

Singing

I have found just one heresy concerning this matter, which derides the singing which is done in church.

The first author (in my opinion) of this error was a certain Hilary, concerning whom Blessed Augustine makes mention and presents his error.¹ And I do not know whether this Hilary was one of the Arians, who also removed the holy chants, because they heard praises of Christ in them, Whom they strongly desired to belittle. Hence Ambrose in his *Sermon against Auxentius on the Giving Up the Basilicas* says the following: “And so today, when Christ is praised, the madness of the Arians is scourged. The Gerasens could not bear the presence of Christ;² these, worse than the Gerasens, cannot endure the praises of Christ. They see children singing of the glory of Christ, for it is written: ‘Out of the mouth of infants and of sucklings thou hast perfected praise’ (Mt. 21, 16). They mock at their tender age, so full of faith, and say: ‘Behold, why do they cry out?’ But Christ answers them: ‘If these shall hold their peace, the stones will cry out,’ (Lk. 19, 40), that is, the stronger will cry out, both youths and the more mature will cry out, and old men will cry out.”³ From whose words it is evident that the Arians belittled the singing of Christ’s praises in church.

Nevertheless (as I think) they were belittling not because praises were being sung, but because Christ was being praised beyond their views, for they believed that Christ is a mere creature, wherefore they looked askance at the praises whereby Christ was extolled as the true God. Which praises they annoyed them even if they were said in a low voice and without singing. I said that on account of Thomas Netter who seems to attribute this error to the Arians, motivated by this quotation of Ambrose, misconstrued (as I think). Whereas Hilary (as it appears from the Augustine’s words) simply belittled chants.

The Waldensians resurrected this error, who said that it was useless to waste time with Church singing. The English John Wycliffe followed them afterwards, who so belittled Church hymns that he called singers in church “priests of Baal,” to whom when they were praying loudly Prophet Elias said: “Cry with a louder voice: for he is a god, and perhaps he is talking, or is in an inn, or on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep, and must be awaked” (III Kings 8, 27). Wherefore John Wycliffe says that they who sing in church are priests of Baal, because they so cry out as though God were sleeping and does not hear them, and so He would have been wakened by their voices.

Now in order that we might more clearly refute this error, it is firstly necessary to recall that there are two kinds of prayer to God. The first kind is private prayer, which is made by an individual person. The other is public prayer, which is made by a group of men gathered together. Silence is more conducive for the first prayer than praying aloud: since when one prays aloud he impedes others from being able to pray quietly in his presence, because by the sound of his words, he distracts the minds of others. Moreover, by so praying aloud in public, one makes one’s prayers audible to the ears of the good and the wicked, which perhaps are not useful for others to know, and one may be mocked by those to whom he made his secrets known. And on account of this Anna, the mother of Samuel, is praised, concerning whom when praying to the Lord for a son it is

¹ *Retractions*, bk. 2, c. 11 (PL 32, 634).

² Lk. 8, 37.

³ N. 19 (PL 16, 1013B).

said: “Now Anna spoke in her heart, and only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard at all” (I Kings 1, 13). And that which Paul says ought to be understood of this prayer: “If there be no interpreter, let him hold his peace in the church, and speak to himself and to God” (I Cor. 14, 28). Nevertheless if someone out of a certain impatience and fervent desire were to cry out while also praying privately, yet in a place where he does not disturb others and while so praying does not reveal the secrets of his heart, nor believes that God will not hear better when he cries out louder than when he prays in a low voice, when this man prays thus aloud he does not act badly, nay he acts well, if perhaps he intends that when another has heard his prayer he may be motivated to praise God. Hence the Prophet says: “In my trouble I cried to the Lord: and He heard me” (Ps. 119, 1).

Now lest heretics attempt to get around this by saying that those words ought to be understood of the cry of the heart, and not the cry of the mouth, let us put forth Christ our Savior, Whose works no one can criticize except wickedly. For He (as John says) when about to resurrect Lazarus, “Lifting up His eyes said: Father, I give Thee thanks that Thou hast heard Me. And I knew that Thou hearest me always; but because of the people who stand about have I said it, that they may believe that Thou hast sent Me. When He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice: Lazarus, come forth” (11, 41-43). Notice here that you see Jesus crying with a loud voice, Who nevertheless could have been heard with a very low voice, nay Who had been able to resurrect without any sound.

