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## Is Gregorian Chant Outmoded?

By Arlene Oost-Zinner and Jeffrey Tucker<sup>i</sup>

Forty years ago, the Second Vatican Council declared that Gregorian Chant is "specially suited" to take "pride of place" in the Roman Rite. Few parishes have followed up on this directive. Since the 1970s, most have instituted popular-style religious music, while chant is rarely heard if at all. Every year, the Catholic music tradition slips further into historical memory. There are many reasons for the tragic loss of our Catholic musical heritage, but none that justify doing nothing to recover it.

Many people resist recovery efforts because of a visceral opposition to chant, an emotion stemming from rigid ideological commitments. Others are less strident. Many parish musicians and liturgists are inundated by contemporary music settings offered by publishing houses that specialize in marketing to parishes, and the chant tradition just goes unnoticed. Other musicians are simply unconvinced that ancient music has any real contribution to make to modern parish liturgy. In still other cases, parishes just don't know where to begin, and, fearing the unknown, they stick with the tiresome standard fare.

Whatever its basis, unfamiliarity and fear concerning chant can be overcome. We must first understand that there is wisdom in the words of the Council's call for chant to take pride of place. Indeed, every objection to chant has an answer rooted in experience, theology, and the uniqueness of the Catholic liturgical experience.

The assertion that chant is outmoded presumes that it is intended only for a certain

period in history. It's true that the basic chant repertoire grows out of the musical experience of the first five centuries of the Christian Church. But the development didn't end there. It expanded and thrived for the following 1,500 years, unchanged in its essentials, even as contemporary musical fashions changed.

Church music developed in new directions too with the addition of polyphony, motets, tropes, organ, orchestral instruments, and vast settings of Mass, and variety of artistic innovations and diversions that caused Popes to weigh in on the question of whether they appropriate for liturgy. But throughout it, the chant remained as the foundation of all truly meritorious development. .

When we sing chant, we are not merely singing music attached to one historical moment. We are singing music that has endured for the whole of development of the Christianity liturgy. It grew up alongside of it. In this way, the chant transcends the constraints of history in the same way that the sign of the cross or the other sacramentals of the Catholic faith do.

The reason for the enduring quality of chant as art is that its spiritual sensibility is unbound by time. It partakes of an eternal voice that sings without regard to the passage of time as registered by the clock and the calendar. It is strives to set before the senses a glimpse of Heavenly truth, in the similar way that all great art does, from the paintings in the Sistine Chapel to a great European cathedral. Art survives when the passage of

time does nothing to diminish a work's innate beauty and worth.

Now, it's true that a great painting sometimes needs a good cleaning in order that its brilliant hues shine through, and a worn book needs a new binding and stitching in order that its prose and poetry are allowed to speak their truths once again. The same goes for a musical genre, specifically, the treasury of sacred chant which belongs only to our Catholic tradition. It needs to be taken off the library shelf, out of the academic journal, and tuned up by simple and loving voices.

The pure echoes of the chant can touch the hearts and minds of all who are fortunate enough to sing or listen to it. Conceived in humility and expertly and lovingly crafted over centuries, chant is our heritage, and should be allowed to live and breathe as it was intended, in liturgy. It ought not to be relegated to the concert hall where its beauty can be only half realized, as there it can point to no mystery beyond itself.

People say that contemporary music makes them feel connected to others present at liturgy. Although some of this music can cause a person to leave an experience "feeling uplifted," it must be remembered that the Mass is the sacrifice re-presented, and much more than a simple religious gathering whose function is partly spiritual, partly social, but always tied to a specific time and place.

