



Music & the Mass **The what, when, why & huh?**

“I am convinced that music is truly the universal language of beauty. This language is capable of uniting men of good will throughout the world, and have them lift their gaze on high so as to open themselves to what is good and beautiful, which both have their ultimate source in God. Looking back on my life, I give thanks to God for having put me close to music, like a travel companion, which has always offered me consolation and joy. I give thanks for those who join music to prayer in harmonious praise, and through their works, help to glorify the Creator and Redeemer of the world, which is the marvelous work of his hands. May the greatness and beauty of music help to give you as well, beloved friends, a new and continuous inspiration to build a world of love, solidarity and peace.”

Pope Benedict XVI on the occasion of his 80th birthday, April 16, 2007

Over the next several weeks, we will be addressing issues regarding music and the Liturgy. We will try to clear up some common misconceptions about what kind of music we should have at Mass, when things should be sung and why we do things this way. There is a vast amount of documentation and research on the subject. Hopefully you will find this interesting and applicable.

First, let's define sacred music. *Musicam Sacram* (1967) defines sacred music as “that which, being created for the celebration of divine worship, is endowed with a certain holy sincerity of form” (§ 4). *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963) says that it is music that is joined to the liturgical rite to become a necessary and integral part of the solemn liturgy, whose purpose is to glorify God and sanctify the people (§ 112).

“As a manifestation of the human spirit,” said John Paul II in 1989, “music performs a function which is noble, unique, and irreplaceable. When it is truly beautiful and inspired, it speaks to us *more than all the other arts* of goodness, virtue, peace, of matters

holy and divine. Not for nothing has it always been, and will it always be, an essential part of the liturgy.”

After defining sacred music, we need to identify its characteristics. The *Motu Proprio* of St. Pius X, *Tra le sollecitudini* of November 22, 1903, says that sacred music has three characteristics: “it must possess holiness and beauty of form: from these two qualities a third will spontaneously arise—universality.” For music to be *holy*, it has to be set aside for the purpose of the glorification of God and edification and sanctification of the faithful. It must exclude all that is ordinary, everyday or profane. We are so inundated with “pop” culture, that we can be uncomfortable at Mass if the music is not up-beat or peppy or in imitation of what we hear on the radio. We expect worldliness in everything we do. However, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is not of this world. We should not compromise its integrity by bringing the ways of the world into it. Concerning *beauty*, as Hans Urs von Balthasar said, without beauty, the truth does not persuade, goodness does not compel. Beauty is that which synthesizes diverse elements into a unified whole: truth, goodness, and the human impulse to worship. Sacred music must be true art, says St. Pius X, “otherwise it will be impossible for it to exercise on the minds of those who listen to it that efficacy which the Church aims at obtaining in admitting into her liturgy the art of musical sounds.” *Universality* means that music should be received naturally by all people as part of the liturgy.

Why should this be important to us? The Church Music Association of America sums up the answer to this question quite well. “In transmitting her message, the Church has consistently used methods which reach the whole person: intellect and will, emotions and senses, imagination, aesthetic sensibilities, memory, physical gestures, and powers of expression. Appropriate feeling is necessary to the assimilation of religious truth. This is why the Church has always attached great importance to an appropriate musical expression of her dogma; we understand her insistence upon music of a specific kind, which will not merely stimulate the feelings in a general way, but will embody the dogma in an appropriate form of expression.”

Many will argue that this is simply a matter of taste. Realistically, we can’t force each other to like one particular form of music over another. We can, however, distinguish what sort of music is more suitable for the liturgy. It must be of a special kind. We must not settle for the mundane. In his general audience on February 26, 2003, John Paul II called for musicians to “make an examination of conscience so that the beauty of music and hymnody will return once again to the liturgy. It is necessary to purify worship of ugliness of style, careless forms of expression, ill-prepared music and texts, which are not worthy of the great act that is being celebrated.”

Next time we will delve into congregational singing!

God Bless you!