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The Music That Comes from God

An article on singing and music in the liturgy. "True liturgical music is prayer; it is liturgy. It does not distract us, nor is it limited to providing us with joyful sensations or aesthetic delight. It helps us to be recollected, to place ourselves in the mystery of God."

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Cantemus Domino, gloriose enim magnificatus est! I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously.

[1] In a wonderfully consistent way, the liturgy of the Easter Vigil unites this singing with the account of the Israelites passing through the Red Sea. This joyful music rises up spontaneously as we “touch” God’s nearness. For the Chosen People, the miracle of the parted waters becomes an emblem of how close God is to us. The Psalms frequently echo this reality.[2] Now in the era of the Church, this event speaks to us about Baptism, about the Cross, about heaven.... It speaks to us about our life and the Life that God has prepared for us on the other shore. This new Life is “not a mere embellishment of the present one: it surpasses our imagination, for God continually amazes us with his love and with his mercy.”[3]

Facing “the God of surprises,”[4] a God who makes all things new,[5] “words are not needed, because the tongue cannot express itself. The intellect grows calm. One does not reason; one looks! And the soul breaks out once more into song, a new song, because it feels and knows it is under the loving gaze of God, all day long.”[6] Seeing our God who surprises us with his newness, praise and adoration arise spontaneously—both song and silence. The two are closely related, since they express what mere words could never say. That is why the liturgy reserves them for its most sublime moments. “The Church sings, it has been said, because merely to speak would not satisfy its desire for prayer. You as a Christian, and a chosen Christian, should learn to sing liturgically.”[7]

A new song

No way out, humanly speaking. That was the situation of the Chosen People, trapped between the Red Sea and the Egyptian army. In front of them was the barrier of the sea; behind them, armed warriors. *The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.'*^[8] So often that is the situation of the Church: under attack from those who want to erase her from the face of the earth, or at least empty her of her supernatural character.

But God is with us as he was with the Israelites. And in the face of what seems humanly impossible, his glory shines forth against the power of Pharaoh and the pharaohs of all ages. In unexpected ways, the sea divides and opens up the way for us and closes again against the enemy. *Thou didst blow with thy wind, the sea*

covered them; they sank as lead in the mighty waters.[9]

The sacred text does not tell us the thoughts of the Hebrew people as they passed through the sea on dry land, with walls of water to the right and to the left. Only at the end does the Bible turn to the Israelites and show us their reaction. *The people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying, 'I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously.'*[10] They reacted with fear and a renewed faith in God that poured forth in the first “new song”[11] the Scripture recounts for us.

We do not know what the music was like. No one was able to record it, nor has it come down to us through oral tradition. But it must have been filled with sincere gratitude and a deep

sense of adoration. And it must have been quite moving: any outside witness would have clearly sensed God's presence in that hymn, as did those who sang it.

After this episode, the Israelites encountered even more difficulties in the desert. First, the bitter waters of Marah that were turned sweet again by the wood, a figure of the Cross.^[12] Then the hardships of the Sinai desert, which the Lord relieved with manna and quails. And later, the water of Massah and Meribah. God always provided help in the midst of the difficulties and the people renewed their song. Their hope was that a moment would come when everything would be a new song.

Christ's coming has brought salvation once and for all. *Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb.*^[13] The new song,

which will never end, has already begun. Nevertheless, we still await the moment when it will be full and complete, just as it is presented in the Apocalypse.[14] In a certain sense, the Church has already reached the Promised Land. But she continues her pilgrimage through the desert, which is why the Liturgy speaks about her as “*peregrinans in terra*.”[15] In reality, the term “new,” in biblical language, “evokes not so much the exterior novelty of the words, as the ultimate fullness that seals hope. It sings, therefore, of the destination of history where the voice of evil . . . will finally be silenced. But this negative aspect is replaced by a more spacious positive dimension, that of the new world, a joyful one about to appear.”[16]

The music from heaven, on earth

When the Lamb *had taken the scroll,*
the four living creatures and the

twenty-four elders fell down . . . each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints; and they sang a new song.[17] Sacred Scripture does not fail to mention, in its sober way, the existence of heavenly music. This shouldn't surprise us since "God is not isolation, but glorious and joyful love, spreading outwards and radiant with light." [18] We can easily imagine the music that must have accompanied our Lady when the Blessed Trinity received her into heaven. The hosts of angels awaited their Queen who was about to arrive, body and soul. The music is solemn; it expresses the joy and delicacy of beauty. Our Lady appears in splendor, and the Son, who has brought mankind into the heart of the Trinity, receives his Mother.

