

# *Embracing What is Ours*

## *Part Three: The “Propers” of the Mass*

### **Introduction**

This is the last of a three-part series on the Sacred Liturgy and the Church’s Tradition. In part one, we focused on the Latin language as an inherent part of our spiritual heritage as Roman Catholics. In part two, we explored Gregorian Chant as the musical form most suited to the Sacred Liturgy and its Latin language. In this last installment, we will seek to understand what we call the “Propers” of the Mass, i.e. those Mass parts which are *proper* (especially suited) to *each* Mass. Whereas the “Ordinary” of the Mass is made up of those Mass parts with do *not* change (i.e. *Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Agnus Dei*, etc.), the Propers of the Mass *do* change, giving to each celebration of Holy Mass a character of its own according to the liturgical season, the feast being celebrated, or the saint being honored.

### **What exactly are the “Propers” of the Mass?**

From ancient times, the Propers of the Mass have given a kind of thematic architecture to the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. They are collectively found in the Roman Missal<sup>1</sup>, the Lectionary<sup>2</sup>, and the *Graduale Romanum*<sup>3</sup>. Almost exclusively scriptural, and cultivating a deep “psalm piety”<sup>4</sup>, I have heard it said that in the propers, we have Sacred Scripture commenting upon itself, thus opening the mind and heart of the believer to a beautiful and continual *Lectio Divina*, a “sacred reading” and contemplative listening to God’s Word. The propers of the Mass are:

The “INTROIT”: The Introit is the gathering, or “introductory” chant of the Mass, bringing us into the celebration of the Sacred Mysteries. The voices of the choir unite, beginning “a unification of the faithful that will deepen gradually during the course of the celebration”<sup>5</sup>. As one author explains, the purpose of the Introit is contemplative. It “ushers the soul into the mystery of the day not by explaining it, but by opening the Mass with a word uttered from above. The text of the Introit signifies that, in every celebration, the initiative is divine, not human”<sup>6</sup>. Musically, the Introit is one of the simplest chants among the Mass propers.

The “GRADUAL” or the “RESPONSORIAL PSALM”: The “Gradual” is a chant between readings, named symbolically for the “gradual” ascent of the stairs of the holy place unto the altar of God as the Liturgy progresses, and also because a cantor would sing it standing on a step leading toward the ambo. In the beginning of our tradition, this chant was something of a “responsorial psalm”, which was progressively shortened over time. By the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century, this relatively short verse was musically elaborated and thus sung by a skilled soloist or a small group called a *schola*. It had remained this way until the liturgical changes of the new Roman Missal in the 1970’s when an attempt was made to return to the more ancient responsorial psalm<sup>7</sup>, which is now sung alternately

---

<sup>1</sup> The Roman Missal is the book containing the prayers of each Holy Mass. Before the “New Mass” of 1970, all of the Propers were found in the Roman Missal. Now, it is necessary to look at all three of the sources mentioned above in order to access them.

<sup>2</sup> The Lectionary is the collection of readings for each Holy Mass.

<sup>3</sup> The *Graduale Romanum* is a compilation of the propers of the Mass in Latin with Gregorian Chant settings published by the monastery of Solesmes in France.

<sup>4</sup> cf. S. WEBER, “Singing the Propers of the Mass: A School of Christian Prayer”, an essay sent to me by Father Weber in September 2015, for which I am deeply grateful, and to which I owe much of the “spirit” of these current reflections.

<sup>5</sup> D. SAULNIER, *Gregorian Chant: A Guide*, Solesmes, 2003, 75.

<sup>6</sup> M. KIRBY, “The Propers of the Mass, Then and Now”, essay delivered in 2011 at a Liturgical Symposium in Phoenix, AZ.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that while ancient fathers such as Leo the Great and Augustine do speak of the Responsorial Psalm, we actually do not know exactly *how* the Responsorial Psalm was sung; our laudable modern attempts are at best an

by cantor and choir. The purpose of the Gradual is meditative: through the “melismatic” (i.e. elaborate, elongated, and beautiful) singing of a relatively short psalm verse, the contemplative nature of the Liturgy comes alive and the reading just proclaimed rests more deeply in the mind and heart.

The “ALLELUIA”<sup>8</sup>: The Alleluia is a great cry of acclamation in preparation for the reading of the Holy Gospel. This is also traditionally a melismatic chant, its complexity serving to accentuate the profound mystery of the Word to be proclaimed. The verse is generally sung by a soloist or *schola*, while the faithful may participate in the singing of the “Alleluia” itself.

The “OFFERTORY”<sup>9</sup>: As the sacred gifts are being brought forward, prepared, and incensed, and God’s people are prayerfully preparing for the offering of the Holy Sacrifice, the Offertory chant accompanies these solemn rites. The offertory is a plaintive and elaborate chant, though generally brief in its verbal content, and is generally sung by a soloist or the *schola* alone due to its complexity.