And so that our position might be strengthened, see what Matthew says: “And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying: Eli, Eli, lamma sabacthani? that is, My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” (27, 46).

Finally, so that we may prove with three witnesses, let us cite Paul, who when speaking about Christ, says the following: “Who in the days of His flesh, with a strong cry and tears, offering up prayers and supplications to Him that was able to save Him from death, was heard for His reverence” (Heb. 5, 7).

What then do you say, impious Wycliffe, to these very clear quotations which are objected to you? But I certainly fear that you will also dare to incriminate Christ, you who have not hesitated to condemn and accuse the Church, His spouse.

The other kind of prayer is public prayer, in which not merely the utility of the person himself praying is considered, but common benefits are taken into account. And in this prayer it helps to pray aloud, so that those praying hear each other, and while hearing each other compete from a certain holy emulation in praising God. For, in fact, two Seraphim cried one to another: “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God of hosts, all the earth is full of his glory” (6, 3). In the likeness of whom there are two choirs in the church, who sing in alternation, and like two Seraphim cry one to another. It is also beneficial that prayer in common be done aloud so that others hearing it may be stirred up to praise God. Hence, the Lord in Matthew’s Gospel says: “So let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father Who is in heaven” (5, 16). And the Prophet says concerning that same prayer and praise: “I will bless the Lord at all times, His praise shall be always in my mouth. In the Lord shall my soul be praised: let the meek hear and rejoice. O magnify the Lord with me; and let us extol His name together” (Ps. 33, 2-4).

Hence, Rabanus says: “The church frequently uses his psaltery with its melody of sweet songs, by which souls may be moved more easily to compunction. The primitive Church, however, so chanted the Psalms that it had the psalmist make his voice resonate with only a slight inflection, so that it was closer to speaking than to singing... A perfect voice is high, loud, and sweet: high, so that it can reach the high range; loud, so that it fills the ears; sweet, so that it soothes the spirits of the listeners. If a voice lacks any of these qualities, it is not perfect.”⁴

Blessed Isidore confirms the same opinion saying: “Therefore in singing hymns and Psalms, we have the example not only of the Prophets, but also of the Lord Himself and of the Apostles, and useful precepts concerning this matter to piously arousing the soul and inflaming the affection of Divine love.”⁵

But if anyone is so pertinacious and wrongly indurate such that he would not be ashamed to deny that hymns themselves if rightly composed as they ought, can move the minds of those hearing to devotion of the spirit, the testimony of Augustine proves this view, who in book nine, chapters six and seven of his *Confessions* says these words: “How greatly did I weep in Thy hymns and canticles, deeply moved by the voices of Thy sweet-speaking Church! The voices flowed into mine ears, and the truth was poured forth into my heart, whence the agitation of my piety overflowed, and my tears ran over, and blessed was I therein. Not long had the Church of Milan begun to employ this kind of consolation and exhortation, the brethren singing together with great earnestness of voice and heart. For it was about a year, or not much more, since Justina, the mother of the boy-Emperor Valentinian, persecuted Thy servant Ambrose in the interest of her heresy, to which she had been seduced by the Arians. The pious people kept guard in the church, prepared to die with their bishop, Thy servant. There my mother, Thy handmaid, bearing a chief part of those cares and watchings, lived in prayer. We, still unmelted by the heat of Thy Spirit, were yet moved by the astonished and disturbed city. At this time it was instituted that, after the manner of the Eastern Church, hymns and Psalms should be sung, lest the people should pine away in the tediousness of sorrow; which custom, retained from then till now, is imitated by many, yea, by almost all of Thy congregations throughout the rest of the world.”⁶

