



Are you in the know?

Sanctus—Holy, Holy, Holy

The Gloria can be said or sung, and is omitted during two seasons of the church year. But the Sanctus, or Holy, Holy, Holy, is the hymn at the heart of the Mass. It must be included at every Mass, whether in the grandest church or the humblest, at the largest gathering or the smallest. We should always sing the Sanctus with the angels, who sing eternally in adoration of God.

The Sanctus recalls three important scriptural accounts, one from the Old Testament and two from the New. In its structure the hymn gathers both parts of scripture into one, wedding old and new, Jewish and Christian, into a whole. Think of a seamless garment, a royal robe draped about us as we enter into the Eucharistic Prayer. That is the Sanctus.

When God calls the prophet Isaiah, God gives him a vision. In the vision, God is seated on a throne, “high and exalted, and the skirt of his robe filled the temple.” (Isaiah 6:1b) God is surrounded by many-winged seraphim, each of them calling out to one another without ceasing the praises of God. They do not speak to God; they speak of God.

Holy, holy, holy Lord,

God of hosts.

Heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

The word “hosts” refers to the heavenly hosts, of whom Luke writes in his account of the Nativity. The heavenly hosts are the legions of angels who move and work at God’s command. This power, this might, is what we profess in the creed: God is the maker of all things visible and, in the heavenly hosts, invisible.

It is the call of Isaiah—and through baptism, our own call—that we hear in the opening words of the hymn.

Then the Sanctus leads us into the life of Jesus, both his birth and his journey to Jerusalem and the cross. Matthew tells us the crowds greeted Jesus as he entered the city with glad cries

Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Matthew 21:9b)

Combine the cry “Hosanna” with “in the highest” from the angels’ song on the night of Jesus’ birth, and one begins to understand how expansive and how rich is this hymn. Prophet, priest, king—it is Jesus in his fullness and we, through Jesus, in our own.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

It is Jesus who comes in the name of the Lord. Pay attention to the use of the present tense. We know Jesus came among us. We know Jesus will come again in glory. The Sanctus reminds us that Jesus comes among us now, in the Eucharist, in bread and wine, blessed and broken, blessed and poured out, for us, for the life of the world.

Eucharistic Prayers II and III model the seamlessness of the hymn in their transitions from song to prayer. In EP II “Hosanna in the highest” flows into “You are indeed Holy, O Lord, the fount of all holiness.”

EP III echoes and expands upon the hymn of the heavenly host, saying, “You are indeed Holy, O Lord, and all you have created rightly gives you praise.”

The Sanctus bridges heaven and earth. Heaven and earth join in song, just as in the Eucharist God and humankind join in the Body and Blood of Christ. We go robed and rejoicing to the feast.

Are you in the know...you are now!



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