Voices united in chant can also produce a community feeling, but the real effects extend much further. The Sacramental end of the Mass necessarily transports us out contemporary time and space. That portion of the liturgy expressed musically must support this notion, and this is where music that appeals primarily to sentiment and is based on secular musical influences falls short. This is why John Paul II has called on parishes to discard music that is "not very suited to the grandeur of the act being celebrated" and rediscover "the purity of liturgical hymns."<sup>ii</sup>

One does not need "contemporary" music to have a range of emotion in liturgy. Chant expresses a huge range of emotion, from an exuberantly sung Gloria to the simple and penitent *Parce Domine*. And yet

the range is contained and restrained, as Marie Pierik points out "The Church liturgy is like the Church feast, but the joy does not go beyond bounds and to the delight of the senses, nor does the sadness sink into worldly afflictions and pessimism. The joy emanates from, and is ennobled through, the majesty and sublimity of the sentiment of the Feast."<sup>iii</sup>

In fact, one of the problems that exists in parishes today, even those where an attempt is being made to include some Latin hymnody in the liturgy, is precisely that it is being introduced alongside contemporary praise songs. This is often done for the sake of ease for the musicians, or uncertainty concerning whether people will like chant, but these effort comes at the expense of liturgical continuity.

For chant to make its full impression (and this goes for music of any style or period) it needs to be sung within the context of a musically integrated liturgy. It makes no sense to impose one style of music upon another within the same liturgy, and expect each isolated bit to lead the faithful to an understanding of the greater mystery playing out on the altar before them.

Beginning the Mass with chant can be breathtaking and mysterious, but if contemporary music dominates thereafter, the sense of timelessness and tradition evaporates. Contemporary music has claimed its place in our parish music programs, but can be saved for another liturgy consisting solely of newer hymns. What is called for is a full commitment to music of our heritage within a single liturgical experience.

Another problem concerns the fear of using the human voice alone, unaccompanied, as the sole source of music. The keyboardist, as well as many of the faithful in the pews are often under the impression that he or she constitutes the music itself, or that organ accompaniment is the very reason people sing and that a cappella singing is to be avoided as an inferior mode. If this were true, one wonders how church music developed in the first thousand years!

In the history of papal legislation concerning music, it has long been emphasized that "music proper to the Church

is purely vocal music"<sup>iv</sup>, while instruments are merely permitted. The popes were not alone in this opinion. "Pure music must only be rendered by sung voices," said Ludwig van Beethoven. Richard Wagner said that "if Church music is to succeed in arriving once again at its original purity, vocal music alone must represent it."<sup>v</sup> To achieve this ideal, singers need to develop the ability to reach within themselves for notes and song. The assembly will not come to understand its musical importance in liturgy so long as its singing drowned out by loud instruments.

It's true that the Latin language itself presents barriers to people. But the basic chant repertoire uses prayers that are familiar, from the Mass and from prayers we say in English all the time. From the Gloria to the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God), it only takes a few times through for people to match the Latin with the English.

There is nothing out of place about challenging people's intellectual sense, especially given that Latin is still the universal language of the Catholic Church. But there is a more important point here: if the primary purpose of liturgy were pedagogy, the entire Mass would be in street language. It is not. Liturgy, as a means of communicating with God and God with us, uses a special language of prayer. Latin captures that beautifully.

If the Mass itself is a prayer, and not just a pedagogical tool or an occasion of community praise, the music that is part of the Mass is also a prayer, what Marc-Daniel Kirby calls a "sung prayer" that is "woven into the very fabric of the liturgy."<sup>vi</sup> It refers to and reveals the mysteries taking place on the altar and has a profound influence on the spiritual life of the community of worshippers.

A tragic aspect of the debate over chant is how it has become so politicized, with its opponents identifying it with a broader agenda to bury "progressive" influence. On this basis, they say chant is not only outmoded but divisive. The truth is that love of the Catholic music tradition of chant is broad based and conceptually independent of other political concerns. It is no more political than the Rosary or the Our Father. It is a form of sung prayer with broad appeal

that can play a role in uniting a parish in song.

There is no evidence that even the architects of the new rite intended that chant be jettisoned. "Sacrosantum Concilium" (1963) could not have been plainer concerning directives for reform. Architect of new rite Annibale Bugnini, in his own contemporaneous account of the later liturgical reform, insists that his reform "must not, however, lead to forgetfulness of the treasures of the past and, in particular, of Gregorian chant."<sup>vii</sup>

As a further point for explaining the merit of chant, the word traditional does not capture the essence of the genre. So much time has passed since the time when Catholics sang the music of their extended heritage, the tradition has, in a sense, been broken to the point that the music must overcome the burden of unfamiliarity. Nonetheless, there is a special appeal to singing the same songs as a thousand plus years of saints and martyrs. Chant not only connects generations in song; it links together the entire "democracy of the dead" (G.K. Chesterton's phrase) stretching back through Catholic history.

