

Why We Are Singing Gregorian Chant

By Fr. Lawrence Donnelly
St. Jude's Catholic Church,
Vancouver, British Columbia

Dear Brothers and Sisters in
Christ,

I have written and spoken to you about Gregorian chant before and the reason why we sing it in our parish. Here are some excerpts from Vatican documents that make clear the mind of the Church. At the Vatican Council II, in 1964, which began a reform of the liturgy, the Church allowed that Mass could be said in the vernacular tongue.

Although Mass could now be said in English, that in no way was meant to abolish Latin at Mass, or singing in Latin. In fact, the Vatican II liturgical document, written in 1964, allowing English says: "the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites." (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, n.36). (*Nota bene*. When official Church documents refer to "Latin rites" it is referring to Catholic dioceses where the official language of the liturgy is Latin, such as for Roman Catholics.)

Regarding the use of Gregorian chant, the same document reminds us: "The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman Liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services." (n.116).

To further the reforms of the council, the Vatican came out with an instruction on liturgical music in 1967 called *Musicam Sacram*. Obviously allowing for the use of the mother tongue at Mass, it also quotes Vatican II: "According to the Constitution on the Liturgy, 'the use of the Latin language, with due respect to particular law, is to be preserved in the Latin rites.'" and orders that: "Pastors of souls should take care that besides the vernacular 'the faithful may also be able to say or sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them.'" (n.47). About the chant, it repeats Vatican II: "Gregorian chant, as proper to the Roman liturgy, should be given pride of place." (n.50).

Pope Paul VI would later insist on the use of the chant seven years later, in 1974. He had the Congregation for Divine Worship send to all the bishops a booklet of Gregorian chants that all Catholics should know along with a letter saying:



"Our congregation has prepared a booklet entitled, 'Jubilate Deo', which contains a minimum selection of sacred chants. This was done in

response to a desire which the Holy Father had frequently expressed, that all the faithful should know at least some Latin Gregorian chants, such as, for example, the 'Gloria', the 'Credo', the 'Sanctus', and the 'Agnus Dei'. It gives me great pleasure to send you a copy of it, as a personal gift from His Holiness, Pope Paul VI. May I take this opportunity of recommending to your pastoral solicitude this new initiative, whose purpose is to facilitate the observance of the recommendation of the Second Vatican Council '...steps must be taken to ensure that the faithful are able to chant together in Latin those parts of the ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them.'" (*Voluntati obsequens*).

The ability of Catholics from all over the world to be able to sing together Latin Gregorian chant, for Paul VI, was a sensible expression of the unity of the Church. The letter goes on: "Down the centuries, Gregorian chant has accompanied liturgical celebrations in the Roman rite, has nourished men's faith and has fostered their piety, while in the process achieving an artistic perfection which the Church rightly considers a patrimony of inestimable value and which the Council recognized as 'the chant especially suited to the Roman liturgy.'...Those who are trying to improve the quality of congregational singing cannot refuse to Gregorian chant the place which is due to it." (ibid.).

Pope John Paul II, in 2003, writes to commemorate the 100th anniversary of an instruction of Pope Saint Pius X, in which the saint back in

1903, already had seen the importance of restoring the use of Gregorian chant in churches.

"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. The Second Vatican Council recognized that 'being specially suited to the Roman Liturgy' it should be given, other things being equal, pride of place in liturgical services sung in Latin. Saint Pius X pointed out that the Church had 'inherited it from the Fathers of the Church', that she has 'jealously guarded [it] for centuries in her liturgical codices' and still 'proposes it to the faithful' as her own, considering it 'the supreme model of sacred music'. Thus, Gregorian chant continues also today to be an element of unity in the Roman Liturgy." (*The Fitting role of Sacred Music in the Holy Liturgy*).

My motive for having you all learn to sing the chant is part of my priestly fidelity to lead you more deeply into the mind of the Church on sacred music and ultimately to enter into the true spirit of the Mass, which the chant, in its beauty, movement and text is geared to do. Admittedly it is a challenge for us all, but once we have a familiarity with this great treasure of the Church, we will find consolation and spiritual benefit.

In Christ,

Fr. Lawrence Donnelly

What does Pope Benedict XVI say about . . .

SINGING AT MASS

THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSIC in biblical religion is shown very simply by the fact that the verb "to sing" (with related words such as "song", and, so forth) is one of the most commonly used words in the Bible. It occurs 309 times in the Old Testament and thirty-six in the New. When man comes into contact with God, mere speech is not enough. (The Spirit of the Liturgy, (SF, CA: Ignatius, 2000), p. 136)... Indeed, man's own being is insufficient for what he has to express, and so he invites the whole of creation to become a song with him: "Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn! I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations. For your steadfast love is great to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds" (Ps 57:8f.)

The singing of the Church comes ultimately out of love. It is the utter depth of love that produces the singing. "Cantare amantis est", says St. Augustine, singing is a lover's thing. In so saying, we come again to the trinitarian interpretation of Church music. The Holy Spirit is love, and it is he who produces the singing. He is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit who draws us into love for Christ and so leads to the Father. (Ibid. p. 142).

LATIN IN MASS

I WOULD BE IN FAVOUR

OF a new openness toward the use of Latin. Latin in the Mass has come meanwhile to look to us like a fall from grace. So that, in any case, communication is ruled out that is very necessary in areas of mixed culture... Let's think of tourist centres, where it would be lovely for people to recognize each other in something they have in common. So we ought to keep such things alive and present. If even in the great liturgical celebrations in Rome, no one can sing the Kyrie or the Sanctus any more, no one knows what Gloria means, then a cultural loss has become a loss of what we share in common. To that extent I should say that the Liturgy of the Word should always be in the mother tongue, but there ought nonetheless to be a basic stock of Latin elements that would bind us together. [*God and the World*, SF, CA: Ignatius, 2002, pp. 417-18]

SACRED MUSIC TODAY

AN AUTHENTIC UPDATING of sacred music can take place only in the lineage of the great tradition of the past, of Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony. (Speaking in the Sistine Chapel following a tribute concert to Dominico Bartolucci, June 24, 2006)