

What are the Church's Teachings on Sacred Music?

Sacred music is “that which, being created for the celebration of divine worship, is endowed with a certain holy sincerity of form,” according to the Sacred Congregation of Rites in its Instruction on Music and the Liturgy, *Musicae Sacram* (1967, ¶4). As defined by the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), sacred music surpasses merely religious music when it is joined to the liturgical rite to become “a necessary and integral part of the solemn liturgy,” whose purpose is “the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful” (¶112).

“As a manifestation of the human spirit,” said John Paul II in 1989, “music performs a function which is noble, unique, and irreplaceable. When it is truly beautiful and inspired, it speaks to us more than all the other arts of goodness, virtue, peace, of matters holy and divine. Not for nothing has it always been, and will it always be, an essential part of the liturgy.”

Sacred music “elevates the spirit precisely by wedding it to the senses, and it elevates the senses by uniting them with the spirit” (Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 150).

“Not all musical forms can be considered suitable for liturgical celebrations,” says Pope John Paul II in his Chirograph on sacred music (2003). He quotes Pope Paul VI: “If music — instrumental and vocal — does not possess at the same time the sense of prayer, dignity, and beauty, entry into the sphere of the sacred and the religious is [thereby] precluded.”

In his general audience of February 26, 2003, Pope John Paul called on musicians to “make an examination of conscience so that the beauty of music and hymnody will return once again to the liturgy. It is necessary to purify worship of ugliness of style, careless forms of expression, ill-prepared music and texts, which are not worthy of the great act that is being celebrated.”

Pope Benedict XVI agrees: “An authentic updating of sacred music can take place only in the lineage of the great tradition of the past, of Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony.”

Chant is the one music that we inherit from the ancient Church fathers. It is not a “style” but the music of the Mass itself. It is sung in unison, which makes it a perfect expression of unity. It illuminates and gives expressiveness to the sacred texts, but it does not alter them. It musically expresses the heart of the Church and thus exists across and outside time.

In his *Ad Limina* Address (October 1998), Pope John Paul II reminded U.S. bishops that “active participation does not preclude the active passivity of silence, stillness and listening: indeed, it demands it. Worshippers are not passive, for instance, when listening to the readings or the homily, or following the prayers of the celebrant, and the chants and music of the liturgy. These are experiences of silence and stillness, but they are in their own way profoundly active.”

A Church which only makes use of “utility” music has fallen for what is, in fact, useless. . . . For her mission is a far higher one. As the Old Testament speaks of the Temple, the Church is to be the place of “glory,” and as such, too, the place where mankind’s cry of distress is brought to the ear of God. The Church must not settle down with what is merely comfortable and serviceable at the parish level, she must arouse the voice of the cosmos and, by glorifying the Creator, elicit the glory of the cosmos itself, making it also glorious, beautiful, habitable, and beloved. - Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “On the Theological Basis of Church Music,” in *The Feast of Faith*, (1986, p. 124)

“When the Holy Father, Pope Francis, asked me to accept the ministry of Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, I asked: “Your Holiness, how do you want me to exercise this ministry?” The Holy Father’s reply was clear. “I want you to continue to implement the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council,” he said “and I want you to continue the good work in the liturgy begun by Pope Benedict XVI.” - Robert Cardinal Sara of Nigeria, Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 2015

Paul VI's request for the universal Church to learn basic chants:

In April 1974 Pope Paul VI sent to every bishop in the world a booklet of some of the simplest selections of Gregorian Chant, much of it drawn from the Graduale Romanum. This booklet, called *Jubilate Deo*, was intended as a “minimum repertoire of Gregorian chant”. It is, in other words, an official Latin “core repertoire” for the Roman Rite. It was prepared, the Pope said, in order “to make it easier for Christians to achieve unity and spiritual harmony with their brothers and with the living tradition of the past. Hence it is that those who are trying to improve the quality of congregational singing cannot refuse Gregorian chant the place which is due to it” (*Voluntati Obsequens*).

From the document:

“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 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. 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.**” (*Voluntati Obsequens*)

Further Reading - Church documents that deal with sacred music:

Sacrosanctum Concilium
The General Instruction on the Roman Missal
Musicam Sacram
John Paul II’s Chirograph on Sacred Music
Pius X’s *Tra le sollecitudini*