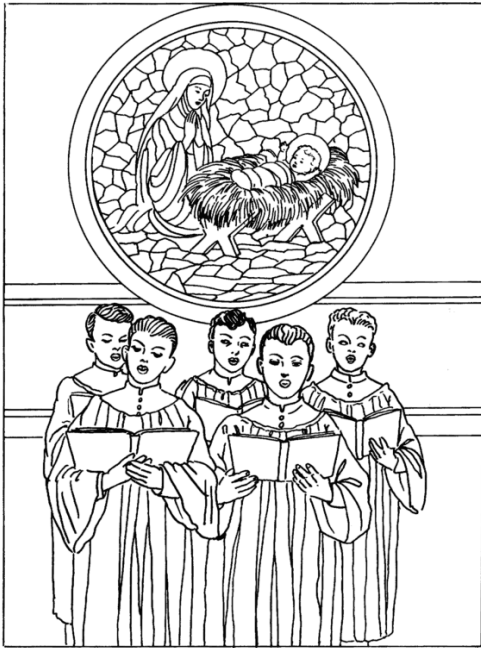


## WHAT MAKES MUSIC SACRED?



MUSIC IS CAPABLE OF OPENING OUR MINDS AND HEARTS TO THE DIMENSION OF THE SPIRIT AND OF LEADING PERSONS TO RAISE THEIR GAZE ON HIGH, TO BE OPEN TO ABSOLUTE GOODNESS AND BEAUTY, WHICH HAVE THEIR ULTIMATE SOURCE IN GOD.

### POPE EMERITUS BENEDICT XVI

The Church teaches that the liturgy is primarily the action of God working through His people, teaching us how to adore Him and offer Him fitting praise. The phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi* means the law of *how we worship* influences or rules the law of *what we believe*. And so the words of our worship and the way we worship, prescribed by the Church, are essential to teach us to be better Catholics.

In the coming weeks we will highlight different aspects of sacred music in the liturgy, explaining what the Church teaches and how we at the Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul seek to embrace the Joy of Tradition in sacred music.

**What is sacred music?** Pope Pius X explained that in order for something to be sacred, it must possess the three qualities of holiness, beauty of form, and universality. Would you expect to see beautiful priestly vestments worn by anyone other than an ordained priest? Would you expect to hear Latin recited or chanted on a popular music radio station? Where would you go to hear the pipe organ? . . . All these things are set aside for the Church and thus are sacred.

**What music is best suited to worship?** Although many different types of music can be enjoyed as a matter of personal taste, only certain types are regarded universally as holy, belonging to the Church. Unequivocally, the Church makes it clear that Gregorian chant should have “pride of place” in the liturgy. The Church also highly esteems sacred polyphony as having a unique character suited to worship and commends the pipe organ as the instrument of choice. In future issues, we will explore these types of sacred music.

**Isn't this kind of music old and outdated? Isn't it out of touch with today's society?** Certainly some of it is very old, but so is Sacred Scripture! No faithful Catholic would argue that the Bible is no longer relevant in today's society and discard it for a more modern text. The antiquity of the Church's musical



tradition assures us of a continuity of thought, of prayer, and of belief. Our sacred language, Latin, does the same. It preserves for us the one true faith and safeguards it for all generations.

**Does this mean that all the music we hear at Mass should be old and in Latin?** Absolutely not. The Church holds up Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony as the ideal, but she encourages new compositions in keeping with these traditions.

**But chant is so slow and boring . . .** No, chant isn't, but maybe sometimes the people singing it are! Chant is like giving wings to words. It is prayer, like incense wafting heavenward with no earthbound attachment to rhythm or meter. Chant is the best way to deliver a message. Go to any sporting event and you will hear chants aplenty being delivered by fans of opposing teams. When there is a message as important as the words of Sacred Scripture, chanting it calls attention to it. It declares with a melody, "These words are important!" Chant moves us out of the domain of the secular and into the realm of the divine.

**Does it have to be in Latin? I don't understand Latin, and I don't like what I don't understand.** Most of us feel similarly toward anything we don't understand, but Latin serves a higher purpose. It preserves Truth because the Latin language is a sacred language and not a spoken language. This means it's not going to change over time. We can all think of words in English that have come to mean something entirely different within our own lifetimes. Have you ever heard the phrase "lost in translation?" That's what happens when something that is firmly fixed in one language can't completely be expressed in another. One example of this occurs when we read the psalms in English rather than the original Hebrew. There is poetry and word-play in the Hebrew that is simply lost in an English translation. It's easy to conclude that the original language gives the fullest expression of the text and therefore is unique and special. Still, this does not preclude us from chanting in our native tongue. Certainly, as we have seen with the most recent edition of the Roman Missal, when translation is done carefully, a Latin text can be beautifully rendered in English. So chanting the Mass parts in English is one way to demonstrate obedience and show our respect for the beauty and truth inherent in these rich texts.

**Where can I read about the norms and rubrics of sacred music?** You can start by reading The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) either in book form or online:

<http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/general-instruction-of-the-roman-missal/>

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In the next issue we will begin introducing some of the norms and rubrics for sacred music and how those relate to what many Catholics have experienced at Mass in recent history.