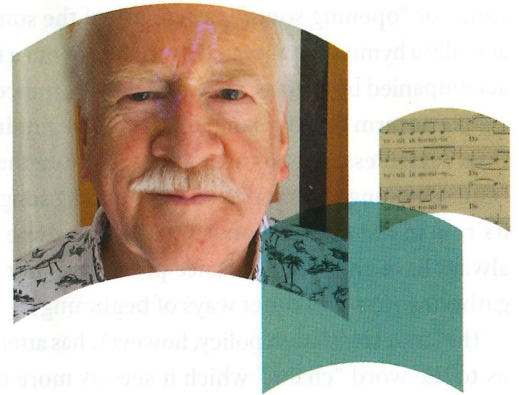


Paul Inwood



To Chant or Not to Chant?

THERE HAS BEEN A LOT OF talk in recent times about chant and chants. In parishes, some places have converted from singing hymns to singing “chants.” For some people, the only authentic musical expression to be used in Roman Catholic liturgy is Gregorian chant. Both of these mindsets tend to envision a particular form and style of singing. But if we take a step back, we may find that all is not quite as people might think.

WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY “CHANT”?

Let’s start off by noticing the fact that the Latin word *cantus* is notoriously difficult to translate adequately, certainly in English. In the wake of the instruction *Liturgiam authenticam* of 2001, our liturgical books have appeared to be somewhat obsessed with an overly literalist fidelity to the Latin text. They usually translate the Latin word *cantus* as “chant.” A few significant problems arise from using this word.

First, it can often imply a particular style of unmeasured singing: Gregorian chant, Ambrosian chant, Jewish synagogue chant, and so on. We think of something not only irregular in meter but with verbal accents and musical accents often not combining but existing in a tension. All this gives to this kind of chant a particular otherworldly atmosphere, which is why it is often considered appropriate for liturgy.

Second, the word “chant” can also imply a particular technique of singing. For example, the Gregorian chant *tonus in directum* is a simple melodic formula onto which you can graft any text you like, within reason. Gregorian psalm tones themselves are a more elaborate way of doing the same thing. They often have an *incipit* or beginning, a reciting note, and a termination. Anglican chant is another type of tone formula with a clearly defined rhythm, making use of four-part harmony. It, too, has a reciting note and a termination.

In all these cases, we talk about “chanting” a text, meaning a way of suspending the words under the music, rather like diapers

on a washing line. Chant in this sense is a vehicle or a mechanism for conveying the text. When we talk about chanting a text, what we often mean is fitting the words to a tone.

Third, for Roman Catholics, the word “chant” often implies unaccompanied monodic singing, as opposed to polyphony or accompanied figured music.

But *cantus*, while it can mean all those things, does not necessarily mean “chant” at all. What it actually means is “something sung,” from the Latin *cantare*, to sing. In English, there is another word used to describe something that is sung: that word is “song.” The Latin for “song” is in fact *cantus*.

At this point some may protest that there are other Latin words, such as *canticum* (from which we get the word “cantic”), *cantio* (just an alternative for *cantus*), or *carmen* (which refers to a song with a poetic strophic text). While this is true, there is no getting away from the fact that *cantus* means “something sung” or even just plain “singing.”

For some people the word “song” is itself problematic. It may have resonances of art song or *lieder*, or of the secular world, such as the French *chanson*. And mentioning this can remind us that other languages have the same translation problem when it comes to *cantus*—it’s not just an Anglophone issue.

THE HISTORY OF CHANT

Before Vatican II, we used to talk about the introit or entrance chant. That continued in the years immediately following the council, but then there was a move away from those terms. Today, the word “introit” is normally reserved for a Gregorian chant setting of an antiphon and psalm verse, though occasionally people refer to a “choral introit”—for example, if they are using a polyphonic setting.

Instead of “introit” or “entrance chant,” we initially used the term “entrance hymn,” especially as what we tended to sing was often hymnic in form. Rapidly this morphed into “entrance

song” or “opening song,” particularly if the sung item was not actually a hymn accompanied by the organ but a freer song-form accompanied by guitars. Quite quickly “entrance song” became a generic term for this sung item at the beginning of a celebration, regardless of its style or idiom. In more than a few places, “entrance song” was replaced by “opening song,” emphasizing its role in the celebration (especially as some places did not always have an actual entrance procession but moved toward gathering rites and other ways of beginning).

