

# Moved by a Lively Desire: Renewing Sacred Music

BY JOHN PAUL II

**M**oved by a lively desire “to maintain and improve the beauty of God’s house,” one hundred years ago my predecessor Saint Pius X issued the *motu proprio Tra le sollecitudini* with the goal of renewing sacred music to its proper function in worship. In it he intended to offer to the Church specific directions for this aspect of the liturgy, presented “as a canonical code governing sacred music.”<sup>1</sup> In addition, such a change in the status quo reaffirmed the program of his pontificate summarized by his motto “to restore all things in Christ.”

The centenary observance of this document offers me an occasion to recall the important function of sacred music, which St. Pius X presented partly as a lifting of the spirit to God and also as a valuable aid to the faithful in “taking an active part in the sacred mysteries and in the solemn public prayer of the Church.”<sup>2</sup>

It is right to pay special attention to sacred music, as the holy Pontiff reminds us, because it serves “as an integral part of the solemn liturgy that shares its general purpose, which is the glory of God and the sanctification and edification of the faithful.”<sup>3</sup> By interpreting and expressing the profound meaning of the sacred text to which it is intimately connected, music has the ability to “make that same text more efficacious, so that the faithful . . . may be better disposed to gather to themselves the fruits of grace, which come from the celebration of the sacred mysteries.”<sup>4</sup>

*“Mosso dal vivo desiderio” is a chirograph (a form of apostolic letter) by Pope John Paul II celebrating the centenary of Pope Saint Pius X’s motu proprio on sacred music “Tra le sollecitudini.” It was signed on November 22, 2003, and released in Italian on December 3. The editorial staff at NPM has prepared this unofficial English translation.*



Pope St. Pius X

2. This formulation was picked up again at the Second Vatican Council in chapter six of the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* on the sacred liturgy, which recalls so clearly the ecclesial function of sacred music: “The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as sacred song closely bound to the text, it forms a necessary and integral part of the solemn liturgy.”<sup>5</sup> The Council also recalled that “Holy Scripture itself has bestowed praise upon sacred song, and the same may be said of the Fathers of the Church and of the Roman pontiffs, who in recent times, led by St. Pius X, have explained more precisely the ministerial function supplied by sacred music in divine service.”<sup>6</sup>

In fact, continuing the ancient biblical tradition, observed by the Lord and his apostles (cf. Matt. 26:30; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), the Church through its long history has favored singing in its liturgical celebrations, supported by the wonderful creativity of each culture—from the East to the West—in producing outstanding examples of melodic commentary on the sacred texts.

Let us remember, then, and pay attention to the way my predecessors dealt with this delicate subject, to the ways they enriched the fundamental principles that must guide the production of sacred music, especially that music destined for use in the liturgy. In addition to Pope St. Pius X, my predecessors who have addressed this subject include Pope Benedict XIV in the encyclical *Annus qui* (February 19, 1749), Pius XII in the encyclicals *Mediator Dei* (November 20, 1947) and *Musicae sacrae disciplina* (December 25, 1955), and finally Paul VI in those enlightening pronouncements which he included in many public statements.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council had some success in reinforcing those principles, especially in their application to changing times and conditions. They addressed this topic particularly in the sixth chapter of the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Pope Paul VI then provided a “translation” of those principles into concrete norms, especially through the instruction *Musicae sacrae*, issued with his approval on March 5, 1967, by what was then the Sacred Congregation of Rites. It is necessary to return to those principles inspired by the Council in order to promote a development that is in accord with the requirements of the liturgical reform and also in fidelity to the highest liturgical music tradition of the Church. The text of the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* which states that the Church



sponsibility of the choir [*schola*] has not decreased: Within the liturgical assembly it carries out a role as guide and support and, at certain moments of the liturgy, it has its own specific and proper role to play.

