



Singing with Angels

by Arlene Oost-Zinner and Jeffrey Tucker

A young boy of eight is sitting at his desk, pencil in hand, involved in his task, sketch upon sketch strewn about the floor and under his chair. From his lips comes a simple song, the same line repeated over and over again, slowly, and in rhythm with each beat of his heart, each stroke of his imagination. He is singing the opening line of the "Salve Regina," just a few simple notes but infused with unfathomable spiritual power. It's no wonder that St. Bernhard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), upon hearing this Latin hymn, dropped to his knees in devotion to our Lady and her great gift to us all.

Like all children, this child responds to music. It enlivens his imagination, inspires his creativity, and aids his memory. Children typically learn their ABCs and celebrate birthdays with songs—songs we carry with us to death. In the same way, for two millennia, and until recently, children have

learned the sound, feel, and teachings of the Catholic Faith through the chant, as sung in our parishes and homes for the whole history of Christianity. This early formation has sustained the music tradition through the ages. But chant is not only music. It is also prayer.

The Sound of the Faith

Today, very few Catholic children know any chant at all. Why? Mostly because the chant is not as much part of Catholic parish life as it was in a previous age. Postconciliar reforms replaced Latin with the vernacular, and an offshoot of this was the loss of once familiar chant and sacred polyphony, despite the explicit words of the Council recommending this music.

Apart from those parishes that offer a traditional alternative, the treasury of sacred music was displaced by more fashionable, secular rhythms.

This change has come close to stripping the Church of many of its time honored traditions, its visual and audible identities, and various other ties to the early centuries. What most children hear at Mass is a rotating set of the same twenty compositions that sound much like an easy-listening radio station.

Where are the ancient melodies which moved the saints to lives of piety and acts of perfect love? Now more than ever, it is left to the laity, the faithful whose voices have sustained the sound of sung prayer for so long in ages past, to teach our children the sound of Catholicism again.

Beauty Regained

Lack of exposure to chant in our parishes is a sad reality, but it should not be seen as an insurmountable barrier. It is possible to learn and teach chant right at home. It can be used for daily devotions,

holidays, and even nightly prayer. The language and melodies of chant impart a beautiful sense of the faith, and give children a gift that they will carry with them throughout their lives. It is the very basis of their musical education. It shapes the way music and liturgy are understood, not only in childhood but through later years as well. Children raised on the chant will develop musical skills alongside spiritual education, and these pay returns to the life of Catholic parishes for decades in future.

Should there come a time in their lives when they doubt or stray, the simple lines of chant, still ringing in the heart, might be the very hook that pulls them back to the spirituality, clarity, and beauty of the faith. Whereas homilies and readings can be intellectually discarded, simple chant lines are woven into the fabric of our spiritual consciousness. All our lives, music from childhood comes to us even when we do not intend to recall it.

Of course there are many myths preventing many of us from learning chant and introducing it to our children. Is chant anachronistic? Not at all. It is even commercially viable, selling well for a decade in secular CD stores. Is it illicit? In no way. Indeed it is recommended by many papal statements from the earliest centuries to the present day. Is it only for adults? It is a fact that children are even more receptive. Is the Latin too difficult? Not at all. The children love the new language. They treat it like their own way

of speaking to God.

Presented to them in the right light, children are fascinated with the responsibility of keeping a tradition alive, partaking in the long tradition, and charmed with the idea of singing with angels. Now, it is true that Latin chant is not like anything else they learn in school, but neither is Catholic doctrine itself. Children understand that religion is different from mathematics. Shouldn't the music of the faith also have a different sense about it?

Making Chant a Centerpiece

One does not need to know how to read music, or even words, in order to begin. From the start, chant was passed on through oral tradition; it is the original music of the people. To learn it is just a simple matter of familiarity. Think of how we, as children, learned any song or nursery rhyme: repetition is the key. There are many chant CDs available on the market, and the best way to learn is just to listen (preferably by singers using Solesmes' approach).