And in book ten, chapter thirty-three, he again says: “Now, in those airs which Thy words breathe soul into, when sung with a sweet and trained voice, do I somewhat repose; yet not so as to cling to them, but so as to free myself when I wish. But with the words which are their life do they, that they may gain admission into me, strive after a place of some honor in my heart; and I can hardly assign them a fitting one. Sometimes I appear to myself to give them more respect than, is fitting, as I perceive that our minds are more devoutly and earnestly elevated into a flame of piety by the holy words themselves when they are thus sung, than when they are not; and that all affections of our spirit, by their own diversity, have their appropriate measures in the voice and singing, wherewith by I know not what secret relationship they are stimulated. But the gratification of my flesh, to which the mind ought never to be given over to be enervated, often beguiles me, while the sense does not so attend on reason as to follow her patiently; but having gained admission merely for her sake, it strives even to run on before her, and be her leader. Thus in these things do I sin unknowing, but afterwards do I know it.

⁴ *De clericorum institutione*, bk. 2, c. 48 (PL 107, 361D-362B).

⁵ *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis*, bk. 1, c. 6 (PL 83, 743A).

⁶ N. 14-15 (PL 32, 769-770).

“Sometimes, again, avoiding very earnestly this same deception, I err out of too great preciseness; and sometimes so much as to desire that every air of the pleasant songs to which David’s Psalter is often used, be banished both from my ears and those of the Church itself; and that way seemed unto me safer which I remembered to have been often related to me of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, who obliged the reader of the Psalm to give utterance to it with so slight an inflection of voice, that it was more like speaking than singing. Notwithstanding, when I call to mind the tears I shed at the hymns of Thy Church, at the outset of my recovered faith, and how even now I am moved not by the singing but by what is sung, when they are sung with a clear and skillfully modulated voice, I then acknowledge the great utility of this custom. Thus vacillate I between dangerous pleasure and tried soundness; being inclined rather (though I pronounce no irrevocable opinion upon the subject) to approve of the use of singing in the church, that so by the delights of the ear the weaker minds may be stimulated to a devotional frame.”⁷ From which words it is very clearly evident how much the Church’s singing can profit the minds of the hearers, if they be sung with sweet modulation, because Augustine himself testifies concerning himself, that he was moved to tears by the hymns of the Church.

Therefore since the not small utility of singing now appears, it is necessary that we confirm it with the authority of the Scriptures. The Royal Prophet says: “Sing to Him a new canticle, sing well unto Him with a loud noise” (Ps. 32, 3).

And lest Wycliffe be able by subterfuge to twist the passage to relating to mental prayer, he said, “sing well unto Him with a loud noise.”

Furthermore, when Christ was born, “There was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army, praising God, and saying: Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men of good will” (Lk. 2, 13-14).

Again, as Luke says, when Christ entered the city of Jerusalem, “They began with joy to praise God with a loud voice, for all the mighty works they had seen, saying: Blessed be the King who cometh in the name of the Lord, peace in heaven, and glory on high! And some of the Pharisees, from amongst the multitude, said to him: Master, rebuke thy disciples. To whom He said: I say to you, that if these shall hold their peace, the stones will cry out” (19, 37-40). From which words it is evident that the Wycliffites are similar to the Pharisees reprehending the disciples praising God aloud. Next, so that singing might be more approved, the Lord Himself deigned to sing with His disciples. For soon before His death, after the Last Supper “a hymn being said, they went out unto mount Olivet” (Mt. 26, 30).

Now so that it is may be more clearly perceived that this evidence supports us very much, it is necessary to state what a hymn is. The word ‘hymn’ is Greek, in Greek *ὕμνος*, and in Latin it is equivalent to both ‘canticle’ or ‘praise that is given to God.’ Hence Augustine in his exposition of the title of Psalm seventy-two says the following: “Hymns are praises of God accompanied with singing: hymns are songs containing the praise of God. If there be praise, and it be not of God, it is no hymn: if there be praise, and God’s praise, and it be not sung, it is no hymn. It must needs then, if it be a hymn, have these three things, both praise, and that of God, and singing.”⁸

⁷ N. 49-50 (PL 32, 799).