The “COMMUNION”: This chant, simple in its structure, accompanies the reception of Jesus in Holy Communion. It often thematically ties in the Liturgy of the Word with the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and is generally memorable and accessible enough that all may participate in the frequent repetition of the antiphon (the short scriptural phrase that is repeated between longer verses).

### **Integrity and unity in the Roman Liturgy: Singing the Mass vs. Singing at Mass**

The Propers of the Mass can of course be spoken rather than sung. This is, after all, the tradition of the “Low Mass”. However, the more ancient practice and ideal has always been and remains that the propers be *sung*. As Bishop Marc Aillet writes, “There is nothing ideological or nostalgic in a preference for Latin and Gregorian Chant”<sup>10</sup>, for beauty is not an ideology or a “camp”, but rather a universal experience of that which speaks to the heart and leads the mind toward truth. A preference for the chant is also an exercise of the most important of virtues in the spiritual life: humility. I *receive* what God seeks to give me through Mother Church and the tradition of our Fathers, rather than opting for a fabrication based on varying whims and changing tastes. In humble reception of tradition (“*traditio*” being that which is handed over and received in turn as a *living gift*), my spiritual life deepens, my heart expands, and I see and experience God in profound and often powerful ways. When we do this, we begin to see that there is a real difference between singing “at” Mass—which is what we do through the use of popular hymns—and *singing the Mass itself*, which is what we do when we sing and listen to the Propers of the Mass as the Church provides them. It is the latter which is the organic and living experience of a Tradition which will not disappoint in its capacity to touch the soul as it inspires to conversion.

---

estimated reconstruction, and the fully chanted Gradual in Latin remains the ideal. Cf. W. MAHRT, “The Gradual and the Responsorial Psalm”, essay written in July, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> in the Lenten season, there is no Alleluia, but rather a *tract* or a “gospel acclamation” which serves a similar purpose of preparation, although distinguished by sorrowful compunction.

<sup>9</sup> The Offertory verse was inexplicably removed from the post-Conciliar Roman Missal. Thankfully, the monastery of Solesmes has included it in their *Graduale Romanum*, thus allowing it to be restored to use in the new liturgy. Along these lines, the current Prefect of the Congregation of Divine Worship, Cardinal Robert Sarah, has recently suggested the re-inclusion of the ancient Offertory prayers which were jettisoned with introduction of the new Roman Missal. Cf. R. SARAH, “The Silent Action of the Heart” in *L’Osservatore Romano*, June 12, 2015, in which His Eminence writes, “It would also be desirable that the Penitential Rite and the Offertory of the “*usus antiquior*” be inserted as an enclosure in the next edition of the Missal with the aim of stressing that the two liturgical reforms illuminate one another, in continuity and with no opposition”.

<sup>10</sup> M. AILLET, *The Old Mass and the New*, Ignatius, San Francisco 2010, 33.

## **“Active Participation”: A Harmony of Roles**

A strong principle of the Vatican II directives on Liturgical reform was that the faithful attending the Sacred Liturgy should be deeply involved in their presence and prayer of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The term used to describe this involvement—“*participatio actuosa*”—is most commonly translated as “active participation”; a fair enough translation, but perhaps not as nuanced or full as it might be. This phrase has been a part of our tradition for over one hundred years, first through the instruction of Pope St. Pius X<sup>11</sup>, later through Venerable Pius XII<sup>12</sup>, and most recently and recognizably by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council<sup>13</sup>. What our Holy Fathers and the Council Fathers likely did *not* intend is that the participation be so much “active” as we understand the word today, as much as *engaged*, according to roles which are equal in dignity but different in their expression. This engagement is expressed in a common unity of heart, mind, and body at prayer, as we say or sing the parts of the Mass which are proper to us, allowing the choir, cantors, lectors, and priest to attend to those parts that are specially suited for them<sup>14</sup>.

In other words, everybody is not supposed to say or sing everything. If and when that happens in the Sacred Liturgy, what is “special” is no longer such, and the beauty that God intends for His Holy Sacrifice is obscured, much in the same way that if every flower were a rose, a garden would lose that splendid variety which is so much a part of beauty’s expression<sup>15</sup>. Benedict XVI (writing as a Cardinal) stated this artfully, writing that

there are a good number of people who can sing better ‘with the heart’ than ‘with their mouths’, but their hearts are really stimulated to sing through the singing of those who *have* the gift of singing ‘with their mouths’. It is as if they themselves actually sing in the others; thankful listening is united with the voices of the singers in the one worship of God<sup>16</sup>.

## **The Teaching of the Church**

Our Church teaches that “Music and singing, which express the soul of people, have pride of place in the liturgy. And so singing must be promoted, in the first place *singing the liturgical text*, so that the voices of the faithful may be heard in the liturgical actions themselves”<sup>17</sup>. Many years before this, Pope Pius XI had taught that “...it is very necessary that the faithful attend the sacred ceremonies not as if they were outsiders or mute onlookers, but let them fully appreciate the beauty of the

---

<sup>11</sup> PIUS X, Instruction *Tra le Sollecitudini*, Nov. 22, 1903.

<sup>12</sup> PIUS XII, Encyclical *Mediator Dei*, Nov. 20, 1947, #78.

