

Gregorian Chant Today



In 1963, as they ordered a “general restoration of the liturgy itself,” the bishops of the Second Vatican Council acknowledged one musical repertoire as “specially suited to the Roman liturgy”: Gregorian chant. Therefore, they said in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC), “other things being equal, [chant] should be given pride of place in liturgical services” (SC, 116).

For thirty-five years, as we have implemented the reform following Vatican II and learned to worship in the vernacular, we have struggled to discover why, on the one hand, Gregorian chant (setting Latin texts) should be a key part of our liturgical repertoire while, on the other hand, we have looked for music in various vernaculars that best fits our renewed worship, as it continues to be adapted to the “native genius” of various places and peoples (SC, 119).

Gregorian chant has a lot going for it: It gives primacy to the voice in worship; it sets texts that are, for the most part, drawn from Scripture; it is music designed to accompany ritual action; it unites us to the worship carried out by generations of our ancestors; it is music that (until recently) has only been used to worship God. But thirty-five years of experience have taught us the value (and some of the pitfalls, certainly) of other kinds of music, other repertoire that sings God’s praise, as it were, in our own voice with sounds taken from our culture. Sometimes we use Gregorian chant because it fits the ritual well. But at other times, the ritual itself will suggest the use of other music.

Liturgy has always been affected by local cultures, and it draws on the unique strengths of those cultures — as well as on the “treasure of sacred music” (SC, 114) inherited from previous generations. What we know as Gregorian chant, in fact, is the product of many cultures: It is similar, in some respects, to chants of the synagogue, to ancient Hellenic chant and hymnody, to some early music of the Eastern Churches, and to secular and religious music of the Frankish Kingdom. There were many musical dialects of the Western Church, even when the text of the liturgy was chiefly in Latin. The music called “Gregorian chant” had its greatest flowering in French and German monasteries from the eighth century on. But that repertoire began to be replaced in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by a new kind of music—polyphony—which became ever

more elaborate as it grew away from its roots in chant.

The Council of Trent (1545–1563) ordered a restoration of chant, and a serious attempt to accomplish this goal was made in the seventeenth century, but that part of the Tridentine reform was quickly overwhelmed, once more, by a new kind of music that entered the churches: baroque. It was really only in the twentieth century, under the guidance of Pope St. Pius X and through the careful work of the monks of the Abbey of St. Pierre de Solesmes, France, that an authentic interpretation of Gregorian chant became widely available in Europe and on other continents. The Solesmes method of interpreting the chant continued to evolve throughout the twentieth century, and it is only now, perhaps, that we have a more accurate understanding of the repertoire — which parts are for the whole assembly, which should be reserved to trained singers — and of how to sing it in such a way that the words inspire the singing.

Now that the value of a vernacular liturgy is firmly established, Gregorian chant might once again find a place in the repertoire of Catholic worship. Now is the time, perhaps, to introduce or re-introduce this music to the sung worship of our communities. But we might best introduce it slowly, for just as we do not exhaust the riches of the liturgy all at once but only discover their true value through repetition, so chant is more effective when small portions seep in deeply than when we have a whirlwind acquaintance with large chunks of this music that are then poorly digested.

Chant is meant to serve the liturgy and the text. In this, it serves as a model for any other music added to the repertoire for worship. Our bishops have reminded us that “the ‘pride of place’ given to Gregorian chant by the Second Vatican Council is modified by . . . the important liturgical and pastoral concerns facing every bishop, pastor, and liturgical musician. In considering the use of the treasure of chant, pastoral and liturgical musicians should take care that the congregation is able to participate in the Liturgy with song . . . in order to build up the Church in unity and peace” (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, 73).