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How to Start Your Own Garage Schola by Arlene Oost-Zinner and Jeffrey Tucker

At an international conference sponsored by the Vatican, the topic is liturgical music. A priest rises to speak. He is Monsignor Valentino Miserachs Grau, head of the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music, the leading voice for the Catholic faith in all matters of music. His topic is not only of academic interest; nor is it clouded in qualifications or hazy rhetoric. Instead, he is using the occasion to make a passionate case for a change that will impact every cathedral, seminary, or parish in the Roman-Rite world. His words are unmistakable and almost shocking, a clarion call for a radical change in the way we experience the liturgy.

Monsignor Grau began by demonstrating that the Church wants the faithful to sing Gregorian chant, citing a century of documents, most of them issued *after* Vatican II and one of them released in 2005 at the last Synod of Bishops. He quickly contrasted this with the current reality: "The almost outright ban on Latin and Gregorian chant seen over the past 40 years is incomprehensible, especially in the Latin countries. It is incomprehensible, and deplorable."

"We have undervalued the Christian people's ability to learn," he continued. "We have almost forced them to forget the Gregorian melodies that they knew, instead of expanding and deepening their knowledge, including through proper instruction on the meaning of the texts. And instead, we have stuffed them full of banalities."

"Without Gregorian chant," he said, "the Church is mutilated.... There cannot be Church music without Gregorian chant.... Gregorian chant must not remain in the preserve of academia, or the concert hall, or recordings; it must not be mummified like a museum exhibit, but must return as living song."

"It's time to break through the inertia, and the shining example must come from the cathedral churches, the major churches, the monasteries, the convents, the seminaries, and the houses of religious formation. And so the humble parishes, too, will end up being 'contaminated' by the supreme beauty of the chant of the Church. And the persuasive power of Gregorian chant will reverberate, and will consolidate the people in the true sense of Catholicism."

No, You're Not Dreaming

In many ways, it was the speech that millions of Catholics the world over have prayed for since those strange days of the late 1960s and early 1970s when liturgy stopped sounding Catholic.

In effect, Monsignor Grau declared that the time for debate is over, and the time for action has arrived. A major rescue operation must begin immediately if we are to recover a most profound treasure of the Church: its musical heritage.

Before the age of electronic communication, such a speech might have been buried by anyone who didn't welcome the message. But today, thanks to the Internet, the speech immediately created a firestorm of controversy; blogs and forums filled up with every kind of response—

from joyous elation from those longing for change, to bitter resentment from people with a heavy investment in the status quo.

Many comments dealt with the reality that few people are prepared to lead in this new direction. Generations have been raised in the parish setting with no musical training, and so competence appears all but vanished. Hardly anyone knows the basic melodies. The Latin is forbidding; fewer still know how to read "square notes." And there is no money to hire professionals.

There is also the pastoral concern that any change could be destabilizing. One Web writer noted: "Changing the music in a church is always an emotional issue for the whole congregation.... In the church I was in previously that had chant, I knew people who left partly over frustration with the music."

Fair enough. It's risky to change the music to which people have become accustomed in liturgy. It calls for hard work, courage, and heavy involvement by laypeople and by every parish. As wonderful as a Vatican commission would be—one that would assist every diocese and work to remind bishops and pastors of the need to support chant and truly sacred music—there is only so much an administrative office can do.

Professionals can help, but far too few are properly trained in this tradition. Ultimately, and in most parishes, the chant is going to be sung by enthusiastic non-professionals, which—if you've read this far in the article—probably means you.

One suggestion from a commenter on the Web was made with humor, but speaks to a certain truth. He called for the founding of "garage scholas" that sing chant, adding: "*Viva la revolución.*"

He is precisely right. The first step is *not* to march up to your pastor and demand that he do something to bring the sounds of Solesmes to your parish. A pastor cannot make it come into being as if by magic: The singers in the parish are not likely to have any experience with the chant—the language confuses them and they're likely afraid that they'll mispronounce the words—and accompanists don't even know where to begin.

