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Gregorian Chant in Parish Life

By Arlene Oost-Zinner and Jeffrey Tucker

Many observers expect the pontificate of Benedict XVI to promote excellence in sacred music. Doing so would be in continuity with John Paul II's homily of February 26, 2003, in which he reminded the world that music can assist in salvation.

Between heaven and earth a sort of channel of communication is established in which the action of the Lord and the song of praise of the faithful meet. And truly, we live in times that cry out for sacred spaces, places to preserve us from trouble where we might find songs that point our senses toward eternity.

The tradition of Latin chant in the Roman Rite, provides songs that meet that need for all ages, classes, races, and not just in our times but in all times. The chant, of late, has been revived in recordings and, to some extent, in popular

culture. It remains largely unheard at parish liturgy where it most belongs. Yet the chant can again become familiar to nearly every Mass-going Catholic.

Chant is Catholic Music

Authoritative documents of the Church convey an unmistakable message concerning music at Mass: Gregorian chant holds pride of place in the Roman Rite.

It is the *cantus firmus* of the liturgical life of a Catholic. This is the message of the new General Instruction on the Roman Missal, which restates the message of Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963): "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,

provided that they correspond to the spirit of the liturgical action and that they foster the participation of all the faithful."

This is also the message of *Voluntatis Obsequens*, the pastoral letter that was published in 1974 along with a book of chants, called *Jubilate Deo*. Pope Paul VI wanted these chants to serve as the minimal repertoire throughout the world: "Those who are trying to improve the quality of congregational singing cannot refuse to Gregorian chant the place which is due to it."

Again, we find the same emphasis in John Paul II's 2003 Chirograph on the Centenary of Pius X's *Moto Proprio* on Sacred Music: "Among the musical expressions that correspond best with the qualities demanded by the notion of sacred music, especially liturgical music, Gregorian chant has a special place." He adds that the chant is an element of unity in the Roman liturgy.

The Practical Fears

Does it really have a place in suburban parishes that have no prior experience with chant?

Perhaps it belongs only in Cathedrals or at Masses at the Vatican. Surely it can only serve to alienate people. This is the view of many pastors who lack experience with the chant, worry about pushing something new on their congregations, wonder whether the chant is outmoded in our time, and have doubts about the pastoral benefits offered by the difficult process of initiating a change in the parish music program

Yet the Second Vatican Council restated a teaching that dates from the earliest statements by Popes and theologians on the place of music in worship. The musical tradition of the church is inestimable in value not only because it consists of beautiful compositions. Its pre-

eminence subsists in this reality: as sacred melody united to words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn Liturgy.

Sacred music, said *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, is to be considered the more holy in proportion as it is more closely connected with the liturgical action. This is why the Council also became the first in the history of the faith to specifically name Gregorian chant and polyphony as having pride of place in the rite. There thus needs to be no bitter feud about contemporary versus traditional music at Mass. The chant tradition exists not as a time-bound statement about musical fashion but rather as timeless melodic means of community prayer. Since its foreshadowing in the Jewish tradition and its codification in the 5th and 6th centuries, it has existed alongside two other forms of music: religious music used outside of liturgy and purely profane music of both popular and serious styles. Chant encourages reverence, prayer, and an awareness of the transcendent purpose of liturgical action. Chant catechizes and serves an evangelistic purpose.

There is no group of parishioners for whom chant will not have an appeal, provide it is presented properly.

Where to Begin

Jubilite Deo was distributed 30 years ago by Pope Paul VI in response to trends that contradicted the original aim of the Council. The booklet remains an excellent basis for starting a parish on the proper path of integrating chant into its liturgy.

The settings are well chosen and can be learned by anyone. This booklet was distributed with the explicit call for this to be the basis of parish song so as to make it easier for Christians to achieve unity and spiritual harmony with their brothers and with the living tradition of the past. Hence it is that those who are trying to

improve the quality of congregational singing cannot refuse Gregorian chant the place which is due it.

A next step after *Jubilate* is the *Liber Cantualis*, a wonderful book of essential chants from Solesmes for every parish. This includes 8 eight settings of the Mass, 40 popular chant hymns and psalms, four sequences, and other selections that can serve as the foundation for all Masses in any parish. These are the songs sung by the people.

