



The Return of Chant: Rediscovering the Church's Musical Tradition

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Catholic musicians—serious ones who regret the disarray in liturgical music over the last decades—were among those rejoicing at the election of the new Pope. Vatican watchers have long known Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to be the most vocal proponents of Gregorian chant (and the entire musical tradition that extends from it) in Rome.

His writings are voluminous, penetrating, and brilliant. They reflect his expertise as a musician himself and his theological mastery. After decades of confusion and misdirection, the pontificate of Benedict XVI holds out the prospect of bringing Catholic parish life in line with Catholic

teaching and tradition concerning what music belongs at Mass.

The opening liturgies, broadcast to the world through every available medium, put his influence in this regard on display to the world. Gregorian chant served as the musical foundation for them all. Other compositions old and new were stylistically integrated and serious. The music was not an accoutrement but rather integral to the text and liturgical action.

A very moving moment occurred at the recessional of the outdoor inaugural Mass, where Marian antiphon for the Easter season, the “Regina Caeli,” was sung by worshipers from around the world, including the Pope himself. It was beautiful and

inspiring but for one problem. Most American Catholics under the age of 60 can't conjure even the first notes or words of this once popular hymn. Even the most basic of Catholic chants—Ubi Caritas, Ave Maria, Ave Maris Stella—are unknown by most US Catholics.

If the US is going to participate in a revival of sacred music, particularly from the Gregorian repertoire, something has got to change to bring parish practice in line. To achieve the musical goal of the Second Vatican Council—to elevate Gregorian chant to pride of place in the Mass—will require Herculean educational efforts and massive dedication of musicians of all sorts.

Leading by Example

Catholic musicians are already asking questions about what is in store and what the new Papacy will mean in their parishes, and in their lives as Catholics. Traditionalists, naturally, are elated, and ready to plunge more deeply into the Church's treasury of sacred offerings. Those advocating pop and folk styles of music at mass, meanwhile, are shaking in their Birkenstocks. One reason, to be sure, is the difficulty of delving into a style and literature that is largely unknown to them. Reactions may be severe: there is no motivator like fear of the unknown, for good and ill.

Not that a dictate or document from Rome is going to be enough to inspire every parish to sing the Credo in Latin or look away from their missaltes and toward Solesmes for Psalms and Communion chants. What this Pontificate can do is provided liturgical and theological leadership by example. This will assist refuting the primary misunderstanding about sacred music today: the choice of musical style at liturgy is a matter of cultural and personal preference to be determined at the parish level, because any music that is

suitably religious is appropriate for liturgy, so long as the people can participate (in theory) by singing along.

This misunderstanding, which is contradicted by two millennia of authoritative teaching, is widely held by Catholic musicians at the parish level. This is why parish music is so often reduced to a variety show, however well intended the performers may be. These same musicians, however, can play an essential role in the revival of chant and truly sacred music, provided that they are called to a higher standard and are willing to undertake the effort to acquaint themselves with the astonishing richness of what our heritage has to offer.

What John Paul II Had Begun

Nor does Benedict XVI need to issue new teachings. The Vatican's focus on Gregorian chant as proper to the liturgy has been consistent in the post-conciliar period. There has been no let up in the insistence that chant is Catholic music, from Sacrosanctum Concilium's explicit call for chant to displace popular hymnody as the music of the people, through Paul VI's issuance in 1974 of "Jubilare Deo" (a booklet of basic chants) for every parish, through John Paul II's prayer in 2000 for the beauty of sacred music to return to our liturgies.

Already in this Year of the Eucharist, Gregorian chant has received new emphasis in a series of documents that appeared in the last year of John Paul II's pontificate. In 2003, the Pope called for renewed attention to "outward forms of mystery" that inspire Eucharistic devotion. Among these forms, he wrote in "Ecclesia de Eucharistia," we find sacred music, particularly "the inspired Gregorian melodies and the many, often great, composers who sought to do justice to the liturgical texts of the Mass." While

recognizing the need for creativity in art, the Pope spoke of the need to follow the "pastoral guidelines" as laid down by "competent Authority."

Last year, the Pope issued the Apostolic Letter "Mane Nobiscum Domine" as the primary theological guide to the year of the Eucharist. Here he wrote his "serious concern that singing and *liturgical music* be suitably 'sacred'. One specific project of this *Year of the Eucharist* might be for each parish community to study the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)."

Indeed, the GIRM, which came out in 2000, stated very plainly that "Gregorian chant holds pride of place because it is proper to the Roman Liturgy. Other types of sacred music, in particular polyphony, are in no way excluded..." This is the only passage in the entire document that speaks specifically to the style and content of the music to be used at liturgy.

Immediately following the Pope's Apostolic Letter, the Congregation for the Divine Worship issued its definitive "The Year of the Eucharist: Suggestions and Proposals." It is here where we find the words of John Paul II more fully spelled out in what was the most explicit call for restoring sacred music to be heard from the Vatican in decades.

The guidelines first addressed the core of the problem: priests are not prepared to act as leaders in placing chant at the forefront of the musical life of the parish. The guidelines demand that anyone in a position to do so should "inculcate in the seminarians an understanding of the usefulness of a certain fluency in the Latin language, and Gregorian Chant, so as to be able to pray and chant in Latin when the need arises, and so rooting themselves in the tradition of the Church at prayer."

The Congregation further wrote that at Shrines, the simple settings of Gregorian settings of the Credo and Lord's Prayer help

"encourage the participation of various groups in the same Eucharistic celebration of the Mass..." And so here we see Latin and chant being cited not as a source of division (as many believe) but rather as a source of unity and in order to achieve the multicultural aims of Catholicism that everyone agrees are centrally important.