With good coordination among all participants—the priest celebrant and the deacon, acolytes, ministers, lectors, psalmist, the *schola cantorum*, musicians, cantors, and the whole assembly—the right spiritual climate emerges that makes the liturgical moment truly intense, participatory, and fruitful. The musical aspect of liturgical celebration, therefore, cannot be left to improvisation nor to the arbitrary decisions of an individual but must be entrusted to a carefully concerted guidance that respects the norms and the competencies of the participants and that is itself the fruit of an appropriate liturgical formation.

9. On this very point, therefore, there is an obvious urgency to promote a solid formation of pastors as well as of the lay faithful. St. Pius X insisted particularly on the musical formation of the clergy. This emphasis was recalled and restated by the Second Vatican Council: “Great importance is to be attached to the teaching and practice of music in seminaries, in novitiates and houses of study of religious of both sexes, and also in other Catholic institutions and schools.”<sup>24</sup> This proposal has yet to be realized. I think it opportune to recall it, therefore, so that future pastors can acquire an adequate formation in this field.

In such formative work, schools of sacred music have a special role to play, one that St. Pius X promoted and encouraged<sup>25</sup> and that the Second Vatican Council recommended be undertaken wherever possible.<sup>26</sup> One concrete result of the reform begun by St. Pius X was the establishment in Rome, in 1911, eight years after the *motu proprio*, of the Advanced Pontifical School of Sacred Music, later called the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music. In addition to this academic institution, now nearly a century old, which has rendered and continues to render such outstanding service to the Church, many other schools have been established in particular churches that deserve support and upgrading so that they may provide an ever better training in and performance of good liturgical music.

10. Since the Church has always recognized and favored progress in the arts, it should come as no surprise that, in addition to Gregorian chant and polyphony, it also admits into its celebra-



This page of chant, from the collection of the Abbey of St. Peter, Solesmes, France, contains three Advent antiphons. It was among the resources used for the Solesmes restoration of Gregorian chant that was embraced by Pope St. Pius X.

tions more modern music, so long as such music respects the spirit of the liturgy and the real values of its art. That is why the Church, in agreement with the churches of the various nations, has approved, among the compositions designed for worship, “those particular forms that are subject to the proper nature of sacred music.”<sup>27</sup> So in line with my holy predecessor and firmly grounded in the recent teaching of the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,<sup>28</sup> in my encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* I deliberately made a place for new musical compositions, mentioning, in addition

to the inspired Gregorian melodies, “the many, often great, composers who sought to do justice to the liturgical texts of the Mass.”<sup>29</sup>

11. The century just past, with the renewal begun by Vatican Council II, has seen a special development of popular religious song, about which *Sacrosanctum Concilium* has this to say: “The people’s own religious songs are to be encouraged with care so that in sacred devotions as well as during services of the liturgy itself, . . . the faithful may raise their voices in song.”<sup>30</sup> Such songs that are particularly adapted to the participa-



Photo by Dorothy Tuma © 2002

tion of the faithful are to be used not only in popular devotions “in keeping with rubrical norms and requirements”<sup>31</sup> but also in the liturgy. In fact, popular song constitutes “a bond of unity and a joyful expression of the community at prayer, fosters the proclamation of the one faith, and imparts to large liturgical assemblies an incomparable and recollected solemnity.”<sup>32</sup>

12. To guide liturgical music composition, I make my own the “general law” which St. Pius X formulated in these terms: “The more a musical composition for use in church is like Gregorian chant in its movement, its inspiration, and its feeling, so much the more is it right and liturgical, and the more it differs from this highest model, so much the less is it worthy of the house of God.”<sup>33</sup> The point, obviously, is not to copy Gregorian chant but to make sure that new compositions are imbued with that same spirit that gave birth to and is expressed in the chant. Only an artist deeply touched by an ecclesial sense [*sensus Ecclesiae*] would try to understand and translate into music the truth of the mystery that is celebrated in the liturgy. In line with this thought, I wrote in my *Letter to Artists*: “How many sacred works have been composed through the centuries by people deeply imbued with the sense of the mystery! The faith of countless believers has been

nourished by melodies flowing from the hearts of other believers, either introduced into the liturgy or used as an aid to dignified worship. In song, faith is experienced as vibrant joy, love, and confident expectation of the saving intervention of God.”<sup>35</sup>

