

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

... regarding the Saint Jean de Brébeuf Catholic Hymnal

Q. My friend said Catholics should never omit verses when singing hymns at Mass. She says “we always sing the full hymn” in her Protestant church. Is she correct?

The basic argument many Protestants make is : “Hymns are a story, and if you omit verses the story doesn’t make any sense.” ***That is not true.***

THE SACRED LITURGY

Those who examine the Catholic liturgy realize it’s not uncommon to sing only selected verses from hymns. An excellent example is *Tantum Ergo*, a Eucharistic hymn written by Saint Thomas Aquinas. The full hymn begins with the words *Pange Lingua*, but during liturgical functions the last two verses only are sung—beginning with *Tantum Ergo* and omitting all the rest. The sacred liturgy has “its own logic” and someone unfamiliar with the liturgy might think it strange to begin a song with the Latin word ***ergo***, which makes reference to ideas which came before. Again: *the sacred liturgy has its own logic.*

FRAGMENTS ARE COMMON

Father Adrian Fortescue, the preëminent Roman Catholic scholar of his time, wrote as follows in the hymnal he published in 1913: “Many breviary hymns **are really only fragments of very long compositions.** It would become tiring to sing ten or twenty verses; nor does there seem any object in filling up pages with verses which we should never use. So when the hymn seemed too long I have left out later verses, taking only those generally sung.”

Turn the page ...

THE ANCIENT BREVIARY

Many hymns in the *Antiphonale Romanum* are broken up into various sections. The PANGE LINGUA by Bishop Fortunatus is a good example: during Passiontide, the first half is sung during Matins, while the second half is sung during Lauds. Something even more drastic is done for *Aurora Lucis Rutilat*. Indeed, countless examples could be given: *Lux Alma Jesu*, *Jesu Decus Angelicum*, *A Solis Ortus Cardine*, *Hostis Herodes Impie*, and so forth. Even the most famous hymns—such as *Vexilla Regis*—are often small fragments from longer works. A publication which appeared after the Second Vatican Council (viz. the LIBER HYMNARIUS) omits a great number of verses which had been in use prior to Vatican II.

NOT THE FULL STORY

Many Protestant hymns are actually metrical versions from the psalter. It would be easy to create metrical versions of certain psalms, such as Psalm 116 (*Laudáte Dóminum*) because it's very short; but this is not the case for lengthy psalms like Psalm 118 (*Beáti Immaculáti*). Indeed, the earliest Protestant hymn books—such as JOHN DAY'S METRICAL PSALTER printed in 1584AD—frequently break up the psalms. Therefore, the notion that Protestants don't "break up" hymns is false.

FITTING THE SACRED ACTION

In the *Saint Jean de Brébeuf Hymnal*, unlike most Catholic hymnals, many verses are provided for each hymn. That means the musician can easily make the hymn longer or shorter, corresponding perfectly to the sacred action. In an important motu proprio called *Tra Le Sollecitudini*, Pope Saint Pius X wrote: "It must be considered a very grave abuse when the liturgy in ecclesiastical functions is made to appear secondary to ... the music."