



LITURGY AND CHURCH MUSIC

by
Pope Benedict XVI

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From the very beginning, liturgy and music have been quite closely related. Mere words do not suffice when man praises God. Discourse with God goes beyond the boundaries of human speech. Hence by its very nature the liturgy has everywhere called upon the help of music, of singing, and of the voices of creation in the sounds of instruments. The praise of God, after all, does not involve only man. To worship God means to join in that of which all creatures speak.

Although liturgy and music are by their very nature closely linked with each other, their relationship has always been a difficult one as well, above all in times of cultural change and at turning points in history. It is thus no surprise that today, the question of the right form of music in worship is once again disputed. The debates of the last council and the years immediately following it seemed to center solely upon the antithesis between the men of pastoral practice and the church musicians who refused to submit to classification in categories of mere pastoral expediency, but strove instead to assert the validity of music's inner worthiness as a pastoral and liturgical standard with a rank of its own. In other words, at bottom the debate seemed limited to the level of concrete application. In the meantime, however, the rift goes much deeper.

The second wave of liturgical reform stimulates a questioning of the very principles themselves. It is question here of the very essence of worship activity as such, of its anthropological and theological foundations. The dispute about church, music is symptomatic of a more profound

question: what is worship?

1. Outstripping the council? A new conception of the liturgy.

The new phase of liturgical reform efforts is explicitly based not upon the texts of the Second Vatican Council, but upon its “Spirit.” As symptomatic of this view, I shall use here the informative and clearly conceived article, “Song and Music in the Church” which appeared in the *Nuovo Dizionario di Liturgia*. There, the high artistic rank of Gregorian chant and classical polyphony is not called into question. It is not even a case of playing off community activity against elitist art. Indeed, the rejection of an historicist rigidity which merely copies the past and thus lacks both a present and a future, is not the real point at issue, either. It is rather a question of a new basic understanding of liturgy, with which the council, whose constitution on the sacred liturgy is said to contain a split personality, is to be outstripped.

Let us attempt to familiarize ourselves briefly with the basic outlines of this new conception. The point of departure for the liturgy (so we are told) lies in the assembly of two or three who gather in Christ’s name. At first hearing, this reference to the promise of Jesus in Matthew 16:20 sounds harmless and quite traditional. However, it acquires a revolutionary impetus through the isolation of this one biblical text, which is viewed in contrast to the entire liturgical tradition. The “two or three” are not set up as the antithesis of an institution with institutional roles, as the antithesis of any kind of “codified program.” This definition of the liturgy therefore means that it is not the Church which takes precedence of the group, but rather that the group is more important than the Church. It is not the Church as total entity which supports the liturgy of an individual group or congregation, but rather the group itself is the point at which liturgy begins in every instance. Hence, it also follows that liturgy does not grow out of a model shared in common, out of a “rite” (which as a “codified program” now becomes a negative image of constraint): liturgy rather arises on the spot, out of the creativity of those assembled. In such a sociological view, the sacrament of priestly ordination appears as an institutional role which has created a monopoly for itself and which by means of the institution (the Church) undoes the pristine unity and community of the group. In this constellation, we are told, both music and the Latin tongue have become a language of the initiates, “the language of another Church, namely of the institution and of its clergy.”

It is evident that the isolation of Matthew 16:20 from the entire biblical and ecclesiastical tradition of the Church’s common prayer has far-reaching consequences: the Lord’s promise to those praying anywhere is transformed into the dogma of the autonomous group. The joint action of praying has been intensified to an egalitarianism which regards the development of spiritual offices as the beginning of a different Church. From this point of view, any guiding postulates derived from the Church as a whole are restraints which must be resisted for the sake of the originality and freedom of the liturgical celebration. It is not obedient to a totality ce to a totality c

present, negative and positive. And so, conventional (indeed, even conciliar!) terms like the “treasury of sacred music,” the “organ as queen of instruments” or the “universality of Gregorian chant” now appear as “mystifications” whose purpose is “to preserve a particular form of power.” A certain administration of power (so we are told) feels threatened by the processes of cultural change. It (allegedly) reacts by masking its effort at self-preservation in the guise of love for tradition. Gregorian chant and Palestrina are said to be the tutelary deities of a mythicized ancient repertory, ingredients of a Catholic counter-culture supported by re-mythicized and super-sacralized archetypes. In fact, the entire historical liturgy of the Church is claimed to be more concerned with the representation of a cultic bureaucracy than with the singing activity of the congregation. And finally, the content of Pope St. Pius X’s *motu proprio* on church music is called a “culturally shortsighted and theologically worthless ideology of sacred music.”