The earthly liturgy, even when we are not attentive to all its beauty, owing perhaps to external

circumstances or our own situation, is “the worship of the universal temple which is the Risen Christ, whose arms are outstretched on the Cross to draw everyone into the embrace of God’s eternal love. It is the worship of a wide open heaven.”[19] Hence the prefaces at Mass always end with an invitation to sing the *Sanctus* together with the angels and the saints. Heaven and earth are united in the *Sanctus*. “We join in the singing of all the centuries, singing that unites heaven and earth, angels and men.”[20] As Saint Josemaria wrote: “I adore and praise with the angels—it is not difficult, because I know that, as I celebrate the holy Mass, they surround me, adoring the Blessed Trinity.”[21]

Certainly, in the narration of the angels’ announcement to the shepherds, “Saint Luke does not say that the angels sang. He states quite

soberly: the heavenly host praised God and said: ‘Glory to God in the highest’ (*Lk 2:13f.*). But men have always known that the speech of angels is different from human speech, and that above all on this night of joyful proclamation it was in song that they extolled God’s heavenly glory. So this angelic song has been recognized from the earliest days as music proceeding from God, indeed, as an invitation to join in the singing with hearts filled with joy at the fact that we are loved by God.”[22]

This is the framework for the development of the Liturgy’s rich musical creativity, which began with the prayer of Israel: the effort to enter into harmony with God’s beauty, in order to catch a glimpse of heaven. “The liturgy is God’s time and space, and we must put ourselves there in God’s time, in God’s space, without looking at our

watches. The liturgy is precisely entering into the mystery of God; bringing ourselves to the mystery and being present in the mystery.”[23] Saint Josemaria wrote that in the Holy Mass “time ought to stand still.”[24] In God’s presence, a purely instrumental, pragmatic viewpoint is out of place. “The appearing of beauty, of the beautiful, makes us happy without our having to ask what use it can serve. God’s glory, from which all beauty derives, causes us to break out in astonishment and joy.”[25]

Within everyone’s reach

Our participation in liturgical singing shows our love, the “sense of mystery”[26] that leads us to set aside our usual quest for efficiency. Without failing to take into account each one’s professional and family circumstances, we can often bring to the liturgy the “touch” that fosters

adoration of God in a special way. Perhaps by doing so we might be going against the pragmatic culture that we also are part of. But by giving the liturgy the time it requires, with the simple splendor of our faith, we help bring the world to God. We make him present amid the hustle and bustle of modern life, which doesn't know how to make time for God. "Isn't it strange how many Christians, who take their time and have leisure enough in their social life (they are in no hurry), in following the sleepy rhythm of their professional affairs, in eating and recreation (no hurry here either), find themselves rushed and want to rush the Priest, in their anxiety to shorten the time devoted to the most holy Sacrifice of the Altar?"[27]

"Faith is love and therefore creates poetry and music."[28] If our faith is alive, we will also be more like those first Christians St. Paul encouraged to

sing and celebrate the Lord with their whole heart.[29]

Liturgical music, then, is not a question of sentimentality or aesthetic taste. It is a question of love, of wanting “to address God with a tender heart,”[30] and not “in a dry, official way, with a faith that has no sparkle to it.”[31] Just as we would miss music at festive times in life, it’s only natural to want to enhance the liturgy in this way. At times, in a daily celebration, a brief pious hymn might suffice: *Adoro te devote, Ave Maris Stella, Rorate Coeli*, etc. On feast days, depending on the talents of those present, the music will take on greater importance. We can sing some parts of the Mass—the *Gloria*, the *Sanctus*, etc.—and perhaps even have an organ accompaniment.

Throughout the ages, the Church has developed a precious tradition of sacred music. The newness of

Christian worship led to seeking new poetic and musical forms that would express prayer raised to unsuspected heights. “Singing psalms befits men, but singing hymns is for the angels and those who lead a life like the angels.”^[32] And so the Roman Liturgy emphasizes Gregorian chant as being most fitting^[33] for prayer during the celebration of the Holy Mass. Thus, for example, the Roman Missal for the altar contains the music for the *Per ipsum* at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer and for other prayers as well.

