

WHY SING GREGORIAN CHANT?



Chant is a living connection with our forebears in the faith, the traditional music of the Roman rite, a sign of communion with the universal Church, a bond of unity across cultures, a means for diverse communities to participate together in song, and a summons to contemplative participation in the Liturgy.

Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship, USCCB (2007)

What is Gregorian chant? Gregorian chant is essentially the music of the Roman Catholic liturgy: the sung Scriptures and prayers of the Mass and the Divine Office. Pope St. Gregory the Great was responsible for organizing the liturgy in the 6th century. He is often depicted with the dove as a symbol of the Holy Spirit's inspiration. Contrary to legend, St. Gregory did not compose all the chants himself, but he was inspired to formally codify the music of the Mass that had been sung since the early years of the Church. This music remains a timeless component of the Church's tradition and is traditionally sung in Latin, the Church's universal language.

How does Gregorian chant differ from other music? Whereas metered songs such as hymns written in 4/4 time are suited to poetic text, chant rhythm is free-flowing and well-suited to the prose of Scripture and prayers. The Gregorian chant melodies we sing today have developed over the Church's whole history, each age adding its innovation. The melodies are based on eight *modes*, or scale patterns, offering more variety than the two *tonal* scale patterns (major and minor) on which modern music is based. Ancient chant melodies sound Medieval and mysterious. More recently composed chants, such as the hymn, *Adoro te devote*, or the Ordinary, *Missa de Angelis*, sound more classical. Still today, the Church's chant treasury expands as composers set English translations to new melodies that reflect the spirit and tradition of historic Gregorian chant.

Is Gregorian chant only for Latin scholars? Have you ever chanted the *Our Father* or acclaimed the "Alleluia" *a capella* before the Gospel is read? These are instances of Gregorian chant that are familiar to most Catholics, and they don't require a degree in Latin. When the priest sings the parts of the Mass as written in the Missal, he is singing Gregorian chant also. While much of the treasury of Gregorian chant requires effort and skill to master, the chants of the Mass that are assigned to the congregation, i.e., the **sung Ordinary** and the people's responses in dialog with the priest, are not generally vocally challenging. The more difficult parts, particularly the **sung Propers**, are intended to be prepared by the *schola cantorum* ("school of singers").

Among the faithful, the schola cantorum or choir exercises its own liturgical function, its place being to take care that the parts proper to it, in keeping with the different genres of chant, are properly carried out and to foster the active participation of the faithful by means of singing. . . . – GIRM #108



How important is Gregorian chant to Roman Catholics today? Throughout its history, the Church has upheld Gregorian chant as sacred and precious. Vatican II affirmed its status thus:

112. The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as sacred song united to the words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy.

116. 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. . . .

Sacrosanctum Concilium (“Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” of Vatican II, 1963)

Recent popes, including Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, reaffirmed these teachings. In 1974, Pope Paul VI published a booklet, *Jubilate Deo*, containing a set of chants he encouraged all Catholics to learn as a minimum. The basilica’s own *Jubilate Deo Youth Schola* was named after this song set, which is a key part of their curriculum.

Is Gregorian chant significant outside of the Church? Gregorian chant has made an important contribution to Western culture as the paramount music of the first millennium. Students of Western music look back to Gregorian chant and study how it led to the development of Renaissance polyphony and subsequent musical forms.¹ Interestingly, the Medieval theorist, Guido d’Arezzo, who developed the Gregorian musical staff and notation, also designed the modern musical staff we use today.

With our Joy of Tradition initiative at the Basilica of Saints Peter of Paul, we are taking steps to restore the pride of place due to Gregorian chant. The celebrant chants his parts. The people chant the responses and the Ordinary in the Church’s transcendent melodies. Our youth and adult scholae cantorum study Gregorian chant and develop skills to sing it in both forms of the Roman rite. At most of our Masses, one of the Propers is chanted in Latin to its ancient melody. At our ancient form sung Masses, you can hear the full spectrum of Gregorian chant genres. At all our Masses, translations are available for you to actively follow and meditate on the sung Scriptures and prayers of our beautiful liturgical tradition.

Our next issue will discuss sacred polyphony as another form of music sanctioned for Catholic worship.

References

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¹ “Gregorian Chant as a Fundamentum of Western Culture,” *Sacred Music* 102, no. 1 (1975), William Peter Mahrt

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