

Notes from the Choir

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TO RESTORE THE SACRED MUSIC OF THE CHURCH "FOR THE GREATER GLORY OF GOD."

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SAINT CECILIA PATRONESS OF SACRED MUSIC

O God our Heavenly Father, who granted Thy heroic Virgin and Martyr, Saint Cecilia, to hear the singing of Angels, grant, we humbly beseech Thee, by her most powerful intercession, that musicians may be inspired to gladden the hearts of Thy holy people by filling the air with Thy gift of music and reminding them of that most excellent Chanter of the Psalms, Thy Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, who livest and reignest with Thee and the Holy Ghost, one world without end. Amen.

There's romance associated with being the 'starving artist.' But, in reality, musicians need to make a living like everyone else. Church musicians make large sacrifices of their time and talent throughout the liturgical year so that our ears can be enriched with sacred chant and polyphony.

Sadly, the organists, singers and orchestral musicians who render the musical offering before God's holy altar are rarely compensated according to the professional level of their musicianship. And in many places their talents are not appreciated at all, nor is the Church's patrimony of music.

But here at St. John Cantius, we want to provide the most beautiful gems from the Catholic treasury of sacred music so that the sense of the sacred can be restored through the awesome gift of music. This means the Church needs your ongoing financial support in order to provide for the needs of our organists, vocalists and orchestral musicians.

The composer Franz Haydn relied upon the support of the wealthy Esterhazy family. One of Mozart's patrons was Emperor Joseph II, the "Musical King," who steered Austria into high culture through the arts. Since there aren't many princes left to approach today, it is now the role to the common man to be a patron of the arts through donations large or small. God reward you!

Rev. C. Frank Phillips, CR
Patrons of Sacred Music



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The Spirituality of Sacred Music

What does it mean when the Church sings?

by The Rev. Scott A. Haynes, SJC

The serious study of the liturgical music of the Catholic Church — namely Gregorian Chant, polyphony and those modern forms of music that are consonant with the Church’s liturgical spirit and tradition — is of utmost importance in the education of a Church musician. Catholic musicians must revere the treasury of sacred liturgical music. As the philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand observed, we should “fear to abandon the prayers and postures and music that have been approved by so many saints throughout the Christian era and delivered to us as a precious heritage. The illusion that we can replace the Gregorian chant, with its inspired hymns and rhythms ... betrays a ridiculous self-assurance and lack of knowledge”.[1]

The constant teaching of the Magisterium, underlined in the teaching of Vatican II, has reiterated that Catholics should receive the Sacred Liturgy, with its renowned tradition of sacred music, as food for the soul. [2] As French Cistercian Abbot Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard wrote, “The Church uses her chant and her ceremonies to appeal to the sense faculties, and to reach, through them, the souls of her children more fully, and to give to their wills a more effective presentation of the true goods, and raise them up more surely, more easily, and more completely to God”.[3]

By analogy, as a child embraces the spoon that his mother puts into his mouth, he savors the food that his mother has prepared for him. In like manner, as children of the Heavenly Father, we too must earnestly hunger for the milk of our Holy Mother the Church, the truths of our faith that are lovingly prepared for us in the Eucharistic Banquet, so that fortified by all that is true, good and beautiful, our hearts, minds and voices might harmoniously resound with the voice of our Mother the Church, and return a joyful song unto the Lord.

When we have this sort of disposition, then we can come to know what the psalmist calls “the beauty of holiness” (Ps 29:2). The Divine Liturgy is the consummation of love between Christ and His Church, between Bridegroom and Bride, which is filled with song and replete with melody. Because the liturgy peels back the veil of time so that we might come to see the Lord face to face, the formation of Church musicians cannot be limited to the study of theory, history or to the perfection of musicianship. Pastoral musicians must be drawn into an intimate contact with the Word of God, both through the Sacred Scripture and ultimately through the Holy Eucharist.

The Word of God must form in us mature Christian wisdom, to give us a relish and taste for the things of God. If we are to have clear perceptions of reality, we must know the eternal value of the Sacred Liturgy. If we can experience the music of the liturgy in this manner, then we follow the axiom based on the thought of Saint Augustine of Hippo, “he who sings well, prays twice”.[4]

To sing well is to sing with a heart that is on fire for God. Our earthly music, no matter how refined it is in our vision, or how imperfect it may be in God’s, will be pleasing to Him only when we truly become mirrors of charity. As Benedictine Father Stephen Thuis wrote in 1952, “It is of interest to note that today we are experiencing a revived appreciation of plainchant. This, then, would indicate ... that we are in the midst of a reawakening of the religious spirit”.[5] Church musicians are exhorted to follow the advice of Pope Saint Pius X, who counseled pastoral musicians, before making music before the Lord, to pray and meditate on the sacred words of the liturgy entrusted to the choir. If the renewal of liturgical music today is to bear lasting fruit, then each of us must cultivate a liturgical piety based on profound and prayerful meditation on the Word.

Lectio Divina — Listening to God

A very ancient art, practiced at one time by all Christians, is the technique known as *Lectio Divina* or “divine reading” — a slow, contemplative reading and praying of the Scriptures — which enables the Bible, the Word of God, to become a means of union with God. This ancient practice has been kept alive in the monastic tradition, and is one of the inherent benefits of celebrating the liturgy with Gregorian Chant. In his rule, Saint Benedict says that the art of *Lectio Divina* begins with cultivating the ability to listen deeply, to hear with the ear of our hearts. When we read the Scriptures we should try to imitate the prophet Elijah. We should allow ourselves the opportunity to listen for the “still, small voice” of God (I Kings 19:12), which is God’s voice touching our hearts.

