

# Singing the Mass, Part One: Liturgical Music as participation in Christ

*by Most Rev. Thomas Olmsted on December 15, 2011 (Bishop Thomas Olmsted's Columns published in the newspaper of the Diocese of Phoenix, The Catholic Sun.)*

St. Augustine recounts in his autobiography Confessions an experience he had during the singing of the Mass:

“How I wept, deeply moved by your hymns, songs, and the voices that echoed through your Church! What emotion I experienced in them! Those sounds flowed into my ears, distilling the truth in my heart. A feeling of devotion surged within me, and tears streamed down my face — tears that did me good.”

How can we explain this overwhelming and transforming experience that led one of our greatest saints to the Church? Clearly, this was much more than a man simply being moved by a well-performed song. His entire being was penetrated and transformed through music. How can this be?

## At Mass, Christ sings to the Father

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (#1157) makes a direct reference to St. Augustine's experience when it teaches that the music and song of the liturgy “participate in the purpose of the liturgical words and actions: the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful.”

The Mass itself is a song; it is meant to be sung. Recall that the Gospels only tell us of one time when Jesus sings: when he institutes the Holy Eucharist (Cf. Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26). We should not be surprised, then, that Christ sings when he institutes the sacramentum caritatis (the Sacrament of love), and that for the vast majority of the past 2,000 years, the various parts of the Mass have been sung by priests and lay faithful. In the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council strongly encouraged a rediscovery of the ancient concept of singing the Mass: “[The musical tradition of the universal Church] forms a necessary or integral part of solemn liturgy” (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 112). The Mass is most itself when it is sung.

This recent rediscovery of “singing the Mass” did not begin with the Second Vatican Council. Following a movement that stretches back at least to Pope Saint Pius X in 1903, Pope Pius XII wrote in 1955, “The dignity and lofty purpose of sacred music consists in the fact that its lovely melodies and splendor beautify and embellish the voices of the priest who offers Mass and of the Christian people who praise the Sovereign God” (Musicae Sacrae Disciplina, #31).

In the years immediately following the Council, there arose the need to highlight and clarify the Council's teaching regarding the importance of liturgical prayer in its native sung form. In 1967, The Sacred Congregation for Rites wrote:

“Indeed, through this form [sung liturgical prayer], prayer is expressed in a more attractive way, the mystery of the Liturgy, with its hierarchical and community nature, is more openly shown, the unity of hearts is more profoundly achieved by the union of voices, minds are more easily raised to heavenly things by the beauty of the sacred rites, and the whole celebration more clearly prefigures that heavenly Liturgy which is enacted in the holy city of Jerusalem.” (Musicam Sacram, #5).

In other words, sung liturgical prayer more effectively reveals the mystery of the Liturgy as well as more easily accomplishes its heavenly purposes. In this way, sung liturgy is a revelation of Christ as well as a vehicle for profound participation in His saving work.

## **What is Sacred Music?**

Sacred music is, in the narrowest sense, that music created to support, elevate, and better express the words and actions of the sacred liturgy. The Council praises it as music “closely connected...with the liturgical action” (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 112), for example, the Order of Mass (dialogues between ministers and people, the unchanging framework of the Mass), the Ordinary of the Mass (Kyrie, Gloria, The Creed, Sanctus and Agnus Dei), and the Proper of the Mass (the priest’s sung prayers, the Responsorial Psalm, Alleluia and Verses, the antiphons and psalms prescribed for the processions).

Sacred music is distinct from the broader category of what we may call “religious” music, that which aids and supports Christian faith but is not primarily a part of the sacred liturgy. “Religious” music includes various devotional music, such as much popular hymnody, “praise and worship” music, as well as a host of other musical forms.

The Council’s enthusiastic rediscovery and promotion of sacred music was not meant to discourage “religious” music but rather to encourage it — assuming the clear distinction and proper relationship between them. Just a few years before the Council, Pope Pius XII wrote,

“We must also hold in honor that music which is not primarily a part of the sacred liturgy, but which by its power and purpose greatly aids religion. This music is therefore rightly called religious music...As experience shows, it can exercise great and salutary force and power on the souls of the faithful, both when it is used in churches during non-liturgical services and ceremonies, or when it is used outside churches at various solemnities and celebrations” (Musicae Sacrae Disciplina, #36).

