the *Extraordinary Form, the Tridentine Mass or Traditional Latin Mass*, follows the rubrics as they appear in the 1962 Roman Missal (the last edition printed prior to the Second Vatican Council). Therefore, the Proper texts are always used and cannot be changed.



A Medieval Choir Book

The Historical Development of Mass Texts

The Mass Ordinary

Historically, sacred music for the Mass was divided into two categories: the **Ordinary** and the **Propers**. The Ordinary of the Mass contained the parts which were sung at every Mass (like the Gloria) while the Propers contained texts which would vary from day to day. Prior to the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the music at Mass (Ordinary & Propers) was normally sung by a choir of trained singers. Mass Ordinaries compose the heart of the choral repertoire of the late-15th and 16th-centuries. Even today, Mass compositions often are considered to be a pinnacle of choral composition.

Vatican II emphasized the importance of congregational participation (both internal and external) in the reform of the liturgy.¹ A strong emphasis was placed on congregational singing. Because the texts were reformed, the concept of the Ordinary changed slightly.

Historic Ordinary of the Mass

Kyrie

Gloria

Credo

Sanctus & Benedictus

Agnus Dei

Current Ordinary of the Mass

Penitential Act (3 options)

Kyrie (if not included in chosen option)

Glory to God

Creed

Holy

Memorial Acclamation (3 options)

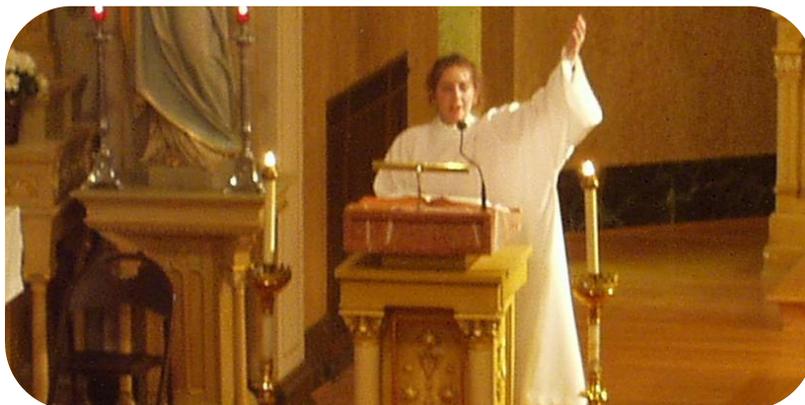
Great Amen

Lamb of God

The Mass Propers

As already mentioned, the Mass Propers are the texts which vary from Mass to Mass. Because of their limited use, Mass Propers were normally simple (especially compared to Mass Ordinary Compositions). Historically, some were sung by the priest and others by a choir of trained singers.

A chart of the Proper texts is found on the next page.



¹For examples, see the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)*, nos. 11, 14, 28, 30, 113, 114, 118.

<i>Historic Propers of the Mass</i>	<i>Current Propers of the Mass</i> ¹
Introit	Entrance Chant or Song
Collect (priest alone)	Collect (priest alone)
Gradual	Responsorial Psalm
	Sequence ²
Alleluia or Tract ³	Gospel Acclamation
Sequence ⁴	
	The Universal Prayer (often recited)
Offertory	Offertory Chant or Song
Secret (priest only)	Prayer over the Gifts (priest only)
Roman Canon	Eucharistic Prayer & Preface
Communion Chant	Communion Chant or Song
Post Communion (priest only)	Prayer after Communion (priest only)

There are a number of variations to the above-mentioned texts (for example, a Gradual may still replace the Responsorial Psalm), but the most-used options are mentioned in the chart above. The Proper Texts are located in three separate liturgical books – the Roman Missal, the Lectionary for Mass, and the Roman Gradual.

Setting aside the Responsorial Psalm, Gospel Acclamation and the Universal Prayer (Prayers of the Faithful) as well as those prayers chanted by the priest alone, there are three Proper texts of special interest to church musicians – **the Entrance Chant/Song**, the **Offertory Chant/Song**, and the **Communion Chant/Song**.

Why didn't we implement the use of some proper chants right after Vatican 2?

There are numerous reasons why the Entrance, Offertory and Communion antiphons were not fully utilized.

- Lack of musical settings in English; lack of access to resources
- Use of these texts is one of four options permitted in the dioceses of the United States
- The texts were not included in many (most?) hymnals
- New congregational music every single week was not seen as advantageous
- Use of modes and 4-line chant notation
- Musical style

Why should we use these texts now?

These texts are part of the *Roman Missal* and are entirely based upon Holy Scripture. They often reinforce the Gospel of the Day (especially during the seasons) or focus the mind on Biblical images of the Eucharist, thus enhancing the participation of the faithful and deepening the mysteries celebrated.

¹Scripture readings are, of course, proper to the day. Since they rarely are sung they are not included in this chart.

²In the reformed (currently used) Mass, the Sequence is only required on Easter Sunday and Pentecost Day. Optional sequences may be used on the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ and the Memorial of Our Lady of Sorrows.

³The *Tract* replaced the *Alleluia* in Lent, at Requiem Masses and other penitential times.

⁴Prior to the current Missal, the Sequence followed the Alleluia or Tract.