

Voluntati Obsequens

Letter to the Bishops on the Minimum Repertoire of Plainchant Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship April 14, 1974

The following is a translation of a letter that was sent to all bishops and heads of religious orders, together with a book of chants, "Jubilate Deo". The letter was published in Latin in the April 1974 issue of Notitiae, (pages 123-126) and in French in "La Documentation Catholique" June 2, 1974.

Eminence, Excellency,

Our congregation has prepared a booklet entitled, "*Jubilate Deo*", which contains a minimum selection of sacred chants. This was done in response to a desire which the Holy Father had frequently expressed, that all the faithful should know at least some Latin Gregorian chants, such as, for example, the "*Gloria*", the "*Credo*", the "*Sanctus*", and the "*Agnus Dei*".[1]

It gives me great pleasure to send you a copy of it, as a personal gift from His Holiness, Pope Paul VI. May I take this opportunity of recommending to your pastoral solicitude this new initiative, whose purpose is to facilitate the observance of the recommendation of the Second Vatican Council "...steps must be taken to ensure that the faithful are able to chant together in Latin those parts of the ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them.[2]

In effect, when the faithful gather together for prayer they manifest at once the diversity of a people drawn "from every tribe, language and nation (Ap. 5:9) and its unity in faith and charity. Their diversity is manifested in the present multiplicity of liturgical languages and in the vernacular chants which, in the context of one shared faith, give expression to each people's religious sentiment in music drawn from its culture and traditions. On the other hand, their unity finds particularly apt and even sensible expression through the use of Latin Gregorian chant.

Down the centuries, Gregorian chant has accompanied liturgical celebrations in the Roman rite, has nourished men's faith and has fostered their piety, while in the process achieving an artistic perfection which the Church rightly considers a patrimony of inestimable value and which the Council recognized as "the chant especially suited to the Roman liturgy."[3]

One of the objectives of the liturgical reform is to promote community singing in assemblies of the faithful, so that they might the better express the festive, communal and fraternal character of liturgical celebrations. In effect, "the liturgical action becomes more dignified when it is accompanied by chant, when each minister fulfills his own role and the faithful also take part.[4]

Those who are charged with responsibility for the liturgical reform are particularly anxious to achieve this difficult objective. To that end, the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship appeals once again, as they have often done in the past, for the proper development of singing by the faithful.

Vernacular Singing

When vernacular singing is concerned, the liturgical reform offers "a challenge to the creativity and the pastoral zeal of every local church." [5] Poets and musicians are therefore to be encouraged to put their talents at the service of such a cause, so that a popular chant may emerge which is truly artistic, is worthy of the praise of God, of the liturgical action of which it forms part and of the faith which it expresses. The liturgical reform has opened up new perspectives for sacred music and for chant. "One hopes for a new flowering of the art of religious music in our time. Since the vernacular is admitted to worship in every country it ought not to be denied the beauty and the power of expression of religious music and appropriate chant. [6]

Gregorian Chant

At the same time, the liturgical reform does not and indeed cannot deny the past. Rather does it "preserve and foster it with the greatest care." [7] It cultivates and transmits all that is in it of high religious, cultural and artistic worth and especially those elements which can express even externally the unity of believers.

This minimum repertoire of Gregorian chant has been prepared with that purpose in mind: to make it easier for Christians to achieve unity and spiritual harmony with their brothers and with the living traditions of the past. Hence it is that those who are trying to improve the quality of congregational singing cannot refuse to Gregorian chant the place which is due to it. And this becomes all the more imperative as we approach the Holy Year of 1975, during which the faithful of different languages, nations and origins, will find themselves side by side for the common celebration of the Lord.

Those who because of their special vocation in the Church need to have a deeper knowledge of sacred music ought to be particularly careful to observe a proper balance between popular chant and Gregorian chant. For this reason the Holy Father recommended that "Gregorian chant be preserved and be sung in monasteries, other religious houses and seminaries, as a special form of chanted prayer and as something of high cultural and pedagogic value." [8]

Further, the study and the performance of Gregorian chant remain "because of its special characteristics, a very useful foundation for the cultivation of sacred music." [9]

In presenting the Holy Father's gift to you, may I at the same time remind you of the desire which he has often expressed that the Conciliar constitution on the liturgy be increasingly better implemented. Would you therefore, in collaboration with the competent diocesan and national agencies for the liturgy, sacred music

and catechetics, decide on the best ways of teaching the faithful the Latin chants of "*Jubilate Deo*" and of having them sing them, and also of promoting the preservation and execution of Gregorian chant in the communities mentioned above. You will thus be performing a new service for the Church in the domain of liturgical renewal.

The contents of this booklet may be reproduced free of charge. To help people understand these texts, one may add the normal vernacular translation.

Endnotes

1. See the Address of Pope Paul VI at general audience, August 22, 1973. Address of Pope Paul VI to the "*Consociatio Internationalis Musicae Sacrae*," October 12, 1973; Letter of Cardinal Jean Villot to the National Assembly of the Italian Association of Saint Cecilia, September 30, 1973.
2. Constitution on the Liturgy, no. 54.
3. Ibid., no. 116.
4. Instruction *Musicam Sacram* no. 5.
5. Ibid., no. 54; Address of Pope Paul VI to members of the Italian Association of Saint Cecilia, 23 September, 1972.
6. Address of Pope Paul VI to the "*Consociatio Internationalis Musicae Sacrae*," October 12, 1973.
7. Constitution on the Liturgy, no. 114.
8. Letter of Cardinal Jean Villot to the National Assembly of the Italian Association of Saint Cecilia, 30 September, 1973.
9. Instruction *Musicam Sacram* no. 52.