⁸ *Expositions on the Psalms*, n. 1 (PL 36, 914).

Isidore [of Seville] subscribes to the same opinion, who in his *Etymologies* says the following: “A hymn (*hymnus*) is the song of those giving praise (*laudare*), whence it is translated from the Greek as “praise” (*laus*) in Latin, being a song of joy and praise. Properly, then, hymns contain praise of God. Therefore if it is praise, but not of God, it is not a hymn; if it is both praise and praise of God, but it is not sung, it is not a hymn.”⁹ If then according to Matthew and Mark Christ said a hymn with His disciples, therefore He sung. And the action of Paul and Silas confirms this opinion, who when put in prison, were praising God aloud. For so it is said: “And at midnight, Paul and Silas praying, praised God. And they that were in prison, heard them. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and the bands of all were loosed.” (Acts 16, 25-26). If, therefore, it is not permitted to pray loudly and aloud and with singing, why were so many miracles done upon the loud prayer of Paul and Silas?

Finally, the practice of the whole Church confirms this Catholic opinion, not a new one, but one kept from the very beginning of the Church until our times. And so that I may omit other testimonies, I will cite one, more efficacious than the others, which was uttered by a stranger and enemy of our religion. For Pliny the Younger, when speaking in a letter to Trajan concerning the then nascent Christians, says: “They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god.”¹⁰

And so that we may further confirm the matter, we will cite another testimony also of a foreigner, but highly acclaimed. For the Jew Philo, who lived during the time of the Apostles and bordering upon the time of Christ, most clearly bears witness concerning the hymns of Christians. For Eusebius of Caesarea when relating how the Jew Philo described all the beginnings of the Ecclesiastical institution and the origin of the Apostolic tradition: he says that he told this fact concerning the Christians, namely that when one of all them rose in their midst, he sang a Psalm regularly in time, and to the one intoning a verse the whole assembly responds.¹¹

Next Socrates Scholasticus¹² relates whence originated the antiphons and responsories sung in the Church, saying the following: “Ignatius third bishop of Antioch in Syria from the Apostle Peter, who also had communication with the Apostles themselves, saw a vision of Angels praising in alternate chants the Holy Trinity. Accordingly, he introduced the mode of singing he had observed in the vision into the Antiochian church; whence it was transmitted by tradition to all the other churches. Such is the account [we have received] in relation to these responsive hymns.”¹³

After these very clear testimonies by which we have proved that the ungodly Wycliffe has erred, there exists a definition of the Church concerning this matter; For the Council of Agde¹⁴ defined the following: “And since it is suitable that the order of the Church be observed by all, it is decreed (as it is everywhere the practice) that after the antiphons collects be said by the bishops or

⁹ Bk. 6, c. 19 (PL 82, 253B-C).

¹⁰ Pliny the Younger, *Letters to the Emperor Trajan*, bk. 10, n. 96.

¹¹ *Ecclesiastical History*, bk. 2, c. 17, n. 22.

¹² Socrates Scholasticus was a historian of the Early Church, born at Constantinople towards the end of the fourth century.

¹³ *Ecclesiastical History*, bk. 6, c. 8 (PG 67, 691A).

¹⁴ This council was held in 506 at Agatha or Agde in Languedoc, under the presidency of St. Caesarius of Arles.

presbyters, and let the morning or evening hymns be sung every day; and at the conclusion of Matins or Vespers, after the hymns, let lesser sections from the Psalms be read; and in the evening let the congregation be dismissed with prayer and benediction by the bishop.”¹⁵ In which words it is clearly commanded that hymns be sung every day

But let us now see by what argument they attempt to support their opinion, so that we may reply to it. For they say the following: Christ forbade praying aloud and singing, when He also forbade public prayer, by commanding that everyone pray in secret. For in Matthew’s Gospel He says the following: “But thou when thou shalt pray, enter into thy chamber, and having shut the door, pray to thy Father in secret: and thy Father Who seeth in secret will repay thee” (Mt. 6, 6). To which objection we reply that Christ does not forbid the action but the intention. For He does not forbid praying in public, but He forbids that one pray with this intention and this motive, that he be seen by others.