Under the best (and least likely) conditions, the pastor will seek out singers to make the change in the music. More likely, the pastor has gotten used to the music as it is and feels no passion for changing it. But even in the latter case, the pastor isn't preventing the chant from being sung. If the conditions were right, he might well approve of a change. But in most parishes, the conditions are not there. Neither

the singers nor the people are prepared for an overnight change by fiat.

If you really want chant in your parish—and you should—you have to take an active role, not in lobbying for it but in *taking the initiative to bring it to life*. The plan we map out below cannot be put into place in a month, or even a year. Your parish will not sound like the *Bells of St. Mary's* in one season. This is for the long term. Think in terms of two to five years, which is a tiny slice of time in the history of chant.

Step 1: Prepare Ye the Way

The first step is not directly related to music; it's a social and spiritual point. People who find themselves disgruntled with the status quo in any parish often feel a sense of alienation from parish life, particularly in its liturgy. This is un-

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derstandable. But to make a difference requires more than merely bemoaning the current state and sneering at parish programs. You need to leave the protest mode and think in terms of the contribution you can make.

The music sector of parish life, in particular, is often fraught with division and acrimony. People become very protective of their liturgical turf and suspicious of those whom they believe are trying to encroach upon it. For this reason, and for the sake of your own peace of mind, anyone who wants to see a change in music must proceed in charity and love.

Agitating against the current music establishment will do nothing to help your cause. You cannot force the existing choirs to stop the musical banalities. Only a positive agenda is capable of creating a long-term change. Make peace, adopt a bright outlook, and make amends for past wrongs: They're not only the right things to do, but they also prepare the way for a successful renewal in your liturgical music.

Step 2: Private Study

You need to be able to sing chant yourself before you can teach it to others, much less sing in public liturgical set-

tings. The second step is to learn about chant on your own; using the vast resources available on the Web and through most any Catholic publisher and/or distributor.

Start by looking at *Jubilare Deo*, the chant booklet issued by Paul VI in 1974 (you can download it from the Web at www.ceciliaschola.org). It came with the following instruction: "This minimum repertoire of Gregorian chant has been prepared with [this] purpose in mind: to make it easier for Christians to achieve unity and spiritual harmony with their brothers and with the living traditions of the past. Hence it is that those who are trying to improve the quality of congregational singing cannot refuse to Gregorian chant the place which is due to it."

The entire *Jubilare Deo* has been recorded by the Solesmes monks on two CDs. It is called *Gregorian Melodies*, available from Ignatius.com or Amazon.com. Following

along in the music and listening to the monks sing—and learning to sing along with them—is the best beginning. The CD begins with the sprinkling rites, continues with the Mass parts, and moves to popular chants.

The medieval neumes of the *Jubilare Deo* serve a purpose, and being able to read them is essential for long-term success. ("An Idiot's Guide to Square Notes" in the May 2006 issue of **crisis** provides a primer for doing so.) But if you just can't see your way around these, you can buy a nice collection of chants in modern notation from the Oregon Catholic Press (OCP) titled *Laus Tibi, Christe*. It alone contains enough chant to transform the musical life of a parish.

The *Gregorian Missal*, produced by the Solesmes Abbey (and available from OCP), includes the complete propers (the changing parts of the Mass such as the introits, gradu-als, offertories, communions, etc.) for Sundays and major feast days, and a full range of the ordinary settings (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Angus Dei), with the readings for the day in English.

It might look intimidating at first, and it'll probably take some time before you can sing it. But the magnificent effect of this book is to serve as a reminder that the liturgy is not

just a text; it's text and song, the latter of which is prescribed in every detail. In these times when music is considered a matter of taste, the *Gregorian Missal* illustrates the desperate need to remove music from its discretionary status and integrate it into our understanding of what the Church is asking musicians to do.

The goal of this stage should be to memorize at least six primary chants, such as the Ave Maria, the Adoro Te, or the Regina Caeli. This way you can sing them while driving, walking, sitting at your desk, before meals, first thing in the morning—anytime. Chant is meant to be part of life, just as life is meant to be penetrated by liturgical sensibilities.

