

Embracing What is Ours

Part Two: Gregorian Chant

Introduction

Last week we explored the Latin Language in the Mass of the Roman rite. This week, we will look at Latin's complementary gift in the Liturgical life: Gregorian Chant. Chant is the Church's musical life's blood. If the Latin language gives an ancient and beautiful structure and solidity to the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy, Gregorian Chant is the musical form through which the doctrinal richness of the Liturgy most readily reaches us. The two, in fact, are so conjoined in the Latin Church that we cannot seriously engage our Sacred Liturgy without also deeply engaging the chant which is so much a part of it¹. And because "for liturgical celebrations sung in Latin, Gregorian Chant, as the music proper of the Roman liturgy, should have pride of place"², when we understand the gift of chant more fully we can better appreciate its prized place in our liturgical and spiritual life.

What is 'Gregorian Chant'?

We call this ancient form of the Church's chant "Gregorian" after Pope St. Gregory the Great (6th century), whose courageous pastoral charity and emphasis on liturgical beauty and reform drew his musically-adept admirers to name the chant after him. By the end of Gregory's pontificate, the essential melodies and structure of the chant which we hear today were sealed. Another successor of St. Peter, Pope St. Pius X—also a great defender of the faith and the Sacred Liturgy— describes this chant which we have inherited from our ancient fathers of the faith as "the supreme model for sacred music"³. Gregorian chant is given pride of place in our musical repertoire not only because of its antiquity, but because of its harmonic gracefulness: its melodies are simple, beautiful, artful, and strong, and have carried the scriptural texts of the Sacred Liturgy as on the wings of a dove since the very early times of the Church, "giving eloquent expression to [the] inner spiritual life" of God's Word⁴. So much more than simply a pleasing melody, the chant is intimately bound up with the scriptural texts it expresses, freeing the Word through beauty to express fully and prayerfully the divine content it contains.

Beauty Touches the Heart

Beautiful music has a place in human life all its own, stirring the emotions, awakening memories, and accessing the God-given passions of the heart in an unspeakable way. St. Augustine, describing how moved he was by the chanting in the churches of Milan, wrote

I wept at the beauty of your hymns and canticles, and was powerfully moved at the sweet sound of Your Church's singing. Those sounds flowed into my ears, and the truth streamed into my heart: so that my feelings of devotion overflowed, and the tears ran from my eyes, and I was happy in them⁵.

What Augustine describes here is the evocative touch of beauty. This beauty is most powerfully present during Holy Mass, and is mystically extended throughout time and place in the continuance of the Eucharistic Sacrifice through the chanting of the Psalms in the Divine Office, the official

¹ cf. D. SAULNIER, *Gregorian Chant: A Guide*, Solesmes 2003, 19.

² SACRED CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP, *General Instruction for the Liturgy of the Hours*, 1971.

³ PIUS X, *Motu Proprio Tra Le Sollecitudini*, Nov. 22, 1903, #3.

⁴ E. CARDINE, *Beginning Studies in Gregorian Chant*, G.I.A. Publications, Chicago 1988, 1.

⁵ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Confessions*, IX.6

prayer of the Church. If the Mass is the center of our spiritual life, the Office widens the center in its sanctification of time and place, allowing us to “pray always” (1 Thes. 5:17) as Christ’s Mystical Body spread throughout the world. When we remove the use of the Latin language and the chant in these superb expressions of prayer, although we may render the Liturgy “more accessible”, we actually *lose*, not gain, as the mystery which compels us toward a deeper life is lost. In the integrity of our tradition, *this* chant was written precisely for *this* language (Latin), articulately transmitting truth to the heart and soul in a way that no other musical means in our tradition does. It was with this in mind that Blessed Paul VI predicted,

“...take away the [Latin] language that transcends national boundaries and possesses a marvelous spiritual power, and the music that rises from the depths of the soul where faith resides and charity burns – we mean Gregorian Chant – and the choral office will be like a snuffed candle; it will no longer shed light, no longer draw the eyes and minds of the people”⁶.

We Desire Contemplation

Contemplation is a mysterious beholding of the love of God made known in Jesus, and every baptized soul possesses this spiritual gift in seed form. When God waters that seed through grace, a new world of heavenly peace is opened in prayer. Recognizing the power of the chant to lift the mind and heart to God and higher things, one author asserts that “the essential worth of Gregorian Chant lies in its profound spirituality”⁷. In Catholic parlance, “spirituality” is not a generic term. It refers to the life of the *Holy* Spirit in man, the Spirit of Love Itself which vivifies and illumines. As part of the Catholic spiritual tradition, chant is not a music that is earth-bound, but rather one which is *suspended* from Heaven, and which draws the listening ear and heart *up* into contemplation of God and divine things. We *all* thirst for union with God, and chant bespeaks and anticipates this union.