## **Participating in the Mystery of Christ**

What are the concrete attributes of sacred music? The Catechism (CCC 1157) teaches that sacred music fulfills its task according to three criteria: 1) the beauty expressive of prayer 2) the unanimous participation of the assembly at the designated moments, and 3) the solemn character of the celebration. All three criteria link sacred music intimately to the work of Christ in the liturgy and in our hearts.

The beauty expressive of prayer. As we have seen, sacred music is the Church's liturgical prayer in sung form. When we hear sacred music, we hear prayer. We hear the liturgy itself. In the Mass, we hear that most beautiful of prayers: Christ's prayer of self-offering to the Father. Music can express any number of things; but sacred music expresses something utterly unique: the saving and sacrificial prayer of Christ and the Church in the liturgy.

Unanimous participation. As I addressed in previous articles on the new English translation of the Mass, liturgical participation is primarily participation with and in Christ Himself, rooted by the deep interior participation of each person. Sacred music powerfully aids us in this union of the heart and mind with whatever liturgical action is taking place exteriorly. "Unanimous" means "of one mind/soul"; thus sacred music aims to unite us all to the soul of Christ in perfect love for the Father at every step of the Mass.

Solemn character. In the sacred liturgy, Christ our Lord performs the work of our redemption through sacramental signs. The liturgy then is a solemn experience, and therefore sacred music bears this character. Far from meaning cold, unfeeling, or aloof, the solemn character of sacred music refers to its earnest, intense, and festive focus on the great Mystery which it serves: Christ's redemptive and transformative love for His Church.

In the next part of this series on singing the Mass, I will explore the rich history of sacred music in order to illuminate what the Second Vatican Council meant when it calls us to preserve and foster "the inestimable treasure" of sacred music.

*This column originally appeared in the Dec. 15, 2011, issue of The Catholic Sun.*

## **Singing the Mass, Part Two: A short history of liturgical music**

by Most Rev. Thomas Olmsted on January 19, 2012 (Bishop Olmsted Columns)

In the first part of this series on sacred music, I described the meaning of sacred music, the music of the Church's sacred liturgy, as distinct from "religious music." In this second installment, I shall explore, from a historical perspective, the Church's role in guiding and promoting authentic sacred music for more fruitful participation in the Sacred Mysteries by the clergy and lay faithful alike.

The Second Vatican Council proclaimed that "the musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art" (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 112). This led the Council fathers to decree that "the treasure of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with great care" (ibid, 114).

## **Sacred music in Judaism before Christ**

The dual task of preserving and fostering sacred music remains a crucial one for the Church today. But to understand what the Council is asking of us, we must not only know what sacred music is in general (as we explored in the previous installment in this series) but also how the Church has carried out this endeavor in history.

The Church inherited the Psalms of the Old Testament as her basic prayer and hymn book for worship. With these sacred texts she also adopted the mode of singing that had been established during the development of the psalms: a way of articulated singing with a strong reference to a text, with or without instrumental accompaniment, which German historian Martin Hengel has called "sprechgesang," "sung-speech."

This choice in Israel's history signaled a concrete decision for a specific way of singing, which was a rejection of the frenzied and intoxicating music of the neighboring and threatening pagan cults. This way of singing the Psalms, traditionally viewed as established by King David (cf. 2 Sam. 6:5), disrupted only by the Babylonian exile, remained in use at the coming of Christ. Sung with respect to and during sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem, the early Jewish Christians assumed this tradition into the sacrifice of the eucharistic liturgy.

## **Sacred music in the early Church**

After Pentecost, the first centuries of the Church's life were marked by the encounter of what was a Jewish-Semitic reality with the Greek-Roman world. A dramatic struggle ensued between, on one hand, openness to new cultural forms and, on the other, what was irrevocably part of Christian faith.

For the first time, the Church had to preserve her sacred music, and then foster it. Although early Greek-style songs quickly became part of the Church's life (e.g., the prologue of John and the Philippians hymn, 2:5-11), this new music was so tightly linked to dangerous gnostic beliefs that the Church decided to prohibit its use. This temporary pruning of the Church's sacred music to the traditional form of the Psalms led to previously unimaginable creativity: Gregorian chant — for the first millennium — and then, gradually, polyphony and hymns arose.

In preserving the forms which embodied her true identity, the Church made it possible for wonderful growth to be fostered, such that centuries after that original restriction, the Second Vatican Council boldly proclaimed that her treasury of sacred music is of more value than any other of her artistic contributions.

