

How to Get Your Teens to Sing at Mass

By **Craig Colson** | JANUARY 23, 2012

We've all seen it before – teens with their arms folded, staring out into space (if their eyes are even open at all). They're whispering to their friends, giggling, and just plain *not* engaged in the liturgy. During the songs or homilies, all they hear is the teacher's voice from the old Charlie Brown cartoons, "womp, womp, womp . . . womp, womp, womp, womp."

If this at all describes your church on Sundays – then "Houston, we have a problem!" The question we need to ask ourselves is: How we can get our young people engaged in the liturgy, the highest point of prayer we have as a Church? I think to answer this question we need to return to some basic keys of youth ministry.

Build Relationships

We can't forget that youth ministry is all about relationships. Jesus himself spent time building relationships with his apostles and we need to follow his example. If the teens don't know you as the music minister, you're just some guy or some lady with a guitar or who sits behind a piano.

I always tell musicians to consider it part of their ministry to be at most or every Life Night and retreat. If we spend time introducing ourselves to the teens and getting to know them and finding out what their interests are, we begin to build relationships. We may even discover that our parish has some teens with amazing musical gifts and talents.

A retreat is a great time to bring up the Life Teen band and not only provide Praise and Worship for the weekend, but have a jam session at free time and invite teens who play instruments to simply "jam." Teens

will often jump at the opportunity and you can use these moments as a time to begin dialogue with them. Now you're not just the guy or girl with an instrument. You're an actual person who they have begun to build a relationship with.

Now, when you invite them to sing at Mass, they know you and may just give it a try. Always remember that we are not drawing teens to ourselves or our own talent, rather to Christ through the gifts and talents he has given us.

Be Hospitable and Welcoming

Maybe your schedule prohibits you from attending retreats and/or Life Nights. Take some time before and after Mass to put down your instrument and go out and introduce yourself to a few of the teens. Tell them that you're so glad they came to Mass tonight and begin a simple conversation with them. It can be as simple as, "What school do you go to?" or "What year in school are you?"

Again, this will help them to get to know you and be more apt to listen to what you have to say before Mass begins and participate with you. If this extra time conflicts with your pre-Mass music rehearsal, start practice 15 minutes earlier and make the time.

Invite, Don't Scold

Before Mass, many parishes will take some time to "warm up" the congregation. When beginning this time, work with your Core Team prior to the Mass so that they know when they hear you begin to talk over the microphone they need to get the teens who may still be talking outside or in the vestibule in to their seats. Hopefully, they can work towards getting the teens to their pews five or ten minutes before the hour so that they have some time to pray before Mass.

When going over songs, make sure you have the attention of the congregation first. Don't just start talking over them when no one is listening. Welcome everyone to the Mass and invite them to quiet down

if their is still chatter going on.

One of the keys to inviting people to sing is simply that – to invite. Don't scold the congregation and don't show your frustration and start saying how you come here week after week to lead them in song and no one sings! This is the wrong approach! Simply invite and affirm them. Remind them that our role at the Liturgy is to practice full, active, conscious, participation as Vatican II tells us. Tell them that it sounds so beautiful to hear their voices singing God's praise together.

Pick Songs They Know

Song selection is key.

The liturgical documents of our Church talk about the “pastoral decision” in selecting music. That pastoral decision encompasses many factors. First of all, how many new songs will you be using at a particular Liturgy? It may be easy for you or your group to pick up and learn a new song, but it's not as easy for a congregation.

Avoid picking more than one new song per week. Sing the songs they know to get them accustomed to singing. Be creative and of course, plan music that ties in with the readings and the focus your priest will be preaching about. Maybe you take a song your congregation knows and change the arrangement or instrumentation to make it sound a little fresher. Maybe the song stands great on its own and you don't need to do that. That's where the pastoral decision comes in.

Another question you need to ask is what key is the song in? Many musicians just sing songs that are too high for a congregation to sing. Try not to go above a “d” on the staff and occasionally an “e” but anything above those notes that you are expecting the assembly to sing is just too high, in my opinion. People will just put down the song sheet and listen.

Use the *Life Teen Liturgy Guide* as a tool to pick songs, but don't think

that just because there are songs recommended in the guide that you have to know them or use them. We try to give a variety of selections so that parishes who are in all different places and know all different kinds of music can benefit from them. Don't just try to find the newest song on christian radio and think that you have to sing that song at your Mass.

The Mass deserves our highest focus and attention. We have a duty and a obligation to create an environment for our young people and our entire community to enable them to lift their voices to the Lord in song and praise.