Moved by a Lively Desire: Renewing Sacred Music

BY JOHN PAUL II

Moved 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.” 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.”

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.” 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.”

“In mossos 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.

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 Musicam sacram, 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
“approves of all forms of genuine art possessing the required qualities”7 finds its criteria for application in numbers 50–53 of the instruction Musicam sacram mentioned above.8

3. On several previous occasions, I have recalled the valuable function and great importance of music and song in developing active and intense participation in liturgical celebration, and I have highlighted the need to “purify worship from ugliness of style, from distasteful forms of expression, from uninspired musical texts which are not worthy of the great act that is being celebrated,”9 in order to assure the dignity and proper form of liturgical music.

In this perspective, and in light of the teachings of St. Pius X and my other predecessors, and taking account particularly of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, I want to restate some fundamental principles for this important part of the Church’s life, to try and make liturgical music more responsive to its specific function.

4. First, following the teaching of St. Pius X and Vatican Council II, I have to emphasize that music intended for the sacred rites must have holiness as its point of reference: in point of fact, “sacred music will be the more holy the more closely it is joined to the liturgical rite.”10 On this point, commenting on a decree of the Council of Trent, my predecessor Paul VI wisely observed that “not everything that is ‘outside the temple’ (profanum) is fit to be brought through its doors,”11 and he specified that music “not at once marked by the spirit of prayer, dignity, and beauty is barred from entrance into the world of the sacred and the religious.”12 Yet this category of “sacred music” has today been enlarged to include repertoire which cannot be censored in Latin.13

It was in this sense, using the term universality, that St. Pius X indicated a further requirement for music destined for ritual use: “that although each country may use in its ecclesiastical music whatever special forms may belong to its own national style, these forms must be subject to the proper nature of sacred music, so that it may never produce a bad impression on the mind of any stranger who may hear it.”16 In other words, the sacred ground of liturgical celebration should never become a laboratory for experimentation or compositional practice in which new pieces are introduced without careful study.

7. Among the musical expressions that best respond to the qualities required by the notion of sacred music—especially of liturgical music—Gregorian chant occupies a unique place. The Second Vatican Council recognized it as the “distinctive music of the Roman liturgy”17 which should be reserved in the first place, all things being equal, to sung liturgy celebrated in Latin.18

St. Pius X described this chant as something that the Church “inherited from the ancient Fathers, which she has jealously kept for so many centuries in her liturgical books, which she proposes to the faithful,” and which she considers “the highest model of Church music.”19 Gregorian chant continues today as an element of unity in the Roman liturgy.

Like St. Pius X, the Second Vatican Council recognized that “other kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, are by no means excluded from liturgical celebrations.”20 It is necessary, therefore, to sift carefully through new musical languages to find those that might express the inexhaustible riches of the mystery hidden in the liturgy and that might support the active participation of the faithful in the celebration.21

8. The need to preserve and foster the rich patrimony of the Church leads us to pay particular attention to a specific request in the constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium: “Choirs must be diligently developed, especially in cathedral churches.”22 In its turn, the instruction Musicam sacram specifies the ministerial task of the choir [schola]: “Because of the liturgical ministry it exercises, the choir (cappella musica; schola cantorum) should be mentioned here explicitly. The conciliar norms regarding reform of the liturgy have given the choir’s function greater prominence and importance. The choir is responsible for the correct performance of the parts that belong to it, according to the various kinds of chant, and for helping the faithful take an active part in the singing. Therefore . . . choirs are to be developed with great care, especially in cathedrals and other major churches, in seminaries, and in religious houses of study, either a choir or a cappella musica or a schola cantorum.”23 The re-

I want to restate some fundamental principles . . . to try and make liturgical music more responsive to its specific function.

6. Under the requirements of the liturgical reform—and it is good to emphasize this—song and music must also respond to the legitimate requirements of adaptation and inculturation. It is clear, however, that any innovation in this delicate area must respect special criteria, especially that the search for appropriate musical expressions must necessarily include the involvement of the whole assembly in the celebration and that they must avoid, at the same time, anything trendy or superficial. Also to be avoided, in general, are those forms of “inculturation” that, in the name of high culture, introduce into the liturgy ancient or contemporary compositions that may have artistic value but employ an incomprehensible language.

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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.”24 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 encouraged25 and that the Second Vatican Council recommended be undertaken wherever possible.26 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 celebrations 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.”27 So in line with my holy predecessor and firmly grounded in the recent teaching of the constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium,28 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.”29

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.”30 Such songs that are particularly adapted to the participa-
tion of the faithful are to be used not only in popular devotions “in keeping with rubrical norms and requirements” 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.”

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.” 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.”

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 of God and the sanctification of the faithful.”

I hope that the centennial commemoration of the motu proprio . . . will be an encouragement and stimulus to all those who work at this important aspect of liturgical celebration.

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

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pay increased attention, in accord with its institutional responsibility,\textsuperscript{39} 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,\textsuperscript{40} and that they will pay particular attention to evaluating and promoting melodies that are truly apt for sacred use.\textsuperscript{41}

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 with hesitation the primacy of the pipe organ, and it established appropriate norms for its use.\textsuperscript{42} 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.”\textsuperscript{43}

At the same time, it took appropriate note of the fact that musical compositions currently in use frequently 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 harmonious 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.”\textsuperscript{44}

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, 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, 177 [Introduction to the motu proprio of November 22, 1903]. The English translation of the motu proprio used here is that provided by Gregory Sunol, osa, 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.


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.


16. Ibid., 78–79.


22. Ibid., 114.


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


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

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

30. [Sacrosanctum Concilium], no. 118.

31. Ibid.


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


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

44. Ibid., 112.

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