Now, of course, it is not only sociology which is at work here, but also a complete separation of the New Testament from the Church’s history, linked to a theory of decadence which is quite typical of many an Enlightenment situation: real purity can only be found in the “Jesuistic” origins, and all the rest of history seems to be a “musical adventure with false and disoriented experiences.” This history must now “be brought to an end” in order to begin again with what is right.

But just what does the new and better look like? The basic ideas have already been hinted at earlier, and we must now try to render them more concrete. Two fundamental values are stated quite clearly. The “primary value” of a renewed liturgy, so we are told, is “the activity of all persons in fullness and in authenticity.” Accordingly, church music primarily means that the “People of God” depicts its own identity by singing. And with this, we arrive at the second value decision which is operative here: music proves to be a force which causes the group to cohere. The familiar songs are, so to speak, the hallmarks of a community. From these two principles there follow the main categories of music at worship: project, program, animation, management. The “how,” so we are told, is much more important than the “what.” The ability to celebrate is claimed to be primarily “the ability to produce”: music must above all be “produced” or “made”. In order to be fair, I must add that the article shows complete appreciation for different cultural situations and leaves room for the acceptance of historical materials as well. And above all, the article stresses the paschal character of Christian liturgy, whose song not only depicts the identity of the People of God, but should also render an account of its hope and proclaim to all the countenance of the Father of Jesus Christ.

In spite of the great rupture, there thus remain elements which make dialogue feasible and offer the hope that unity in our basic understanding of the liturgy can once again be achieved. Because the liturgy is derived from the group instead of from the Church, this unity threatens to disappear, and that not merely in theory, but in actual liturgical practice.

I would not speak at such length about all of this if I believed that such ideas were attributable only to a few individual theorists. Although it is beyond all dispute that they are not supported by the texts of Vatican II, many a liturgical office and its organs firmly believes that the “spirit” of the council points in this directi

widespread opinion today holds that the real categories of the conciliar understanding of liturgy are a so-called creativity, the activity of all those present, and the reference to a group whose members know and are drawn to each other. Not only assistant pastors, but sometimes even bishops have the feeling that they are not loyal to the council if they celebrate Holy Mass exactly as it is printed in the *Missale*: at least one “creative” formula must be slipped in, no matter how banal it might be. Of course, the bourgeois greeting of the audience and if possible also the friendly greetings at leave taking have already become an obligatory element of the sacred action which scarcely anyone dare omit.

2. The philosophical foundation of this conception and its questionable aspects.

In spite of all that has been said thus far, we have not yet reached the center of this change of values. The points already discussed all follow from the preferential ranking of the group above the Church. How so? Because the Church is classified under the general term “institution,” and in the type of sociology being borrowed here, “institution” bears the quality of a negative value. “Institution” embodies power, and power is viewed as the antithesis of freedom. Since faith (“imitation of Jesus”) is conceived of as a positive value, it must stand on the side of freedom and hence by its very nature be anti-institutional as well. Accordingly, worship may not be a prop for or a part of an institution either, but it must instead be a counterforce which helps bring down the mighty from their thrones.

If that be the point of departure, then of course, the paschal hope (to which the liturgy is supposed to testify) can become quite terrestrial. It can become the hope of overcoming the institutions, and in fact it becomes a weapon in the struggle against the powers that be. For example, he who merely reads the texts of the *Missa Nicaraguensis* can get a good idea of this shifting of hope and of the new realism which liturgy acquires here, as instrument of a militant promise. And something else becomes evident: the importance which actually accrues to music in the new conception. The revolutionary songs have the power to arouse, and this communicates an enthusiasm and a conviction which a merely spoken liturgy could not evoke. Here, there is no longer any opposition to liturgical music, since music has received a new and indispensable function of arousing irrational powers and a communitarian impulse which is the purpose of the entire process. And music simultaneously contributes to the formation of consciousness, because something which is sung gradually communicates itself to the spirit much more effectively than something merely spoken or thought.

Moreover, by way of the group liturgy, the boundaries of the locally assembled community are here quite deliberately overstepped: by means of the liturgical form and its music there arises a new solidarity which is supposed to bring forth a new people that calls itself the people of God, although “God” really means the people themselves and the historical energies realized in them.