It is necessary, therefore, to give renewed and deeper consideration to the principles that must be the foundation for the formation and development of a quality repertoire. This will only be possible if there is general consent that any musical expression be used in a manner appropriate to its ultimate end: “the glory

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of God and the sanctification of the faithful.”<sup>36</sup>

I know well that able composers today do not hesitate to offer, in this spirit, their indispensable contribution and their competent collaboration in order to increase the treasure of music in service to

a liturgy that is lived ever more intensely. My expression of confidence goes out to those composers, united to a cordial word of encouragement that they take every opportunity to increase the repertoire of compositions that are worthy of the high mysteries that we celebrate and, at the same time, are adapted to modern sensibilities.

13. Finally, I want to remember that St. Pius X laid out a plan of operation designed for the effective application of the principles in his *motu proprio*. Addressing the bishops, he prescribed that they establish in their dioceses “a special commission of persons who are really competent in sacred music matters.”<sup>37</sup> Wherever that papal program was put into practice, it yielded results. Now there are numerous national, diocesan, and interdiocesan commissions which offer their precious contribution in preparing local repertoire, guided by a discernment that takes account of the quality of text and music. I hope that the bishops will continue to support the use of these commissions, relying on their pastoral effectiveness.<sup>38</sup>

In light of the maturing experience of these past years, and better to assure the implementation of this task of regulating and promoting the sacred liturgy, I ask the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments to

pay increased attention, in accord with its institutional responsibility,<sup>39</sup> to the field of sacred liturgical music, taking advantage of the competencies of the various commissions and institutions specializing in this field, such as the contributions of the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music. It is important, in fact, that musical compositions used in liturgical celebrations correspond to the criteria that were opportunely identified by St. Pius X and wisely developed by the Second Vatican Council and by successive documents from the Church's magisterium. In this context, I trust that the bishops' conferences will accurately complete their review of the texts intended for liturgical song,<sup>40</sup> and that they will pay particular attention to evaluating and promoting melodies that are truly apt for sacred use.<sup>41</sup>

14. Always looking to the practical, the *motu proprio* now observing its centennial also addressed the issue of musical instruments to be used in the Latin liturgy. Among these it recognized without hesitation the primacy of the pipe organ, and it established appropriate norms for its use.<sup>42</sup> The Second Vatican Council accepted in its totality the guidelines that my holy predecessor established: "In the Latin Church the pipe organ is to be held in high esteem, for it is the traditional musical instrument that adds a wonderful splendor to the Church's ceremonies and powerfully lifts up the spirit to God and to higher things."<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, it took appropriate note of the fact that musical compositions currently in use often employ diverse instruments which do not lack their own dignity. In the measure in which they aid the prayer of the Church, these instruments can reveal a precious enrichment. It is necessary to make sure that the instruments are adapted to sacred use, are in accord with the dignity of the place of worship, are capable of supporting the song of the faithful, and contribute to their edification.

15. I hope that the centennial commemoration of the *motu proprio Tra le sollecitudini*, through the intercession of its saintly author, united to the intercession of St. Cecilia, patroness of sacred music, will be an encouragement and stimulus to all those who work at this important aspect of liturgical celebration. The ministers of sacred music, dedicating themselves with renewed momentum to this vital form of service, contribute to the maturation of the spiritual life of

the people of God. The faithful, for their part, expressing their own faith in a harmonic and solemn way through song, will experience more and more the depth of these riches and will let their singing shape more and more each aspect of daily life. This will allow musicians and the faithful, with the zealous help of pastors of souls, to be caught up in what the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* calls the true "purpose of sacred music," which is "the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful."<sup>44</sup>

There is also the example and model of the Virgin Mary, who knew how to sing in her own way, in the *Magnificat*, about the wonders of God operating in human history. With this final comment, I impart with affection my blessing.