## **Preserving, fostering through the centuries**

In this remarkable process in which the Church navigated her encounter with Greek culture and then other cultures, we see the same basic pattern that Vatican II decreed for sacred music: she first preserves, then she fosters. The early Church had to first preserve the basic form of Christian faith which constituted her very identity — an identity which was inseparable from

specific cultural (i.e., Jewish) artistic forms (i.e., the music of the Psalms). Thus she was able to foster new forms of sacred music which, organically and gradually springing from older forms, authentically expressed Christian faith in new cultural forms.

St. Gregory the Great (the saint from whom "Gregorian chant" takes its name) collected and systematized the Church's chant tradition in the 6th century and it spread and developed in the West throughout the first millennium. Gregorian chant was sometimes enhanced by the organ in the eighth or ninth centuries and with a single or with multiple vocal harmonies (e.g. polyphony) beginning in the 10th century. The development of polyphony carried on throughout the beginning of the second millennium, producing music of a highly sophisticated and ornate style.

The fathers of the Council of Trent recognized that some musical forms were becoming detached from their origins and so forbade anything "lascivious or impure." The result was a continued affirmation of the value of Gregorian chant and a refinement of the polyphonic style so as to preserve the integrity of the liturgical text and to achieve a greater sobriety of musical style. Throughout the period that followed, the Church continued to preserve her great tradition while always fostering new and authentic forms of sacred music. This ongoing activity of the Church continues today.

## **The task for today**

On June 24, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI attended a concert of sacred music, after which he said: "An authentic renewal of sacred music can only happen in the wake of the great tradition of the past, of Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony. For this reason, in the field of music as well as in the areas of other art forms, the Ecclesial Community has always encouraged and supported people in search of new forms of expression without denying the past, the history of the human spirit which is also a history of its dialogue with God."

The authentic renewal of sacred music is not a question of merely copying the past, but even less is it one of ignoring it. Rather, it is one of preserving the past and fostering new forms grown organically from it. This is a truly great and essential task, entrusted in a particular way to pastors and sacred artists.

Preserving the old forms, fostering new growth: this is how a gardener cares for a plant, how Christ tends our souls, how the Church's sacred music — carefully preserved — is able to surprise us and more importantly glorify God with new and delightful growth.

Next time, in part three of this series, we shall look at the essential role that sacred music plays in the Church's mission of evangelizing culture.

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# Singing the Mass, Part Three: Sacred music's role in evangelization

by Most Rev. Thomas Olmsted on February 16, 2012 (Bishop Olmsted Columns)

In the first part of this series on sacred music, I described the meaning of sacred music, and the difference between the music of the Church's sacred liturgy and "religious music" (Dec. 15, 2011). The second part explored, from a historical perspective, the Church's role in preserving and fostering authentic sacred music for more fruitful participation in the Sacred Mysteries (Jan. 19). In this third part, we now look at the role of sacred music in evangelizing culture.

## Evangelization and inculturation

Evangelization, the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ, is closely linked to what the Church calls inculturation. Inculturation is the process by which "the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community." This process brings about "an intimate transformation of the authentic cultural values" (Redemptoris Missio, 52).

We see here a double movement — the interplay of two profound mysteries of faith: the Incarnation (characterized by an earth-ward movement and proclamation) and the Paschal Mystery (characterized by a heaven-ward movement and transformation). This double movement is all the work of Christ: As the Eternal Word He enters our history, becoming flesh in the Incarnation; and then He suffers, dies, rises, and ascends into Heaven, to draw all people to Himself.

Like Christ and in Him, the Church engages authentic human culture wherever she finds it. She proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ to a specific culture; and then whatever is good in the culture she purifies and transforms, drawing it into her own communal life in her various ecclesial "rites" (in our case, the Roman Rite).

## Music and inculturation

The distinction between religious music and liturgical music (cf. part one of this series) embodies this double movement: religious music is, we might say, the earthly expression of a given culture's faith in Christ; liturgical music is the sacramental expression of Christ and the true nature of the Church. The former tends to be particular, individual, temporal and profane; the latter tends to be universal, communal, eternal and sacred. Religious music comes from human hearts yearning for God; liturgical music comes from Christ's heart, the heart of the Church, longing for us.