Parishes have been asked to establish choirs that "should dedicate singular attention to liturgical song, taking into account the indications of John Paul II in his recent document on Sacred Music." This "Chirograph" in particular renews the letter and spirit of Pius X's "Tra le Sollecitudini: the chant holds pride of place, is a source of unity, and is the stylistic source from which all other sacred music flows.

In the Chirograph, the John Paul II not only underscored the need for every parish to employ chant at liturgy but also presents clear guidelines for music that goes beyond chant. "The more closely a composition for church approaches in its movement, inspiration and savour the Gregorian melodic form," the Pope quotes from Pius X, "the more sacred and liturgical it becomes; and the more out of harmony it is with that supreme model, the less worthy it is of the temple."

Truth and Purity in Music

This emphasis on chant, which is definitive and undeniable, did not begin with Benedict XVI. It has been intensifying in recent years. And yet anyone familiar with the culture of Catholic practice knows that dictates from above can only accomplish so much. They can encourage movements already in place and they can inspire new movements. But actually achieving the objective requires dedication, energy, teaching, and hope at all levels. Particularly with chant, the major barrier that needs to be broken is in making it accessible to parishes.

Benedict XVI, in his writings on liturgy and otherwise, has profoundly clarified many disputed matters about sacred music. He has emphasized the purpose of timeless styles, the primacy of the human voice, and pointed out that active participation can take the form of internal prayer. He has argued for the legitimacy of the choir's role in singing the Sanctus and Agnus Dei in complex settings. He has famously said that rock (hard or soft) music has no place at liturgy.

Mostly, he has stressed the need for truth and purity of form in the Church and in our lives as Christians. Nowhere in the Bible or in his example did Christ promise us an easy time of things, his writings teach us, and it is in fact the responsibility of all of us, regardless of our station, to follow Christ's model in our acceptance of suffering in striving for that perfect union with God. This struggle predates the Incarnation, and will continue beyond any point in time within our own earthly comprehension.

All serious musicians, regardless of personal taste, must know the suffering that comes with tackling new compositions and traditions. Technique must be learned and practiced and interpretive skills must be honed. Church organists struggling with the works of Bach and singers attempting to master the intervals and nuance of Gregorian chant face very similar battles.

One of the temptations that faces musicians is to stop midway and come up

with solutions that satisfy themselves alone, solutions that "mimic" the intent of the composer or the genre, appeal to our temporal senses and that of our listeners, but rely in the end rely on improvisation based on limited vision, skill, and tenacity. It is not enough to stick with the standard fare. Musicians need to rethink their place in liturgy and begin to think of the sounds they create as part of the structure and not purely additive. That means acquiring chant book from Solesmes and spending time every week and every day on familiarizing oneself with Catholic tradition.

The demands of truly sacred music are uniquely challenging. Sacred music requires humility and a willingness to go beyond pleasing ourselves and our immediate audiences alone. Sacred music requires sacrifice and loving service to the God the Father and his Church.

And what are the rewards? From St. Augustine through Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, through the many musicians who are working hard today to sing with the voice of the Church, Catholics of all times have found in the chant a glimpse of Heaven. That is what the liturgy can bring us, not just in Rome or in Cathedrals but in every parish and every heart. What a wonderful re-discovery it will be.

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BENEDICT XVI ON MUSIC

The life of the liturgy does not come from what dawns upon the minds of individuals and planning groups. On the contrary, it is God's descent upon our world, the source of real liberation. He alone can open the door to freedom. The more priests and faithful humbly surrender themselves to this descent of God, the more "new" the liturgy will constantly be, and the more true and personal it becomes. Yes, the liturgy becomes personal, true, and new, not through tomfoolery and banal experiments with the words, but through a courageous entry into the great reality that through the rite is always ahead of us and can never quite be overtaken. [*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, (SF, CA: Ignatius, 2000), p. 170]

In the West, in the form of Gregorian chant, the inherited tradition of psalm-singing was developed to a new sublimity and purity, which set a permanent standard for sacred music, music for the liturgy of the Church. Polyphony developed in the late Middle Ages, and then instruments came back into divine worship—quite rightly, too, because, as we have seen, the Church not only continues the synagogue, but also takes up, in the light of Christ's Pasch, the reality represented by the Temple. [*The Spirit of the Liturgy* (SF, CA: Ignatius, 2000), pp. 146-47]

Not every kind of music can have a place in Christian worship. It has its standards, and that standard is the Logos.... The Holy Spirit leads us to the Logos, and he leads us to a music that serves the Logos as a sign of the sursum corda, the lifting up of the human heart. Does it integrate man by drawing him to what is above, or does it cause his disintegration into formless intoxication or mere sensuality? That is the criterion for a music in harmony with logos, a form of that *logike latreia* (reason-able, logos-worthy worship)... [*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, (SF, CA: Ignatius, 2000), p. 151]

The great cultural tradition of the faith is home to a presence of immense power. What in museums is only a monument from the past, an occasion for mere nostalgic admiration, is constantly made present in the liturgy in all its freshness.... Humble submission to what goes before us releases authentic freedom and leads us to the true summit of our vocation as human beings. [*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, (SF, CA: Ignatius, 2000), pp. 155]

If the congregation has a choir that can draw it into cosmic praise and into the open expanse of heaven and earth more powerfully than its own stammering, then the representative function of the choir is at this moment particularly appropriate. Through the choir a greater transparency to the praise of the angels and therefore a more profound, interior joining in with their singing are bestowed than a congregation's own acclamation and song would be capable of doing in many places.... [*A New Song for the Lord*, (NY: Crossroad, 1995) pp. 141-142]