The cry of the prophets to ancient Israel was the joy-filled command to listen. *Sh’ma Israel*: Hear, O Israel! (Deut 6:4). In *Lectio Divina* we, too, heed that command and turn to the Scriptures, knowing that we must hear the voice of God, which often speaks very softly. In order to hear someone speaking softly we must learn to be silent. Gregorian Chant can quiet our souls, so full of the noise of the world, and prepare us to embrace this sacred silence. From time to time, a word or a passage in the Scriptures speaks to us in a personal way, and we must take it in and ruminate on it. In the celebration of Mass, after the epistle, our



Mother the Church guides us in this sort of *Lectio Divina* by selecting a short psalm verse called the Gradual, as a scriptural-musical meditation in preparation for the Gospel. While the text of the Gradual and Alleluia is short, the melismatic chants (with several notes sung to a single syllable) decorate and embellish the Scripture passage with a spirit of melodic and rhythmic freedom, which gives us time to spiritually digest and contemplate the sacred texts.

In antiquity, the image of the ruminant animal quietly chewing its cud was used as a symbol of the Christian pondering the Word of God. Christians have always seen a scriptural invitation to *Lectio Divina* in the example of the Virgin Mary “pondering in her heart” what she saw and heard of Christ (Lk 2:19). For the church musician today, these images are a reminder that we must take in the Word — even memorize it like the monks of old, if we can — and while contemplating it, allow it to permeate our thoughts, our hopes, our memories, our desires. This is the second step or stage in *Lectio Divina: meditatio*, meditation. Through this meditation, we allow God’s Word to become living and active in our daily lives.

Gregorian chant, as the *Lectio Divina* of the early Church, provides a deep reflection on the Word of God in the context of the Sacred Liturgy and in the

wider tradition of the Church. Gregorian chant has a spirituality — a liturgical spirituality — all its own. True Christian, spiritual, music is never an end in itself. It returns the soul to God, causing the listener to become sanctified. Truly sacred music leads to the most profound silence, to true contemplation of the Divine Majesty.

Saint John Chrysostom, Doctor of the Church, taught that “our chant is nothing but an echo, an imitation of the angelic chant. Music was invented in Heaven. Around and above us the angels sing”. By embracing the Church’s song, Gregorian Chant, as *Lectio Divina*, our holy Mother the Church lays the foundation stones of an ecclesial renewal, attuning Catholics to the beauty of Christ, reflected in the Sacred Liturgy.

The Church Sings to Her Bridegroom

The axiom *lex orandi, lex credendi* (i.e. “the law of prayer is the law of belief”) should be expanded to include *lex cantandi, lex amandi* (i.e. “the law of singing is the law of loving.”) As Saint Augustine said: “For he that sings praise, not only praises, but only praises with gladness: he that sings praise, not only sings, but also loves Him of whom he sings. In praise, there is the speaking forth of one confessing; in singing, the affection of one loving”.[6] Music is the language of love. Hence the Church, as the Bride of Christ, has always sung the praises of her Divine Bridegroom,



Jesus Christ. Her praises, in turn, are the echo of that ineffable canticle sung in the Godhead from all ages. For the Eternal Word, Jesus Christ, is a divine canticle singing the Father's praise. This is the infinite hymn that forever sounds in the "bosom of the Father" (Jn. 1:18). It is the canticle that rises up from the depths of the Divinity, the Living Canticle wherein God eternally delights, because it is the infinite expression of His perfection. Thus the Church is filled with the songs of the angels. When the Sanctus passes through the lips of the Church she is echoing the joyous praise of the cherubim and seraphim, who adore our Triune God in ceaseless adoration. Because one who loves is wont to sing — *Cantare amantis est*, as Saint Augustine says [7] — then the Church must sing God's praises with knowledge, with understanding and with love. Our voices, filled with such love and understanding, will not be silenced, but rather, with all the saints and angels, our songs of praise will echo through all eternity in the halls of heaven.

1. Dietrich von Hildebrand, "The Case for the Latin Mass", Triumph magazine, October 1966.
2. "The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as a combination of sacred music and words, it forms a necessary or integral part of solemn liturgy". *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 112. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1156).
3. Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard (1858-1935), *The Soul of the Apostolate* (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1946, pp. 218-219).
4. See Catechism of the Catholic Church 1156; Eph 5:19; Saint Augustine, En. in Psalm 72:1: PL 36, 914; cf. Col 3:16.
5. Stephen Thuis, OSB, *Gregorian Chant: A Barometer of Religious Fervor in the Catholic Church*; Excerpt from Master of Music Thesis, 1952. St. Meinrad, Indiana.
6. Saint Augustine. Commentary on Psalm 73, 1.
7. Saint Augustine. Sermon 336, 1 (PL 38, 1472). "Our voices, filled with such love and understanding, will not be silenced, but rather, with all the saints and angels, our songs of praise will echo through all eternity in the halls of heaven."

Words of Wisdom from Our Holy Father

One recognizes right liturgy by the fact that it liberates us from ordinary, everyday activity and returns to us once more the depths and the heights, silence and song. Right liturgy sings with the angels. It is silent with the expectant depths of the universe. And that is how it redeems the earth. Where liturgy is correctly understood and lived, there good church music also grows.

The choir acts for the others and includes them in its own action. Through its singing everyone can be led into the great liturgy of the communion of saints and this into that kind of praying which pulls our hearts upwards and lets us join, above and beyond all earthly realizations, the heavenly Jerusalem.