The Gregorian Missal, also from Solesmes, is available in English, French, Italian, and Spanish. It includes Mass settings and propers that correspond with the Sundays and Feast Days. It follows the Graduale in assigning to Masses the Introits, Offertorio, Communio, Psalms, and other antiphons and includes many chants that had fallen into obscurity. In the readings, Latin is one side and the vernacular on the other. All propers are translated. The great merit of this book is that it fully seals the understanding that there is no strict separation between the text and the music in liturgy. They are wedded to each other in the whole history of the church.

With the revival of chant, many new publications offer selections, and this new-found popularity is all to the good. Some are particularly appealing because they are written in modern notation, which permits people who already read music to make a quick transition to the chant repertoire. And yet, the Solesmes books use medieval square notes for good reason: this notation is more authoritative, easier to sing in the long run, and causes the music to take more of a liturgical shape.

Introducing Chant

An overnight, wholesale reversal of decades of popular music would be both unfeasible and unwise. The melodies that have shaped people's

liturgical sensibilities over the decades are also an integral part of people's lives. For this reason, progress should be counted in years, not weeks or months.

Some favorite hymns of the parish, even the modern ones, will take on a more prayerful sense when sung without instruments. Reducing the music at Mass to the human voice alone will encourage more singing and provide for a more aesthetically appealing integration of the text of the liturgy with its sung prayer.

The choir should lead. Their voices should flow through the congregation, ideally from the rear or the balcony, so that the music created by the human voice becomes part of the liturgical action. Another aid in introducing chant would be to introduce a very simple Kyrie, intoned by the celebrant or cantor and answered by the people. A similarly simple vernacular Gloria can follow (our parish favors the effective and easy setting Kurt Poterack, found in the *Adoremus Hymnal*).

Parts of the Mass that previously had music might employ the use of sacred silence, a point urged by Pope John Paul II. If these steps are taken over a period of months and people come to appreciate the new solemnity, the introduction of chant hymns such as *Ave Maria*, *Ubi Caritas*, *Jesu Dulcis*, will go far more smoothly.

Once the ground is prepared, the quiet solemnity of chant will take root and grow, persuading people of its merit by the hearing and doing.

Actual Participation

Of course voices can be hired, if the money is there, but there are serious dangers associated with this approach, insofar as people do not see or hear people from the parish doing the singing.

The best approach is for the pastor to talk to people from the parish who might be willing to undertake a weekly practice in the chant. They need not come from existing choirs. It need only be two to five singers at the start. With the aid of recordings and practice, they can learn three or four chants in the course of a month or two. In time, more ambitious singers can receive formal instruction or use self-study materials on CD that are ever more available. The propers sung in Gregorian chant are the most difficult to learn. A lay group attempting them week-to-week can expect to spend an hour or two on each chant, at least at the outset. Enthusiasm, vigor, and beauty is what will draw people back to sacred music, whereas a dirge-like and duty-bound routine can only inspire a backlash.

Recordings can aid in gaining a sense of the style, none better than those done by the Solesmes Abbey. At this pace, it is remarkable what can be accomplished in two to four years. In time, the parish schola could be singing full communios and introits, and using motets by Vitoria and Palestrina for offertory.

Children and Chant

The children of the parish should not be neglected or overlooked. They can learn the chant alongside adult members of the parish; they might even prove to be the most enthusiastic for the chant.

In addition, a person in a position to organize a children's chant choir should do so. This can make a great impression on the parish community. To hear children sing at Mass is to remove the intimidation factor from the chant (if the children can do it, surely the adults can, too) and poignantly demonstrates that the Latin chant is not only about the past but about the future.

Examination of Conscience before Change

Pope John Paul II called for renewed interest in truly sacred music.

But in his general audience of February 6, 2003, he cautioned that this renewing conversion must begin on the level of the individual soul. "The Christian community must make an examination of conscience so that the beauty of music and song will return increasingly to the liturgy."

This is a call for humility above all else. The motivation must be love of liturgy and its source, love of sung prayer and its purpose, and a genuine desire to hear the people of God united in one voice in praise and thanksgiving. The Vatican and the Pope have been thoroughly consistent on the question of music but genuine change cannot be dictated from above. It must begin in the parish community.

It must come from the people and their pastors so that it can really take root in the life of Catholics again.

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