The first step in bringing chant into your family is to simply make the commitment. You will find learning and teaching chant to children is more enjoyable than grueling, and welcomed by children of all ages. Identify a time of day when your children are likely to be attentive - early in the morning when their imaginations are fresh, or after lunch when they are ready for a quiet and concentrated activity. Each family will find

its own rhythm in time. Do not be concerned if your children's ages vary a great deal. The older children can set a example of good behavior for younger ones and help keep the group in tune. Younger family members will be eager to sing along with their older brothers and sisters.

Pull out a CD and sit down with your children and listen. Start talking about what kind of mood the different chants evoke. Explain to the children that chant is a form of prayer, and translate the texts as you go along. When you feel ready, just begin singing.

Some of your older children might want to follow along with a piece of music, but stress to your non readers, lest they feel excluded, that chant has been passed down through listening and singing, and that by doing so themselves, they are carrying on the time honored tradition of church goers over the centuries. An ethos of independence from the page will develop quickly!

Finally, do not be alarmed if you encounter shyness at first, this is perfectly normal. And a little giggling is not harmful, but can actually go a long way toward making everyone relax and enjoy the experience. Do not expect your little group to sound like the monks of Solesmes right away: after all, Rome wasn't built in a day.

Setting this time aside once a week or every other day will sure to become a family necessity. Listening and singing, talking about the meaning of the words and

discovering new favorites are all wonderful ways of bringing your family together in the spirit of our Catholic tradition. Consider, in fact, having your older children research traditional chants for different seasons in the liturgical year, and do not underestimate the benefits of putting in a CD in the car on the way to Mass. Finally, make chant a bedtime ritual, or a part of your blessing before a meal.

Sing to Mary

Start out with two beautiful and timeless chants written for Our Lady. The "Regina Caeli" begins "Joy to thee, O Queen of Heaven" and continues to announce the resurrection. It was written sometime in the first millennium of Church history. Legend has it that St. Gregory the Great (540-604) heard its first three lines chanted by angels on Easter morning. He was so inspired that he was moved to add the fourth line, "Ora Pro Nobis Deum, Alleluia."

It is short, bright, and majestic, in a way that captures the joy of a mother who has learned that her Son has been resurrected from the grave. From the first notes, which appropriately rise up, it has an appeal for children. The meter is simple and repetitive in just the right way that makes it easy to learn. It can be sung anytime. And you can tell your children that all the saints and martyrs they are reading about sang this song as well!

Another wonderful Marian chant is the "Ave Maria." Many serious Catholic families aspire

to learn the Rosary in Latin but never quite get around to doing so. Well, learning the song that goes with the Hail Mary is a wonderful beginning. Its melodic line is pure and clean, and has inspired countless composers over the centuries. It begins slowly and spans a large range of notes and then moves to a prayerful mode. As with the prayer itself, it is split into two parts so that it can be sung alternatively by members of the family.

Other essential chants include "Jesu Dulcis," "Ave Verum," "Ave Maris Stella," "Pange Lingua," "Veni Creator," "Parce Domine," "Adoro Te," "Salve Regina," and "Ubi Caritas." Teaching all of these, and committing the first verse to memory, should be part of every Catholic child's musical and spiritual education.

A Choir of Children

Once chant has become a part of your daily devotions at home, suggest that some families get their children together to start a Latin choir at your parish. There is a surprising dearth of any choir's in parishes specifically designed for children. Those that do exist concentrate on a repertoire that is on the silly side. This provides a perfect opening for a substantive alternative.

The directors and organizers will be surprised to see what a range of parents will want their children to participate. Most parents want their children to have music as part of their education. What better way than through learning the Latin

chant? The group can make its own little hymnal that includes all the chants they are learning.

Begin with the simplest ordinary parts of the Mass, the Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. These are found in many hymnals, including the missalette which you will find in your pew. Remember, too, that performance is not what chant is about. If you are fortunate to be in a parish where there is traditional music, the children will have ample opportunity to repeat and participate and sing with the assembly in liturgy, their sweet voices encouraging the more timid around them to join in.

Perhaps it will be the children who lead us back to our history and enliven our liturgies with the prayerful songs of saints. In twenty years, when young people schooled in these chants become old enough to start and sing in scholas in our parishes, we will begin to infuse Catholic culture with a new level of musical and liturgical sophistication, which is a step toward repairing some of the damage inflicted over the last decades. As with most great things, it all begins at home.

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