Seeing that Gregorian chant has this singular way of speaking to contemplative desire, Pope St. Pius X recognized that the further sacred music veers from Gregorian chant, the less suited it is to the deepest aspirations of man, and to the liturgy which exists to *fulfill* those aspirations⁸. In light of the chant’s exodus from the life of the Church in the mid 1960’s, Paul VI wrote to monastic communities charged with keeping this gift *alive* about his fears that prayer without chant would become “vapid and boring”, and also questioned “whether people who want to take part in the liturgy will go to your churches in such numbers if they will no longer hear there the ancient language, natural to the liturgical prayers, accompanied by a chant full of gravity and grace”⁹. Empty pews do not lie, and the Holy Father predicted as much. In the words of Bishop Marc Aillet, “There is nothing ideological or nostalgic in a preference for Latin and Gregorian chant”, for the embracing of this ancient and beautiful form of praise is at once an embracing of a *universal faith*¹⁰.

The Teaching of the Church

When the Church teaches, she always has reasons *why* She does so. Just after the 2nd Vatican Council, Paul VI, in writing about some of the requests that had been made to diminish the use of the chant and Latin in the Sacred Liturgy, admitted that he was “quite disturbed and troubled” and wanted to know “where such an attitude and hitherto unheard of discontent have come from and why they

⁶ PAUL VI, Letter *Sacrificium Laudis*, August 15, 1966.

⁷ E. CARDINE, *Beginning Studies in Gregorian Chant*, 1.

⁸ cf. PIUS X, *Tra Le Sollecitudini*, #6.

⁹ PAUL VI, Letter *Sacrificium Laudis*.

¹⁰ M. AILLET, *The Old Mass and the New*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2010, 90.

have spread”¹¹. The Holy Father emphasized that it was not about “merely keeping the Latin”, but rather “to keep intact the grace, the beauty, and the *inherent strength* of these prayers and chants”¹². The Church fosters the use of chant “to make it easier for Christians to achieve unity and spiritual harmony with their brothers and with the living traditions of the past. Hence it is that those who are trying to improve the quality of congregational singing cannot refuse to Gregorian chant the place which is due to it”¹³, and so our liturgical law directs that “the main place should be given, all things being equal, to Gregorian chant, as being proper to the Roman Liturgy”¹⁴. Gregorian chant is thus “not only permitted, but *encouraged* at all liturgical ceremonies above all other styles of music”¹⁵, retaining the rhythmic cadence of verse and response between the priest and people in the Holy Sacrifice which has so long been such a cherished part of our Tradition¹⁶.

This anthem would be taken up by the 2nd Vatican Council, which taught that Gregorian chant, being “specially suited to the Roman liturgy...should be given pride of place in liturgical services”, and that “the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites”, emphasizing (as we saw in last week’s installment) that “steps should be taken so that the faithful may also be able to say or to sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them”¹⁷. Ever a faithful son of the Church, Benedict XVI, listening to the expressed desire of his bishops, wrote, “I desire...that Gregorian chant be suitably esteemed and employed as the chant proper to the Roman liturgy”¹⁸. In response to this “desire”, Bishop Marc Aillet respectfully asks, “Do we not have the right to demand that such authoritative calls be heard”¹⁹.

Conclusion

Beauty speaks deeply to the human heart. Sonorous melody is healing for the distracted mind. And peace is the great thirst of every soul, especially those baptized into the Divine Life in Christ. Gregorian chant flows as a breath from Heaven *per ritus et preces* (through the rites and prayers) of the Sacred Liturgy in an unparalleled way, helping us to deepen our access to the Divine Mysteries which are ever ancient and ever new. In a culture saturated with innumerable false lights, and thus so thirsting for what is authentically *beautiful*, we do well to rediscover Gregorian chant as a balm to the world-tried soul.

Father Cassian
Associate Pastor

¹¹ PAUL VI, Letter *Sacrificium Laudis*.

¹² PAUL VI, Letter *Sacrificium Laudis* (emphasis added). When Paul VI saw the movement to diminish or remove Gregorian chant from the life of the Church, he saw that it “surely would afflict the Church of God with sickness and sadness” (*Sacrificium Laudis*). Paul VI was a prophet in more ways than one. It is no coincidence that he would utter this prophetic stance in favor of unambiguous liturgical beauty within the same Ecclesial season in which he would have to courageously stand for human life in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. Unfortunately, neither teaching has been well-heeded, and the fruits of such deafness loom darkly in the spiritual and moral horizon of the faithful, threatening with sterility the nuptial gifts of the marital embrace and the Sacred Liturgy.

¹³ CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP, *Vonluntati Obsequens*, April 14, 1974.

¹⁴ GENERAL INSTRUCTION OF THE ROMAN MISSAL (“GIRM”), #41.

¹⁵ SACRED CONGREGATION OF RITES, *De Musica Sacra et Sacra Liturgia*, Sep. 3, 1958, #16 (emphasis added).

¹⁶ As one author shares, “Never forget that a fully-chanted Mass, as prescribed by the modern *Graduale Romanum*, remains the ideal for the new Mass, no less than for the old”. P. RICE, *The Parish Book of Chant: A Manual of Gregorian Chant and a Liturgical Resource for Scholas and Congregations*, The Church Music Association of America, xix.

¹⁷ VATICAN COUNCIL II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, #116, #36, and #54.

¹⁸ BENEDICT XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Feb. 22, 2007, #42.

¹⁹ M. AILLET, *The Old Mass and the New*, 56.