In the great repertoire of Christian sacred music we can find hymns that fit all tastes and talents, from simple melodies to complex polyphony. There are also more recent compositions that stem from a particular culture and whose music accords well with the mysteries of God. Both the more traditional pieces and the more modern ones can be

found in books for the use of the faithful. Collections of hymns can also be offered that are more suited for a specific time and place.

Those with more musical talent can make an important contribution here. The effort to pour their creativity into making worship more attractive will also lead them to be more generous towards God, because by dedicating their time to the Lord and to others they are offering the sacrifice of Abel.[34] In any case, it is well worthwhile putting at least the same effort here that they would put into preparing, for example, a birthday celebration: learning and practicing hymns that are a part of Christian culture, that express an authentic liturgical taste, and that provide a channel for our prayer. For in the liturgy we are with God, and God is pleased by our singing.

The language of adoration

In the liturgy, music is not a mere accompaniment or ornamentation. Nor is it the interpretation of a religious theme that draws attention to itself. In either case, music would run parallel to the celebration, when in reality it should be one and the same thing with it.^[35] True liturgical music is prayer; it is liturgy. It does not distract us, nor is it limited to providing us with joyful sensations or aesthetic delight. It helps us to be recollected, to place ourselves in the mystery of God. It leads us to adoration, which has silence as one of its privileged languages. As the Pope reminds us: “silence guards the mystery.”^[36] If the music comes from God, it will not compete with silence. It will lead us to the true silence, that of the heart.

The moments of silence that the liturgy provides for—at the beginning of Mass, in the penitential rite, in the *mementos*, at the

consecration, etc.—are invitations to recollect ourselves in adoration.

They prepare us for the moment of communion. “If I am truly to communicate with another person I must know him; I must be able to be in silence close to him, to listen to him and look at him lovingly. True love and true friendship are always nourished by the reciprocity of looks, of intense, eloquent silences full of respect and veneration, so that the encounter may be lived profoundly and personally rather than superficially. And, unfortunately, if this dimension is lacking, sacramental communion itself may become a superficial gesture on our part.”[\[37\]](#)

Pointing to the intimate heart of the liturgy that will be our heaven, the Pope asks in one of his homilies: “You and I, do we worship the Lord? Do we turn to God only to ask him for things, to thank him, or do we also

turn to him to worship him? What does it mean, then, to worship God? It means learning to be with him, it means that we stop to dialogue with him, and it means sensing that his presence is the most true, the most good, the most important thing of all . . . worshiping the Lord means that we are convinced before him that he is the only God, the God of our lives, the God of our history.”[38]

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[1] *Ex* 15:1.

[2] See Psalm 65 (66); 77 (78); 105 (106); 135 (136).

[3] Pope Francis, Angelus, 10 November 2013.

[4] Pope Francis, Homily in Santa Marta, 20 January 2014.

[5] See *Rev* 21:5.

[6] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 307.

[7] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 523.

[8] *Ex* 15:9.

[9] *Ex* 15:10.

[10] *Ex* 14:31-15:1.

[11] See *Psalms* 32 (33); 39 (40); 95 (96); 97 (98); 143 (144); 149.

[12] See *Ex* 14:22-25.

[13] *Rev* 7:10

[14] *Rev* 5:9-10; 14:3.

[15] *Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer III.

[16] Benedict XVI, Audience, 25 January 2006. See *Psalms* 143 (144).

[17] *Rev* 5:8-9.

[18] Benedict XVI, Homily, 19 February 2012.

[19] Benedict XVI, Audience, 3 October 2012.

[20] Benedict XVI, Homily, 24 December, 2010.

[21] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 89.

[22] Benedict XVI, Homily, 24 December 2010.

[23] Pope Francis, Homily, 10 February 2014.

[24] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 436.

[25] Benedict XVI, Homily, 24 December 2010.

[26] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 17 April 2003, no. 49.

[27] *The Way*, no. 530.

[28] Benedict XVI, Audience, 21 May 2008.

[29] See *Eph* 5:19; *Col* 3:17.

[30] *Friends of God*, no. 167.

[31] *The Forge*, no. 930.

[32] Origen, *Sel. in psalmos*, in Psalm 119 (118): 71.

[33] See Const. *Sancrosanctum concilium*, no. 116.

[34] See *Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer I; Cf. *Gen* 4:4.

[35] See Const. *Sacrosanctum concilium*, no. 112.

[36] Pope Francis, Homily in Santa Marta, 20 December 2014.

[37] Benedict XVI, Homily, 7 June 2012.

[38] Pope Francis, Homily, 14 April 2013.

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