To be more blunt: If you cannot sing the first lines of the Gregorian melody for Ave Maria and Regina Caeli—right

The schola can be one more person or it can be 20. And there's no need to commit to a future performance. The only benefit promised should be a private one. Make it exciting and fulfilling, and they will come.

Work on the simple songs and Mass settings, week after week. Set a schedule for practice—say, once a week for one hour. Don't start late or go overtime. The discipline of starting and stopping on time reflects the discipline that monks since the earliest years of Christianity have practiced in saying their prayers and singing the Psalms. Work on one or two chants each week. Pronounce them first; sing them after. Work on listening to other singers and achieving a calm and smooth sound. As soon as you can, put down your music and attempt to sing by memory.

With all this activity, the idea that the schola is there to serve the parish—not just demand its rights—begins to take hold. It costs nothing but your time and energy. There are very few pastors of Catholic parishes, even among those who have no chant sympathies, who would not be impressed with this level of dedication.

now, right where you are—you are in *no* position to complain about the music in your parish. You are not yet part of the solution. Sing the chant in private, ask for the intercession of St. Cecilia, and miracles can begin to happen.

Step 3: Find Others to Sing

But even once you are armed with study materials, you're still not quite ready to sing at Mass. You must first find others in your parish or in the area to sing with you. While it's good to have the pastor's blessing, it might not be best to put him in the position of having to say yes or no. Just form your group, your schola, the way you would form a private prayer group.

Nor is this the time for the church-bulletin announcement. Just ask others in the parish who might be interested. They don't have to be musicians as such. They need only to have the ability to stay on pitch and have the desire to learn. In fact, people who have never sung before can be excellent singers for liturgy because they lack pretension and sing with humility.

This step should be taken even if there is no pianist or organist. Learning to sing without the aid of anything but a pitch pipe is the best kind of training. It is also the surest means of achieving what the Church calls for with regard to the primacy of the human voice, the very instrument that God granted us as part of our physical makeup.

You can, of course, practice in your home. But at some point, you may want to move your practices to the parish social hall or some classroom at the church. Do it every week and at some point, the staff will begin to notice. Other parishioners will talk. The buzz will start slowly and without alarming anyone. People will enjoy hearing the group.

This stage—quite possibly the most important one—can last as long as six months to a year. It will train the minds and hearts of those people who will form the schola in the importance of submitting to the music in humility, purging the desire to "perform," improving the art of chant, and giving time for the idea of a new approach to begin to work its way into parish life.

Some other resources are essential at this stage. You will

need the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, which you can download from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Web site (www.usccb.org/liturgy). It should be read carefully. You will also need *Ceremonies of the Liturgical Year* and *Ceremonies of the Modern Roman Rite*, both by Peter J. Elliott, and both available through Ignatius Press. These books are essential for making sure that what the schola does is precise and correct as regards the demands of tradition and Catholic practice. Knowing the ins and outs of these matters will further establish the schola as something of a standard bearer for what should and should not take place during celebrations of particular feasts and throughout the year.

You might also sing some English hymns and polyphony at this stage, since those too will be essential in any modern parish setting. All the polyphonic music you might ever need is available for free download at the Choral Music Public Domain Library (www.CPDL.org). It is also a good time to consider workshops on sacred music. You can find out about these through the Web site of the Church Music Association of America (www.musicasacra.com).

Step 4: Build Support

Once group cohesion takes hold and you have learned the basics of chant well enough, the schola can begin to take part in some broader activities of parish life. Let's say an older parishioner is in the hospital. The schola can go to his or her room and sing some chant. What a glorious ministry it would be. Think of the benefit for the patient, or for those dying, and imagine the benefit you will gain from such service. The schola can also sing in retirement homes, or in the homes of those who cannot come to Mass. All of this establishes the schola as a burgeoning, if informal, ministry of the parish—and it can all be done without having to seek any kind of official sanction or funding.