Let us now return to our analysis of the values which have become determinant of the new liturgical consciousness. First of all, there is the negative quality of the concept “institution” and the fact that the Church is considered solely under this sociological aspect, which is not that of an empirical sociology (be it noted), but from a point of view for which we are indebted to the so-

called masters of distrust. They have obviously done their work quite well, and have achieved a mind-set which remains effective even when its origin goes unremarked. But the distrust could not have had such explosive power if it were not accompanied by a promise whose fascination is almost unavoidable: the idea of freedom as the real requirement of human dignity. To this extent the question of the correct concept of freedom must represent the heart of the discussion. And thereby the dispute about the liturgy is brought back from all the superficial questions about its shape, to the real matter at hand, for in the liturgy it is actually a matter of the presence of the Redemption and of the approach to genuine freedom. The positive side of the new dispute is undoubtedly to be found in thus pointing up the central issue.

At the same time, we can see just what Catholic Christianity is suffering from today. If the Church appears to be merely an institution, a bearer of power and thus an opponent of freedom and a hindrance to redemption, then the faith lives in contradiction to itself, because on the one hand faith cannot dispense with the Church, and on the other hand faith is fundamentally opposed to the Church. Therein lies the tragic paradox of this trend in liturgical reform. After all,

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meaning greater than that which can be explained.

All of this is now replaced by creativity, in which the autonomy of those emancipated attempts to corroborate or ratify itself. Such a creativity, which aspires to be a functional expression of autonomy and emancipation, is—precisely on that account—diametrically opposed to any form of partaking. Characteristic of this creativity is arbitrariness as a necessary expression of the rejection of all prescribed forms or rules, unrepeatability because repetition would already imply dependence, and artificiality because it is necessarily a case of purely human production. And so we see that human creativity which refuses to receive and to partake, is contradictory and untrue in its very nature, because man can only be man through receiving and partaking. Such creativity is escape from the *conditio humana* and therefore falsehood. This is ultimately why cultural decadence begins at the point where along with the loss of faith in God a pre-established reasonableness of being must also be called into question.

Let us now summarize our findings so that we can draw consequences for the point of departure and the basic form of church music. It has become evident that the primacy of the group derives from an understanding of the Church as institution based upon a concept of freedom which is incompatible with the idea and the reality of the institutional. Indeed, this idea of freedom is no longer capable of grasping the dimension of the *mysterium* in the reality of the Church. Freedom is conceived in terms of autonomy and emancipation, and takes concrete shape in the idea of creativity, which against this background is the exact opposite of that objectivity and positiveness which belong to the essence of the Church's liturgy. The group is truly free only when it discovers itself anew each time.

We also found that liturgy worthy of the name is the radical antithesis of all this. Genuine liturgy is opposed to an historical arbitrariness which knows no development and hence is ultimately vacuous. Genuine liturgy is also opposed to an unrepeatability which is also exclusivity and loss of communication without regard for any groupings. Genuine liturgy is not opposed to the technical, but to the artificial, in which man creates a counter-world for himself and loses sight of, indeed loses a feeling for, God's creation. The antitheses are evident as is the incipient clarification of the inner justification for group thinking as an autonomistically conceived idea of freedom. But now we must inquire positively as to the anthropological concept which forms the basis for the liturgy in the sense of the Church's faith.

2. The anthropological pattern of the Church's liturgy

The answer to our question is suggested by two fundamental statements in the New Testament. Saint Paul coined the expression *logike Iatreia* in Romans 12:1, but this is very difficult to translate because we lack a satisfactory equivalent for the concept of *logos*. It might perhaps be translated "*logos-like* worship" or worship fixed or determined by the Spirit, which would also echo Jesus' statement about adoration in spirit and in truth (John 4:23). But it is also possible to translate adoration stamped or marked by the word, adding of course that in a biblical sense (as well as in the Greek meaning) "word" is more than mere speech or language: it is creative reality. To be sure, it is also more than mere thought or spirit: it is spirit which explains and

communicates itself. The relationship to a text, the rationality, the intelligibility and the sobriety of Christian liturgy have always been deduced from this fact and presupposed as the basic norm of liturgical music. But it would be a restrictive and a false interpretation to understand this norm as strictly requiring of all liturgical music a very close link with the text, or to declare the intelligibility of the text to be a general requirement for all liturgical music. After all, “word” in the biblical sense is more than text and comprehension includes more than the banal perspicuity of what is obvious to everyone, what is to be compressed into the most superficial rationality. It is quite correct, however that music which serves the adoration in spirit and in truth cannot be rhythmic ecstasy sensual suggestion or stupefaction subjective emotional bliss or superficial entertainment. It is rather subordinated to a message to a comprehensive spiritual statement which is rational in the highest sense of the word. In other words it is quite correct to say that such music must correspond in its innermost nature to this “word” in a comprehensive sense, indeed must serve it.