The latest translation policy, however, has attempted to return us to the word “chant,” which it sees as more dignified, more traditional, more church-y. “Chant” may be a useful shorthand term, but if we use it, it’s important for pastoral musicians to know that our liturgical books currently use a translation of the word *cantus* that does not accurately reflect the meaning of the Latin word.

So when the Roman Missal talks about the “entrance chant” (GIRM 43, 47, 50, etc.), it doesn’t mean an actual chant or a piece of Gregorian plainsong. The Latin is *cantus ad introitum*, which simply means “the thing sung at the entrance,” whatever that thing may be.

GIRM 62 talks about “the Alleluia or another chant.” Once again, the Latin is *Alleluia vel alius cantus*, in other words, “the Alleluia or whatever is sung in its place.” It does not mean that you have to sing something that is in chant style.

We often refer to the “chants between the readings” as another shorthand term to designate the Responsorial Psalm and the Gospel Acclamation, but this doesn’t presuppose that those items will necessarily be sung in chant style. On the other hand, we do use the term “ministerial chants” to indicate the things sung by the priest or minister, including the dialogues between priest and people, all frequently sung in a chant style.

IS ONE KIND OF CHANT MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANOTHER?

One of the banners that those who are in favor of actual chant frequently wave is a statement in *Sacrosanctum concilium* that at first sight appears to give Gregorian chant primacy over all other forms of liturgical singing. The statement in question runs: “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” (SC 116). This is echoed in GIRM 41: “The main place should be given, all things being equal, to Gregorian chant, as being proper to the Roman Liturgy.”

The question is, what exactly does the phrase “other things being equal” or “all things being equal” mean?

We find a significant aid to interpreting SC 116 in paragraph 50 of the instruction *Musicam sacram* of 1967, where this statement is once again made: “Gregorian chant, as proper to the Roman liturgy, should be given pride of place, other things being equal” (MS 50a). However, the key is the context. Section 50a is a subsection of paragraph 50, which begins, “In sung liturgical services

celebrated in Latin” followed by subsections (a), (b), and (c).

In other words, when you are celebrating in Latin, Gregorian chant should be given pride of place, but this does not hold good if you are not celebrating in Latin.

Just to be clear, I am no enemy of Gregorian chant. I grew up with it and love it. It is a vital part of our heritage as Roman Catholics. Nevertheless, it evolved in the context of a different kind of liturgy from the one which generally obtains today. Then, liturgy was largely non-participatory, in Latin; today, it is or should be highly participatory and frequently in the vernacular.

Because Gregorian chant is part of our tribal identity as Roman Catholics, this means that we need to use it more carefully. We can’t assume that God will be glorified by “dropping chant into every liturgical slot.” Indeed, in today’s context, where so many different backgrounds and ethnicities come together to celebrate, there is a strong argument in favor of stylistically “mixed grill” types of liturgies that do not have a uniform style of musical content but where many different and varied idioms combine to make a many-faceted whole. This would mean that you might well find that there are some things in a celebration that you don’t much care for. However, the other, positive side of that coin is that, no matter what an individual’s tastes, background, and expectations may be, everyone ought to be able to find *something* in a celebration with which she or he can identify.

So we can certainly continue to use Gregorian chant in our liturgies, but perhaps more sparingly, and more tellingly, than in preconciliar days. Rather than a panacea for all our liturgical ills, it becomes one valuable resource among many upon which we can draw as we prepare our celebrations.

One brief example: for the procession to the altar of repose at the end of the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord’s Supper, we could use the traditional *Pange, lingua* chant melody, still well known by many people, either with its original Latin text or perhaps with an up-to-date vernacular translation such as the English one by James Quinn, SJ, or perhaps the two in alternation. We could do this even if there was no other Gregorian chant in the entire celebration.

By using chant in this way, we can remain joined to our roots while at the same time moving onward in our mission to take Christ to the world. ■

PAUL INWOOD is an internationally known liturgist, composer, organist, author, and speaker. His work appears in Roman Catholic and other repertoires across the English-speaking world and beyond. He was named NPM Pastoral Musician of the Year in 2009 and Distinguished Catholic Music Composer of the Year by the Association of Catholic Publishers in 2022, and he was the winner of the Vatican competition for the official Hymn for the Holy Year of Mercy in 2015.