

THE PROPERS OF THE MASS: CHANTS BETWEEN THE READINGS THE GRADUAL, TRACT, ALLELUIA, AND SEQUENCE



Catholics today are accustomed to hearing the **Responsorial Psalm** and the **Gospel Acclamation** (*Alleluia* or *Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ*) sung during the Liturgy of the Word. These were instituted by the Second Vatican Council to foster meditation on the Word of God. Since the early centuries of the Church, however, sung propers known as the *Gradual*, the *Alleluia* or *Tract*, and the *Sequence* were chanted between the readings, and these ancient chants may still be sung in the modern form of the Roman rite today. What distinguishes these from the others we have introduced (the Introit, Offertory, and Communion Chants), is that instead of accompanying other actions, these sung propers are themselves the liturgical action.

What are the Gradual, Tract, Alleluia, and Sequence? Recall that the **sung propers of the Mass** are certain Scriptural texts, besides the readings, that are prescribed in the Church's official song book, the *Graduale Romanum*, for various parts of each Mass, particular to the day and occasion being celebrated. In the modern form of the Mass, the **Gradual** is assigned as a traditional option to be sung after the First Reading as an alternative to the Responsorial Psalm. During Lent, the **Tract** may be sung between the Second Reading and the Gospel as the traditional alternative to the Gospel Acclamation ("Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ"). Outside of Lent, the ancient **Alleluia** is a florid chant that is traditionally sung before the Gospel. During Eastertide, in place of the Gradual and one Alleluia, two different Alleluias are sung between the readings. The **Sequence** is a hymn that expresses devotion on a particular holy day. These occasions include the Octave of Easter, Pentecost, and Corpus Christi. It is sung between the Second Reading and the Gospel.

The most authentic setting of each Gradual, Alleluia, Tract, and Sequence is its ancient Gregorian chant melody in Latin, contained in the *Graduale Romanum*. Of all the propers, the Gradual, Tract, and Alleluia are the most *melismatic* (having many notes sung on the same word syllable for decoration) and are regarded the most difficult to master. Composers have also written beautiful polyphonic expressions of these propers in Latin, as well arrangements in the vernacular. Because these sung propers are difficult to learn and are different for each Mass, they are assigned to the *schola cantorum* (the skilled choir). Like typical hymns, the Sequence is generally *syllabic* (having one note sung for each word syllable) and has a repeated melody, and some congregations are eventually able to sing it together.



Why sing the ancient Gradual, Alleluia, Tract, and Sequence today? In their ancient melodies (and polyphonic extensions of those melodies), the contemplative Gradual, the penitential Tract, and the joyful Alleluia are quite elaborate and inspire a sense of focused contemplation in the listener, thus fostering the recollection on the Word of God encouraged by Vatican II. As Pope St. John Paul II stated:

Liturgical music must meet the specific prerequisites of the liturgy: full adherence to the text it presents, synchronization with the time and moment in the liturgy for which it is intended, appropriately reflecting the gestures proposed by the rite. The various moments in the liturgy require a musical expression of their own. From time to time this must fittingly bring out the nature proper to a specific rite, now proclaiming God's marvels, now expressing praise, supplication, or even sorrow for the experience of human suffering which, however, faith opens to the prospect of Christian hope. – Pope St. John Paul II (Nov. 22, 2003)

Do these propers sung by the choir conflict with Vatican II's call to active participation?

Active participation certainly means that, in gesture, word, song and service, all the members of the community take part in an act of worship, which is anything but inert or passive. Yet active participation does not preclude the active passivity of silence, stillness, and listening; indeed it demands it. Worshipers 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. In a culture which neither favors nor fosters meditative quiet, the art of interior listening is learned only with difficulty. Here we see how the liturgy, though it must always be properly inculturated, must also be counter-cultural.

– Pope St. John Paul II (Oct. 9, 1998)

Will we hear the Gradual, Tract, Alleluia, and Sequence at the basilica? These propers between the readings are always sung at a high Mass in the ancient form of the Roman rite. We continue to sing the Responsorial Psalm and Gospel Acclamation regularly at our Ordinary Form Masses. But from time to time we will highlight the ancient Gradual, Tract, and Alleluia as an expression of our Joy of Tradition at the Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul. During this Holy Week, a polyphonic setting of the Gradual will be sung on Good Friday and the ancient Gregorian Alleluia will be sung on Easter Sunday at the 11:30 Mass. The Sequence will be chanted in its ancient language on Easter Sunday, Pentecost, and Corpus Christi. All are encouraged to follow the translations in the missal and meditate upon the Scriptures and prayers being sung.

Our next issue will discuss the role of the organ in sacred music.

References

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