And so we are quite naturally led to another text which makes the really fundamental biblical statement about worship by clarifying for us the importance of the “word” and its relationship with us. I refer to that sentence in the prologue of Saint John’s gospel: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory” (John 1:13). First of all, the “word” to which Christian worship refers is not a text, but a living reality: a God Who is meaning, communicating Himself, and Who communicates Himself by becoming man. This Incarnation is now the holy tent or tabernacle, the point of reference for all cult, which is a gazing upon God’s glory and does Him honor. But these statements of Saint John’s prologue do not convey the complete picture. The passages will be misunderstood unless we take them together with the “farewell speeches” of Jesus, in which He says to His disciples, “If I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again. I go away, and I come unto you. It is expedient to you that I go, for if I go not, the Paraclete will not come to you (John 12:2 ff., 14:18 ff., 16:5 ff., etc.). The Incarnation is only the first step in a longer process which moves to a final and meaningful conclusion in the Cross and the Resurrection. From the Cross, the Lord draws everything to Himself and bears what is corporeal, i.e., man and the whole created world, into God’s eternity.

The liturgy is subordinate to this movement, which we might call the basic text to which all liturgical music refers: music must be measured from within by the standard of this line of motion. Liturgical music is a result of the demands and of the dynamism of the Incarnation of the Word, for music means that even among us, the word cannot be mere speech. The principal ways in which the Incarnation continues to operate are of course the sacramental signs themselves. But they are quite misplaced if they are not immersed in a liturgy which as a whole follows this expansion of the Word into the corporeal and into the sphere of all our senses. It is this fact which justifies and indeed renders necessary images in complete contrast to Jewish and Islamic types of worship. This is also the reason why it is necessary to appeal to those deeper levels of comprehension and response which become accessible through music. Faith becoming music is part of the process of the Word becoming flesh. But at the same time, this “becoming music” is also subordinated in a completely unique way to that inner evolution of the Incarnation event which I tried to hint at earlier the Word become flesh comes to be, in the Cross and Resurrection, flesh become Word. Both are permeated with each other. The Incarnation is not revoked, but

becomes definitive at that instant in which the movement turns around, so to speak: flesh itself becomes Word, is “logocized,” but precisely this transformation brings about a new unity of all reality which was obviously so important to God that He paid for it at the price of the Son’s Cross.

When the Word becomes music, there is involved on the one hand perceptible illustration, incarnation or taking on flesh, attraction of pre-rational powers, a drawing upon the hidden resonance of creation, a discovery of the song which lies at the basis of all things. And so this becoming music is itself the very turning point in the movement: it involves not only the Word becoming flesh, but simultaneously the flesh becoming spirit; Brass and wood become sound; what is unconscious and unsettled becomes orderly and meaningful resonance. What takes place is an embodiment or incarnation which is spiritualization and a spiritualization which is incarnation or em-body-ment Christian incarnation or embodiment is always simultaneously spiritualization and Christian spiritualization is em-body-ment into the body of the *Logos* become man.

4. The consequences for liturgical music

a) Basic principles

To the degree that in music this conjunction of both movements takes place, music serves in the highest degree and in an irreplaceable manner that interior exodus which liturgy always is and wants to be. This means that the propriety of liturgical music is measured by its inner conformity to this basic anthropological and theological model. At first glance, such a statement seems far removed from concrete musical realities. But the statement becomes very concrete indeed when we consider the antithetical models of cultic music which I mentioned earlier. Or we can recall the Dionysiac type of religion and its music, which Plato discussed on the basis of his religious and philosophical views. In many forms of religion, music is associated with frenzy and ecstasy. The free expansion of human existence, toward which man’s own hunger for the Infinite is directed, is supposed to be achieved through sacred delirium induced by frenzied instrumental rhythms. Such music lowers the barriers of individuality and personality, and in it man liberates himself from the burden of consciousness. Music becomes ecstasy, liberation from the ego, amalgamation with the universe. Today we experience the secularized variation of this type in rock and pop music, whose festivals are an anti-cult with the same tendency: desire for destruction, repealing the limitations of the everyday, and the illusion of salvation in liberation from the ego, in the wild ecstasy of a tumultuous crowd. These are measures which involve a form of release related to that achieved through drugs. It is the complete antithesis of Christian faith in the Redemption. Accordingly, it is only logical that in this area diabolical cults and demonic musics are on the increase today, and their dangerous power of deliberately destroying personality is not yet taken seriously enough. The dispute between Dionysiac and Apolline music which Plato tried to arbitrate, is not our concern, since Apollo is not Christ. But the question which Plato posed concerns us in a most significant way.