Some people might come to believe that chant is outmoded simply because so little of it appears in today's hymnals, or they might believe introducing chant will require a vast new expense in purchasing new hymnbooks or music. But hymnals are published by all sorts of organizations with a huge variety of agendas, and their contents should not be mistaken for the will of the Church. As for buying new ones, it may not be necessary. For \$1-2 a copy, any parish can put together its own booklet of Latin chant (which is in the public domain).

Indeed, it is a common fallacy that a quality music program depends on a great hymnal. Hymnals do not sing themselves. The printed page was not available to Catholics in the pew during the Church's first 1600 years, but somehow the musical tradition lived, thrived, and grew.<sup>viii</sup> To instruct musicians of the need for reform and to enliven their sense of responsibility and deference to the rite itself is a far greater priority than spending money.

For a parish just starting out, a few parts from the ordinary will suffice to infuse the liturgy with solemnity—provided the liturgy is not interrupted with injections of popular music in an ill-advised attempted at musical eclecticism. The next step will be to add a Latin hymn as a recession used week after week (the “Salve Regina” is the ancestral choice). After that, the offertory can employ Latin hymnody.

One Latin setting of the ordinary and ten basic Latin hymns, together with stable and time-tested vernacular hymns, is more than enough to transform a parish and revive a sense of solemnity, thereby demonstrating that this repertoire is not outmoded but rather the very sound of the faith. Polyphony can be added (thousands of free choral arrangements of liturgical music are available at no charge from [www.cpd.org](http://www.cpd.org)).

As for the Psalm, it will likely continue to be in the vernacular except in parishes with the most ambitious leadership. Again, what is important here is not the sheer quantity of Latin chant and sacred music; what matters is the internal aesthetic consistency of the whole liturgical experience. It is probably more important for permitting solemnity to blossom to keep worldly music out than it is to import Latin chant.

To achieve that, however, requires decisive leadership from pastors who are willing to be straightforward with parish musicians. There is a clear need for pastors

to provide leadership toward a solemn option that connects with the full range of Catholic history, that keeps alive the songs that have built the faith over two millennia and can rekindled a love for faith, history, and transcendence today.

Those who take the initiative in bringing chant to parish life need no specialized training or background. With only an hour or two a week, and the aid of a CD and chant book, anyone can master enough of them to teach them to others. After only a few rehearsals, they can be prepared for liturgy. The next step will be to introduce them to the assembly, not through intrusive pre-liturgical "rehearsals" (as if a performance were coming) but through consistent use within liturgy itself. Perhaps the pastor can write about his own appreciation of chant in the parish bulletin. In the course of months, more will have been done to achieve renewal than all the expensive architectural changes and new catechetical materials that the parish might be contemplating.

To be Catholic is to be rooted in the sweep of a grand tradition; music can and should be provided that reminds the faithful that they are part of something much larger than themselves and more extended than the range of their own lifetimes. Chant is a magnificent and timeless treasure of our faith that has been tragically but not irreversibly neglected

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<sup>ii</sup> John Paul II, "Give Praise," General Audience, February 26, 2003.

<sup>iii</sup> Marie Pierik, *The Spirit of Gregorian Chant* (Boston: Bruce Humphries Publishers, 1939), p. 17

<sup>iv</sup> "Tra le Sollecitudini," Encyclical on Sacred Music, Pope Pius X, November 22, 1903, No. 15.

<sup>v</sup> Pierik, p. 178.

<sup>vi</sup> Kirby, Marc-Daniel Kirby, O.Cist., "Sung Theology: The Liturgical Chant of the Church," in *Beyond the Prosaic: Renewing the Liturgical Movement*, Stratford Caldecott, ed., (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) p. 137.

<sup>vii</sup> Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy: 1948-1975* (Collegeville, Minnesota, 1990), p. 216.

<sup>viii</sup> The same mistake is often made concerning the need to pay musicians to play and sing. A pastor is far better off with volunteers who care about what they are doing than professionals who are often the first to claim that their supposed expertise should trump the will of the Church.