Because religious music is marked by the particular and profane, it is especially useful for evangelization. Like St. Francis Xavier donning the silk garments of Japanese nobility in his

missionary work in Japan, religious music "wears the clothes" of those it seeks to evangelize; it becomes familiar, taking in much of the cultural forms, and where possible doing this with minimal alteration. In religious music, the Church learns to sing, in many voices, through the familiar melodies and rhythms of various cultures.

But in the sacred liturgy, we enter the precincts not of man's culture but the heavenly courts of Christ, the culture of the Church, the wedding feast of the Lamb: and new festive garments are required for this feast (cf. Mt 22:1-14). In liturgical music, the peoples drawn into the sacred liturgy learn to sing, in one voice, through the often unfamiliar melody and rhythm of the Church's sacred music. This oneness is exemplified (for us Roman Rite Catholics) primarily in Gregorian Chant and Polyphony, the musical "garments" of the texts of the sacred liturgy.

## **The genius of the Roman Rite**

The new English translation of the Mass has powerfully reminded us that authentic liturgy comes to us through the unity and integrity of the Roman Rite (*Liturgiam Authenticam*, 4). The liturgy of the Roman Rite is a "precious example and an instrument of true inculturation" because of its amazing ability of "assimilating into itself spoken and sung texts" (*ibid*, 5). Inculturation, in the liturgical (and musical) sense, is finally about the assimilation of peoples, cultures, and even musical forms into the already given form of the Roman Rite.

Some might ask: should not the mention of the word assimilation give us pause, or even make us somewhat nervous? If we submit ourselves to this assimilation — with all our musical preferences, tastes, and cultural differences — to the concrete musical sources of the Church's liturgy (i.e., the Roman Missal itself, *Graduale Romanum*, *Graduale Simplex*, vernacular translations and adaptations thereof, etc.), will we not entirely lose ourselves, our individuality and creativity? Is there not a danger of the Church becoming irrelevant and therefore powerless in her liturgical expressions, a mere museum of "old" music?

To answer these concerns, we could extend the Church's teaching on the new translation to the use of liturgical music: "So the liturgy of the Church must not be foreign to any country, people or individual, and at the same time it should transcend the particularity of race and nation. It must be capable of expressing itself in every human culture, all the while maintaining its identity through fidelity to the tradition which comes to it from the Lord" (*Liturgiam Authenticam*, 4).

In other words, the Church, though existing in many cultures, has her own authentic culture because she has authentic liturgy... both which come to her from Christ. The unity and integrity of the Roman Rite is embodied in the Rite's sacred texts and musical forms, as a vine is expressed in its branches. Growth requires pruning and nourishing, but never ignoring or starting from scratch.

The sacred liturgy — and sacred music — does not exhaust the entire work of the Church, not even of the Church's work of evangelization. Religious music (outside the sphere of the liturgy) is absolutely necessary for pre-evangelization and evangelization. But it is not enough. It must lead to authentic liturgical music, concretely embodied in the music of the Roman Rite. The liturgical music of the Roman Rite bears unparalleled witness to the assimilating power of

Christ, and His power to engage, purify, transform, and assimilate human culture into the culture of the Church.

In the end, it is precisely this assimilating power of heaven's beauty — and not our own efforts or preferences — that brings about the true end of evangelization: to reconcile all things to God in Christ (Col 1:20).

In the fourth and final part in this series, we will consider practical ways in which we can deepen our experience of sacred music in the liturgy and in our lives.

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## **Singing the Mass, Fourth and Final Part: Practical points for Singing the Mass**

by Most Rev. Thomas Olmsted on March 16, 2012 (Bishop Olmsted Columns)

In the first three parts of this series we have explored the meaning of sacred music, the Church's role in preserving and fostering it, and its role in evangelizing culture. Now, in this fourth and final part of the series, we discuss practical ways to deepen our use of sacred music for greater participation by all the faithful.

### **What to sing at Mass**

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) describes the importance of singing in the sacred liturgy and offers practical considerations. In article 40 we learn that “in the choosing of the parts [of the Mass] actually to be sung, preference is to be given to those that are of greater importance and especially to those which are to be sung by the Priest or the Deacon or a reader, with the people replying, or by the Priest and people together.”

But how are we to know what parts of the liturgy are of greater or lesser importance? Musicam Sacram, cited in the GIRM, provides a useful instruction on just this question, dividing into three degrees the parts to be sung in the Mass to help “the faithful toward an ever greater participation in the singing” (cf. MS 28-31).