In a way which we could not imagine thirty years ago, music has become the decisive vehicle of

a counter-religion and thus calls for a parting of the ways. Since rock music seeks release through liberation from the personality and its responsibility, it can be on the one hand precisely classified among the anarchic ideas of freedom

Only there do they recover themselves completely—on condition, of course, that the spirit too does not remain uncommunicative. In “lifting up your hearts,”—*sursum corda*—music of faith seeks the integration of man and finds it not within itself but only by going beyond itself into the Word made flesh. Sacred music which forms a part of this framework of movement thus becomes man’s purification, his ascent. Let us remember, though, that this music is not the product of a moment, but participation in history. It cannot be realized by an individual, but only in cooperation with others. And thus such a sacred music also expresses entrance into the history of the faith, and the mutual relationship of all members of Christ’s body. Such a sacred music bequeathes joy and a higher type of ecstasy which does not extinguish personality, but unites and thus liberates. Such a sacred music gives us a foretaste of that freedom which does not destroy, but which unites and purifies.

b) Remarks on the present situation

The musician, of course, will ask: How can that be accomplished? In the last analysis, great works of church music can only be bestowed or presented, since it is a matter of going beyond oneself, which is something man cannot accomplish without help; whereas according to the well-known mechanisms of stupefaction, frenzy of the senses is producible. But all producing ends where the truly great begins. It is this limitation which we must first of all recognize and acknowledge. To that extent, the beginnings of great sacred music necessarily lie in reverence, in receptivity, and in that humility which is prepared to serve and to minister while partaking of already existing greatness. It is only the person who at the very least lives radically within the inner framework of this image of man, who can create the music appropriate to it.

The Church has posted two additional signposts. In its inner character, liturgical music must fulfill the demands of the great liturgical texts: the *Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei*.

By way of reply, we might say that in Africa, Asia and Latin America we are apparently on the threshold of a new florescence of the faith which could also give rise to new cultural forms. But even in the western world, we should not be frightened by the term “subculture.” In the cultural crisis we are currently experiencing, new cultural purification and unification can break forth only from islands of spiritual composure. It is already apparent that Christian culture forms itself anew wherever new departures of faith occur, and that joint experience inspires and opens new paths which we could not previously see. However, J. F. Doppelbauer has quite rightly pointed out that genuine liturgical music often and not by accident bears the traits of later or mature work and presupposes that growth and ripening have taken place earlier. Here it is important that there exist the “antechambers” of popular piety and its music as well as religious music in the broader sense, which should always remain in fruitful exchange with liturgical music. On the one hand, the “antechambers” will be fructified and purified by liturgical music, while on the other hand, they prepare the way for new forms of liturgical music. Out of such freer forms there can develop elements capable of entering the joint action of the Church’s universal worship. Here, too, is the realm in which the group can try out its creativity, in the hope that one day something will emerge which can belong to all.

Conclusion: Liturgy, music and the cosmos

I would like to conclude my remarks with a fine quotation from Mahatma Gandhi which I recently found in a calendar. Gandhi mentions the three “living areas” of the cosmos and notes that each of these involves a specific manner of existing. Fish live in the sea, and they are silent. Animals on earth below, bark and bray. But the birds who inhabit the heavens sing. Silence is proper to the sea, braying is proper to the earth, and singing belongs to heaven. But man has a share in all three, for within himself he bears the depths of the sea, the burden of the earth and the heights of heaven. Hence he possesses all three properties: silence, bellowing and singing.

Today, I would like to add, we see that for man deprived of transcendence there remains only braying, because he desires to be earth and nothing more, indeed tries to make the heavens and the ocean deep to be his earth. True liturgy, the liturgy of the communion of saints, gives man once again his completeness. It instructs him once again in silence and in singing by opening for him the depths of the sea and by teaching him to fly—the existence of the angels. By “lifting up the heart;” true liturgy allows the buried song to resound in man once again. Indeed, we could now actually say that true liturgy can be recognized by the fact that it liberates from everyday activity and restores to us both the depths and the heights: silence and singing. True liturgy is recognizable because it is cosmic and not limited to a group. True liturgy sings with the angels, and true liturgy is silent with the expectant depths of the universe. And thus true liturgy redeems the earth.