With all this activity, the idea that the schola is there to serve the parish—not just demand its rights—begins to take hold. It costs nothing but your time and energy. There are very few pastors of Catholic parishes, even among those who have no chant sympathies, who would not be impressed with this level of dedication.

Step 5: Sing at Liturgy

If all the above steps have been taken, the group can integrate itself into the public liturgical life of the parish. It could be just a special occasion—say, Good Friday. It could be at a daily Mass or at evening Benediction or Vespers. It could be just the summer when everyone else is on vacation

and music for Mass is needed. Any opportunities that present themselves should be accepted.

Of course, the schola should be well-prepared before accepting a Sunday Mass. When it finally does happen, the schola needs to be experienced enough to sustain momentum. The goal should be to sing every week, and not just once per month or season. This is more important than it first seems. Parishioners need to be able to expect sacred music on a regular basis in a certain time period and without exception. Consistency and repetition are the paths to winning the hearts and minds of the people.

Schola members will find themselves taken aback at the pace of demands. The liturgy moves surprisingly quickly from Easter to Pentecost to Advent to Christmas and Lent—with all special solemnities along the way—and each poses unique challenges to the singers.

In order not to be caught off guard, and to set the highest standard of liturgical practice, the schola must be familiar with the music of each of these seasons. The schola will also need to eschew conventional planning resources in favor of CanticaNOVA's wonderful online liturgical planning guide (www.CanticaNOVA.com), a publisher that also offers excellent sacred-music resources of every sort.

The schola should make it clear that an integrated liturgy is necessary (good hymns, along with dignified Mass parts), not a mixed program of "traditional" and "contemporary." Every effort should be made to keep "popular" hymns and settings out of Masses assisted by the schola, if only so that the people can observe the difference between the solemnity of the schola-assisted Masses and the others. This demonstration project, carried out over time, will secure the schola in the life of the parish.

There is little room for error, because the burden of proof falls so heavily on those who want to do something different. The schola should not be front and center but in the balcony or the back of the church, if at all possible. In the end, it's not the music that will carry the day so much as the silence and space that this repertoire provides. People will pray and experience a sensibility far different from that provided by a contemporary choir. Once the congregation gets a taste of participating in the liturgy through prayer and preparation, and comes to understand that music can point to God and not just to the community, the rest will take care of itself.

How long will this process take? It depends on the local situation. It could be a month, or it could be two years. But no matter how long, it's worth the effort. Introducing this music can bring new people to the Faith, reinforce the

faith of those already there, introduce a new generation to real Catholic music and tradition, and lift the hearts and rekindle the fire in the souls of older Catholics who remember it all from their childhood.

One must never lose sight of the goal, which is not to achieve a personal victory or to score debating points against others, but to glorify God in the audible celebration of sacred space.

So many of the struggles in smaller parishes turn on questions of ego, personality, and control over liturgy—a consequence of the mistaken but too-often-encouraged view that liturgy should be structured or or-

ill, it's nearly impossible to dislodge musical memories once they are instilled in us. Even trite music has an impact on us if it's associated with a happy memory.

The movement for chant in parishes, then, cannot only seek to make a case against the music that people love and associate with the Faith. To tell someone that his love for "Be Not Afraid" reflects an insipid spirituality is to do nothing but provoke a fight.

What we need is to begin the process of making new associations, carving out a new and special place in the soul's aesthetic understanding. To do this requires total dedication and repetition over years. The good news, however,

There is no need to wait for directives and commissions to come to your parish. Every Catholic with musical intuition should involve himself in this grand project. And now is the time, before the music is lost forever. We have a mission, and the means, and the will. Let us participate in the creation of music of eternal value.

ganized like a political democracy. The attempt to bring chant to a parish cannot and should not be approached as a matter of control. The point of our musical heritage is not power and authority but humility and deference to the sacrament.

Facing Barriers

New scholas often find widespread support in the parish, provided that they have prepared the way. But not everyone in the parish will celebrate what you are doing. Some people might resent this attempt to "turn back the clock." One way around this problem is to avoid using hot-button words. Who cares if Gregorian chant is described as conservative, liberal, traditionalist, or progressive? The music itself knows no bounds of time and should be neither pushed nor thwarted based on political concerns. Its fate should not be tied to any other political or doctrinal cause.