The first degree consists essentially of the Order of the Mass (the chants sung in dialogue between the priest or the deacon and the people). The second degree consists essentially of the Ordinary of the Mass (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei). The third degree consists essentially of the Proper of the Mass (the chants sung at the Entrance, Offertory and Communion processions, and the Responsorial Psalm and Alleluia with its verse before the Gospel).

## **The Order of the Mass**

The Order of the Mass is the fundamental and primary song of the liturgy. It forms the part of the Mass that is of the greatest importance, and therefore it should be sung ideally before any of the other parts of the Mass are sung. When the Order of the Mass is sung, the liturgy becomes most true to itself, and all else in the liturgy becomes more properly ordered. The Order of the Mass is set to be sung in our new English edition of the Roman Missal. I strongly urge all priests and deacons to learn these chants and to encourage and inspire the faithful to join in their singing with love and devotion.

## **The Ordinary of the Mass**

The Ordinary of the Mass, comprising the chants of the second degree, is also of its nature meant to be sung. The Ordinary of the Mass consists of two penitential litanies, two hymns of praise, and the Church's great profession of faith, which are fixed within the Order of the Mass and, depending on the demands of the liturgy or season, form a part of the unchanging structure of the Mass.

While the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo (Creed), Sanctus and Agnus Dei may be sung to a variety of musical settings, the Church's great sacred music tradition has handed down to us an inestimable treasure of chants for the Mass Ordinary. The recent English edition of the Roman Missal itself has given us a "standard" musical setting of the Ordinary in the form of simple English and Latin chants, including musical settings of the Creed. While the Ordinary of the Mass may be sung in the vernacular, the Second Vatican Council mandated 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" (SC 54).

## **The Proper of the Mass**

The Proper of the Mass, comprising the chants of the third degree, form an integral, yet often overlooked part of the sung liturgy. The Proper of the Mass consists of three processional chants and two chants between the Lectionary readings. These parts of the Mass, contained in the Roman Missal and Graduale Romanum, are unlike the Order of the Mass and the Ordinary of the Mass in that they are not fixed and unchanging from day to day, but change according to the liturgical calendar, and therefore are "proper" to particular liturgical celebrations.

Here we find the Entrance Antiphon, Responsorial Psalm (or Gradual), the Alleluia and its Verse, the Offertory Antiphon, and the Communion Antiphon. While the Proper of the Mass is subordinated in degree of importance to the Order of the Mass and the Ordinary of the Mass, the texts of the Mass Proper form perhaps one of the most immense and deeply rich treasure troves in the sacred music tradition. Because these texts change from day to day, they were historically sung by the schola cantorum, and, because of their demands, are sometimes replaced today by other seasonal or suitable options.

The texts of the Proper of the Mass, especially the Entrance, Offertory and Communion chants, are comprised of scriptural antiphons and verses from a psalm or canticle. This is the form of the texts given in the Roman Missal, the Graduale Romanum, and the Graduale Simplex, the Church's primary sources for the Proper of the Mass. The GIRM also allows for the possibility of singing chants from "another collection of Psalms and antiphons, approved by the Conference of Bishops or the Diocesan Bishop" during the three Mass processions, and, lastly, allows for the singing of "another liturgical chant that is suited to the sacred action, the day, or the time of year, similarly approved by the Conference of Bishops or the Diocesan Bishop" (Cf. GIRM 48, 87).

The texts of the Proper of the Mass, while of lesser importance than the texts of the Order of the Mass and the Ordinary of the Mass, form a substantial and constitutive element of the liturgy, and I encourage a recovery of their use today. We are blessed to have in our day a kind of reawakening to their value. In addition, many new resources are becoming available that make their singing achievable in parish life. I strongly encourage parishes to take up the task of singing the antiphons and psalmody contained within the liturgical books, and to rediscover the immense spiritual riches contained within the Proper of the Mass.

I offer my heartfelt thanks to all pastors, priests, deacons, religious, and lay faithful who enthusiastically study, encourage, and seek new ways to implement sacred music in the life of the Church. This is an ongoing task, an essential part of authentic liturgical renewal since the Second Vatican Council, and a sure means of drawing many souls to the beauty of Christ, who invites us into His unending song of love to the Father.

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