



Catechesis For the Masses

Basic Teachings on Liturgy and Participation in the Mass in Both Forms.

Part 15: Basics of Gregorian Chant

Among the elements of the liturgy treated by Vatican II, one area that has been greatly impacted in the life of the Church since the council is liturgical music. Since the 1960s, many new compositions in varied genres have made their way into liturgical prayer. Of these compositions, some are best described as “folk” or “contemporary” songs, while others may sound more “traditional,” appearing more fitting for singing by liturgical choirs. Among all of these new compositions, one genre of music maintains “pride of place” in the mind of the Church. That genre is none other than “Gregorian Chant.”

In Vatican II’s “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” music is acknowledged to be the greatest of arts and a treasured part of the Church’s patrimony. Given this status of music as an art, the Church remains open to many expressions of this art, insofar as they are in keeping with the purpose for which it is given. For liturgical music, such a purpose of music is to be in keeping with the two-fold goal of liturgical worship as the glorification of God and the sanctification of people. In addition, liturgical music is primarily understood as *the liturgy itself being sung*, meaning that the very content of the music is to be the liturgical prayers themselves put to music (as opposed to music compositions which are separate from the liturgy being attached, or as extant texts being inserted into the liturgy). To that end, paragraph 116 of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy gives us the following: “The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services.”

Given this designation of pride of place for Gregorian Chant, it is important to rightly define what such chant is and “how” it ought to be employed, that its true beauty as an art and its true place in the Church’s life and history would be rightly understood and approached with greater openness. To that end, might we consider some basic characteristics of Gregorian Chant, leading toward applying these characteristics in our own use of such chant.

Historically, Gregorian Chant has always been understood as “sung speech.” While such a terminology may not be all that distinguishing, hidden in this term is the truth that any sacred text can be sung by way of Gregorian Chant. Whereas many other types of music, and in particular, contemporary compositions, are almost exclusively written in such a manner that the words must fit into a beat and a rhythm that is composed in a consistent pattern of time, number of beats, etc., any text can be chanted, no matter how many words or syllables are in each line of the text, no matter how many lines the text contains, etc. This characteristic of the composition of chant yield another key characteristic of chant: that in chant *the text itself always remains primary ahead of the melody and its accompaniment*. In other words, the music serves the text to draw out a greater expression of the meaning and beauty of the word - such that it (the word) is emphasized as opposed to the melody for the music.

Such emphasis on the text itself being one of the primary advantages that give chant this pride of place, there are other related elements to “how” chant is used that fortify this standard. First of all, chant is simple and very natural. The “tones” used in chant

are such that their sounds are those which are natural (or what are considered “consonant”), versus what are irregular or “dissonant.” Simply put, the beautiful sounds of nature, as with song birds, are the root sources for chant melodies. As chant is rooted in what is simple and natural, so too the singing of chant is fundamentally simple. This simplicity of chant shines through in multiple ways:

1 - Chant has a “movable scale,” meaning that its notation is such that it can be sang in higher or lower ranges of pitch (based upon those voices who are singing it.)

2 - As “sung speech,” chant is intended to be sung at a “comfortable” pace - not too slow, not too fast - once more, as dictated by those who are singing.

3 - Chant is meant to be a “blending” of all voices into one. In this way, those with stronger voices may encourage or sustain the melody, but without overpowering other, less powerful voices.

4 - As the text is primary, instrumental accompaniment is to be limited - for the sake of assisting the singing - that the word may be most fully expressed.

Given these basic characteristics of chant itself and the manner for singing chant, might we also consider what might be called the “restfulness” of chant. Whereas most genre’s of music require great energy to sing - especially compositions with wider ranges of pitch, of volume, and/or of tempo - chant can truly be done in a restful manner. Such restfulness becomes evident through experience of singing chant and learning to recognize how each phrase is its own (as opposed to being a rigid line of text in an overarching melody), by learning how to more easily and deliberately breath between these phrases, and in learning to cooperate with others singing, allowing lesser voices and stronger voices to blend as “one voice.”



“Gregorian Chant” receives its name as an honorary attribution to Pope Saint Gregory the Great (590-604), whose contributions to the liturgy include his efforts to collect and bring together collections of chants in use in various locales for the use of the whole Church.

Acknowledging that much more can be said of the particularities of chant (such as “what’s with those weird looking ‘square’ notes?”), a final point to make in general regarding the pride of place given to Gregorian Chant is simply this: the origins and existence of Gregorian Chant are founded upon the Church’s own celebrating of the liturgy. Whereas any other type of music can be “performed” as entertainment or for music appreciation, Gregorian Chant’s invention and its true purpose is for the liturgy of the Church. Though the Church remains open to other types of music in worship, only Gregorian Chant is “specially suited” to the liturgy, as the Church’s own directives have said. Thus, as we worship while employing Gregorian Chant, might we be aware that we are singing the Church’s own music that has been around for centuries for the very purpose of worship.