

CHOOSING THE HYMNS (Part 2)

The second of two articles in which The Reverend Peter Moger offers guidance on the choice of hymns and songs for worship

I was once asked to sing at a Parish Eucharist the hymn *Strengthen for service, Lord, the hands that holy things have taken*. Fine - except that the hymn had been chosen as a Gradual, before the reading of the Gospel! At that point in the service, our hands had not taken anything, holy or otherwise! By singing this hymn here, its impact as a fine post-communion hymn was totally lost.

The correct placing of hymns within a service is crucial. When we put together a service, we should ask of each hymn or song: 'What job are we expecting it to do?' and 'How does it fit within the shape of flow of the liturgy?' The Eucharist, in particular, has an in-built sense of flow and the hymns should help this process. A 'standard' Order One Parish Communion might have five hymns/songs, each of which has a clear liturgical function:

- **An opening hymn (which might cover a procession).** This needs to gather the congregation in worship and set the tone for the service. If there is a theme for the worship, it might set that theme. An opening hymn should be well-known, and if it is to cover processional movement, it should be long enough for this purpose.
- **A Gradual hymn before the Gospel.** This will focus on the readings or on the person of Christ as seen in the Gospel reading. For this hymn, the shorter the better. This is often the most difficult hymn to choose: we need to make use of the scripture indexes in the back of hymn books. A worship song (or group of songs) can work well at this point.
- **A hymn at the preparation of the gifts ('Offertory').** This hymn should be long enough to cover the preparation of the altar and gifts (and perhaps also the taking of a collection), but its liturgical purpose is to manage the 'gear-change' from word to sacrament. It does not necessarily have to have a sacramental focus. Coming before the *Sursum corda* ('Lift up your hearts....') at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer, this hymn can be a powerful means of encouraging the congregation to lift up their hearts and join in the worship of 'the whole company of heaven.'
- **A hymn during the administration.** This is the place for a devotional hymn or song which enables the congregation to meet with Christ in the sacrament. The volume of this hymn is crucial: unaccompanied singing is sometimes preferable here, as is the use of Taizé chants or quiet worship songs.
- **A post-communion hymn.** The job of the final hymn is to sum up the worship and send out God's people 'to live and work to his praise and glory.' *Common Worship* makes it clear that this should come before the blessing and not as a recessional hymn. Hence it does not necessarily have to be over-long.