Some people are truly happy with the existing music. That's because music reaches the mind and soul and spirit like no other medium. The music we know from childhood becomes part of our living memory and integral to our aesthetic understanding for the whole of our life. For good or

is that as difficult as it is to dislodge people's attachment to popular songs, once the chant has made its way back into the spiritual memories of the faithful, it will begin to become a durable part of Catholic life again. The support for chant will grow and change the whole character of what we experience at Mass, from the inside out.

How Hard Is Chant?

The question always comes up: Is chant simple or difficult? The answer is that it can be both. Chant is like Christian theology in that it can be understood on many different levels. Just as theological understanding can take the most simple expression—the sign of the cross or the name of Our Lord—a few chanted notes can reveal the highest truth; its simplicity in no way distracts from the fullness of the entire Gregorian repertoire. The important thing is to take that first step.

To bring back basic settings of the Mass is, in one sense, easier than people imagine. A Kyrie can be sung by any choir in any parish starting next week. Just taking this single step can make a big difference in the sound and feel of the liturgy, and establish a basis for future development.

A plainchant English Gloria can follow, then a Latin Sanctus and Agnus Dei, and over a period of months, you have a liturgy that is hospitable to the sounds of the sacred.

The chant schola should make the extra effort to print programs week to week for parishioners with pictures of the chant or translations. This helps remove a familiar objection that no one can understand the Latin (actually, the soul understands the Latin, which is one reason some people object to it). Making translations available is not that difficult, and it can be a great help.

Pastoral support is, strictly speaking, not necessary, but it can be a great advantage. It helps to have a homilist make reference to the chant as a way of "legitimizing" the changes taking place. Workshops can be held at the parish, or special guest directors can be brought in. Finally, the pastor and people will have to be reaccustomed to the liturgy. More is required of the faithful; parishioners will be called upon to participate in a genuine and full sense.

As for those who love sacred music but do not believe they have musical talent, there's a role for them, too. They can encourage the new groups that are forming. They can tell the singers how they appreciate their contribution to the liturgy. They can tell the pastor how much they approve of the new trends in parish life. They can make contributions to the cause. Above all, they can pray to St. Cecilia or other saints to help those who are attempting to make the music fitting, suitable, and holy to the occasion.

A Revolution Is Coming

The groundwork for the revival of chant and sacred music with which it is associated has been in the works for a very long time. Many scholars believed that Vatican II—with its explicit statement that chant and polyphony should have pride of place in the liturgy—would be the event to finally push popular hymnody out of the Mass and bring back genuine liturgical music. Of course, the opposite happened.

All these years, scholars and musicians have been working to prepare for the moment that is now arriving. Colloquia and workshops on chant are filling up. New publications appear monthly. Publishers that once only pushed contemporary music are now offering publications by the Solesmes monks. Catholic institutions are sending out chant CDs with their fundraising appeals.

The movement has support at the highest levels of the Church. Pope John Paul II issued many statements emphasizing Latin and chant; the Synod of Bishops meeting in Rome produced an *Instrumentum Laboris* that stated: "The

faithful need to know the standard Gregorian chants, which have been composed to meet the needs of people of all times and places, in virtue of their simplicity, refinement and agility in form and rhythm. As a result, the songs and hymns presently in use need to be reconsidered."

In addition, the Vatican conference on sacred music in November 2005 featured numerous speakers who echoed the themes of Monsignor Grau. The current pope's writings and interviews emphasize the importance of truly sacred music and the incompatibility of liturgical expression with popular styles.

There is no need to wait for directives and commissions to come to your parish. Every Catholic with musical intuition should involve himself in this grand project. And now is the time, before the music is lost forever. We have a mission, and the means, and the will. Let us participate in the creation of music of eternal value. This is the new direction we are being asked to take, and the only direction that can properly be called progressive. ■

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