*Given at Rome, near St. Peter, on November 22, the memorial of St. Cecilia, in the year 2003, the twenty-sixth of this pontificate. John Paul II.*

#### Notes

1. *Pii X Pontificis Maximi Acta [Acts of the Supreme Pontiff Pius X]*, I:77 [Introduction to the *motu proprio* of November 22, 1903]. [The English translation of the *motu proprio* used here is that provided by Gregory Sunol, OSB, in his *Text Book of Gregorian Chant* (Tournai: Desclée, 1930).]

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, no. 1, page 78.

4. *Ibid.*

5. [Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* on the Sacred Liturgy], no. 112. [The translation of conciliar documents and postconciliar texts through the pontificate of Paul VI is taken from the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, *Documents on the Liturgy 1963–1979: Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1982).]

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. Cf. [*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*] AAS 59 (1967), 314–316.

9. Cf., for example, Discourse to the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music on the Ninetieth Anniversary of Its Foundation (January 19, 2001), 1: *Insegnamenti* XXIV/I (2001), 194.

10. General audience of February 26, 2003, 3; *L'Osservatore Romano*, February 27, 2003, 4.

11. Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 112.

12. Discourse to the participants at the general assembly of the Italian Association of Saint Cecilia (September 18, 1968): *Insegnamenti* VI (1968), 479.

13. *Ibid.*

14. No. 50: AAS 95 (2003), 467.

15. [*Tra le sollecitudini*], no. 2 [*Pii X Acta* I:] 78.

16. *Ibid.*, 78–79.

17. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 116.

18. Cf. Sacred Congregation of Rites, Instruction on Music for the Sacred Liturgy *Musicam sacram* (March 5, 1967), 50: AAS 59 (1967), 314.

19. *Motu proprio Tra le sollecitudini*, no. 3 [*Pii X Acta* I:] 79.

20. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 116.

21. Cf. *ibid.*, 30.

22. *Ibid.*, 114.

23. [*Musicam sacram*] no. 19: AAS 59 (1967), 306.

24. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 115.

25. Cf. the *motu proprio Tra le sollecitudini*, no. 28 [*Pii X Acta* I:] 86.

26. Cf. the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 115.

27. Pius X, *motu proprio Tra le sollecitudini*, no. 2 [*Pii X Acta* I:] 79.

28. Cf. [*Sacrosanctum Concilium*], no. 119.

29. [*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*], no. 49: AAS 95 (2003), 466.

30. [*Sacrosanctum Concilium*], no. 118.

31. *Ibid.*

32. John Paul II, address to the International Congress of Sacred Music (January 27, 2001), 4: *Insegnamenti* XXIV/1 (2001), 239–240.

33. *Motu proprio Tra le sollecitudini*, no. 3 [*Pii X Acta* I:] 79.

34. Cf. Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 112.

35. [John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (1999)], no. 12: *Insegnamenti* XXII/1 (1999), 718.

36. Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 112.

37. *Motu proprio Tra le sollecitudini*, no. 24 [*Pii X Acta* I:] 85.

38. Cf. John Paul II, apostolic letter *Vicesimus quintus annus* (December 4, 1987), 20: AAS 81 (1989), 916.

39. Cf. John Paul II, apostolic constitution *Pastor Bonus* (June 28, 1988), 65: AAS 80 (1988), 877.

40. Cf. John Paul II, encyclical *Dies Domini* (May 31, 1998), 50: AAS 90 (1998), 745; Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, instruction *Liturgiam authenticam* (March 28, 2001), 108: AAS 93 (2001), 719.

41. Cf. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, third typical edition, 393.

42. Cf. *Motu proprio Tra le sollecitudini*, nos. 15–18 [*Pii X Acta* I:] 84.

43. Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 120.

44. *Ibid.*, 112.

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