<sup>13</sup> VATICAN COUNCIL II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Dec. 4, 1963, #14.

<sup>14</sup> S. CORDILEONE, Foreword in S. WEBER, *The Proper of the Mass for Sundays and Solemnities*, Ignatius, San Francisco 2015, xi.

<sup>15</sup> cf. THÉRÈSE DE LISIEUX, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 3rd ed., trans. John Clarke, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1996), chapter 1, p. 14: “Jesus deigned to teach me this mystery. He set before me the book of nature; I understood how all the flowers He has created are beautiful, how the splendor of the rose and the whiteness of the Lily do not take away the perfume of the little violet of the delightful simplicity of the daisy. I understood that if all flowers wanted to be roses, nature would lose her springtime beauty, and the fields would no longer be decked out with little wild flowers”.

<sup>16</sup> J. RATZINGER, *The Feast of Faith*, trans. G. HARRISON, Ignatius, San Francisco 1986, 124, in AILLET, *The Old Mass and the New*, 57.

<sup>17</sup> CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS, Instruction *Varietates Legitimae: Fourth Instruction for the Right Application of the Conciliar Constitution on the Liturgy (Nos. 37-40)*, March 29, 1994, #40 (emphasis added). We read more specifically in the GENERAL INSTRUCTION OF THE ROMAN MISSAL, “This [entrance, offertory, or communion] chant is sung alternately by the choir and the people or similarly by a cantor and the people, or entirely by the people, or by the choir alone. In the Dioceses of the United States of America, there are four options for the Entrance Chant: [the first of which is to sing] the antiphon from the Missal or the antiphon with its Psalm from the Graduale Romanum, as set to music there or in another setting” (#48).

liturgy and take part in the sacred ceremonies, alternating their voices with the priest and the choir”<sup>18</sup>. According to their harmony of roles and capacities, “...if those present are well trained in Gregorian chant, they can sing the parts of the Proper of the Mass”<sup>19</sup>. And if they are not (yet), while singing may not be their particular gift, *praying* and being *fully present* with engaged mind and heart certainly are and can be; and no matter what we “do”, “say”, or “sing”, during the Sacred Liturgy, this receptive and contemplative presence is the first and most primary “active participation” for *all* of us. As the Congregation for Divine Worship shares with us, “...it does not follow that everyone must necessarily have something concrete to do beyond the actions and gestures”<sup>20</sup>, for the greatest and most active “gesture” of the Christian faithful at the Sacred Liturgy is a heart alive with prayer.

### **Conclusion**

Benedict XVI was ever fond of emphasizing that Tradition is not static and dead. Tradition is *alive*, flowing like a river from the mystery of Christ Himself<sup>21</sup>. Perhaps this is what brought our Pope Emeritus to say, “I am convinced that the crisis we are going through in the Church today is largely based on the disintegration of the liturgy”<sup>22</sup>. If we treat the Sacred Liturgy as manipulable, rather than that living presence of Christ’s dying and rising which is meant to change *us*, we do indeed contribute to the Liturgy’s “disintegration”, and to the misapprehension of Christ’s gift of redemption. But if we receive the Sacred Liturgy as a gift of Tradition, acting as its humble stewards, then there is no limit to what God can do with our lives.

I end these reflections with a poignant and prophetic quote from Thomas Merton, one of the better known voices of the modern Church. Grasping the inestimable gift of the Church’s liturgical, musical, and linguistic tradition, and apprehending the incalculable loss of letting it slip away, Merton wrote:

This is what I think about the Latin and the chant: They are masterpieces, which offer us an irreplaceable monastic and Christian experience. They have a force, an energy, a depth without equal. All the proposed English offices are very much impoverished in comparison...But I must add something more serious. As you know, I have many friends in the world who are artists, poets, authors, editors, etc. Now they are well able to appreciate our chant and even our Latin. But they are all, without exception, scandalized and grieved when I tell them that probably this Office, this Mass will no longer be here in ten years. And that is the worst. The monks cannot understand this treasure they possess, and they throw it out to look for something else, when seculars, who for the most part are not even Christians, are able to love this incomparable art<sup>23</sup>.

We need not—we *must not*—let what is ours slip away. What is ours is beautiful and calls out to be embraced.

*Father Cassian*  
*Associate Pastor*

---

<sup>18</sup> PIUS XI, Apostolic Constitution *Divini Cultus*, Dec. 20, 1928, #9.

<sup>19</sup> SACRED CONGREGATION OF RITES *De Musica Sacra et Sacra Liturgia*, Sep. 3, 1958, #5

<sup>20</sup> CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS, Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, April 23, 2004, #40.

<sup>21</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *General Audiences* of May 3 and May 10, 2006, as referenced in AILLET, *The Old Mass and the New*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> RATZINGER, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927 – 1977*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1998, as referenced in in AILLET, *The Old Mass and the New*, 46.

<sup>23</sup> T. MERTON, in a letter to Dom Ignace Gillet, Abbot General of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, 1964.