Now this is inferred from the preceding words of Christ Himself. Indeed, the preceding and following words show the true literal meaning. Now the preceding words of Christ are these: “And when ye pray, you shall not be as the hypocrites, that love to stand and pray in the synagogues and corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men: Amen I say to you, they have received their reward” (v. 5). And He immediately adds: “But thou when thou shalt pray” etc. Now the preceding words forbid a bad intention, which is when one prays so that he be seen by men. Now in the words that follow He commands the good intention, namely that one pray with this intention alone, namely that one be seen by God. But if someone were to make public prayer with this intention, his intention is secret, that is to say, that it is done secretly, because he directs it to God alone, although the action was public. And in this he does well, nay it is often necessary that it be so done, because (as Blessed Augustine says¹⁶) if we did not have observers, we will also have no imitators. But if the one praying prefers to be seen by men, no matter how much he closes the door in the room in which he prays, still in Christ’s estimation he prays in public: because Christ pays more attention to the intention than to the deed. And the deed itself is never deemed good or bad, unless because it proceeds from a good or bad intention.¹⁷

Secondly they object using that which the Prophet Elias said to the prophets of Baal: “Cry with a louder voice: for he is a god, and perhaps he is talking, or is in an inn, or on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep, and must be awaked” (III Kings 18, 27). Wherefore John Wycliffe argues that it is not allowed to pray aloud, because (as he says) those praying in this manner are like the prophets of Baal who were reproached by Elias. We admit that the prophets of Baal were reprehended, or rather mocked by Elias, and yet not for this reason alone that they were shouting, but because when they were shouting they thought that God hears louder voices than quiet ones. Thus those who so believed shouted when praying, so that God might hear their voices more easily. Therefore, Elias mocking their error says: “Cry with a louder voice” etc. Not because he reprehends shouting, but he reprehends the error whereby they believe that God needs louder voices so that He can hear. Now he who prays with shouting and singing, believing that God equally hears low voices as well as others, nay, what is more, He hears the cries of the heart, this man so believing even if when

¹⁵ Canon 30.

¹⁶ *On the Sermon on the Mount*, bk. 2, c. 2-3, n. 7-11 (PL 34, 1272-1274).

¹⁷ Here the author speaks on the subjective level. For although an action may be objectively good or evil, still men will ultimately be judged according to their conscience regarding that deed.

praying cries out from a certain fervent and impatient desire, does not err. For we have shown above that Christ prayed aloud, and He approved of the children crying out. In this way Christ reprehends prolixity of words in prayer, not simply and absolutely, but as the heathens do. For so He says: “And when you are praying, speak not much, as the heathens. For they think that in their much speaking they may be heard” (Mt. 6, 7).

Augustine, when expounding these words, says: “And in reality, every kind of much speaking comes from the Gentiles, who make it their endeavor to exercise the tongue rather than to cleanse the heart. And this kind of useless exertion they endeavor to transfer even to the influencing of God by prayer, supposing that the Judge, just like man, is brought over by words to a certain way of thinking. ‘Be not you therefore like to them,’ says the only true Master.”¹⁸ Therefore, by those words Christ does not absolutely forbid much speaking and lengthy prayers: because He prayed long and longer. But He forbids much speaking in prayer as the heathens do, who think that in much speaking they may be heard, that is, He forbade that we believe that God will be more influenced by our speaking much rather than by greater fervor of soul.

Brother Thomas Netter wrote at sufficient length and abundantly against this error in his book, *De Sacramentalibus*,¹⁹ from which I admit that I have taken some things, and also abridged many things.

¹⁸ The author attributes these words to Rabanus Maurus, who indeed writes them in his *Commentarium in Matthaeum*, c. 6 (PL 107, 816D-817A), but he is merely quoting Saint Augustine in his *On the Sermon on the Mount*, Book 2, c. 3, n. 12 (PL 34, 1274). Hence Saint Augustine’s name has been substituted here.

¹⁹ Title 2.