

## “CANTATE DOMINO CANTICUM NOVUM”

### A Statement on the Current Situation of Sacred Music

We, the undersigned—musicians, pastors, teachers, scholars, and lovers of sacred music—humbly offer to the Catholic community around the world this statement, expressing our great love for the Church’s treasury of sacred music and our deep concerns about its current plight.

#### Introduction

*Cantate Domino canticum novum, cantate Domino omnis terra* (Psalm 96): this singing to God’s glory has resonated for the whole history of Christianity, from the very beginning to the present day. Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition alike bear witness to a great love for the beauty and power of music in the worship of Almighty God. The treasury of sacred music has always been cherished in the Catholic Church by her saints, theologians, popes, and laypeople.

Such love and practice of music is witnessed to throughout Christian literature and in the many documents that the Popes have devoted to sacred music, from John XXII’s *Docta Sanctorum Patrum* (1324) and Benedict XIV’s *Annus Qui* (1749) down to Saint Pius X’s *Motu Proprio Tra le Sollecitudini* (1903), Pius XII’s *Musicae Sacrae Disciplina* (1955), Saint John Paul II’s *Chirograph on Sacred Music* (2003), and so on. This vast amount of documentation impels us to take with utter seriousness the importance and the role of music in the liturgy. This importance is related to the deep connection between the liturgy and its music, a connection that goes two ways: a good liturgy allows for splendid music, but a low standard of liturgical music also tremendously affects the liturgy. Nor can the ecumenical importance of music be forgotten, when we know that other Christian traditions—such as Anglicans, Lutherans, and the Eastern Orthodox—have high esteem for the importance and dignity of sacred music, as witnessed by their own jealously-guarded “treasuries.”

We are observing an important milestone, the fiftieth anniversary of the promulgation of the Instruction on Music in the Liturgy, *Musicam Sacram*, on March 5, 1967, under the pontificate of Blessed Paul VI. Re-reading the document today, we cannot avoid thinking of the *via dolorosa* of sacred music in the decades following *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Indeed, what was happening in some factions of the Church at that time (1967) was not at all in line with *Sacrosanctum Concilium* or with *Musicam Sacram*. Certain ideas that were never present in the Council’s documents were forced into practice, sometimes with a lack of vigilance from clergy and ecclesiastical hierarchy. In some countries the treasury of sacred music that the Council asked to be preserved was not only not preserved, but even opposed. And this quite against the Council, which clearly stated:

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. Holy Scripture, indeed, has bestowed praise upon sacred song, and the same may be said of the fathers of the Church and of the Roman pontiffs who in recent times, led by St. Pius X, have explained more precisely the ministerial function supplied by sacred music in the service of the Lord. Therefore sacred music is to be considered the more holy in proportion as it is more closely connected with the liturgical action, whether it adds delight to prayer, fosters unity of minds, or confers greater solemnity upon

the sacred rites. But the Church approves of all forms of true art having the needed qualities, and admits them into divine worship. (SC 112)

### **The Current Situation**

In light of the mind of the Church so frequently expressed, we cannot avoid being concerned about the current situation of sacred music, which is nothing short of desperate, with abuses in the area of sacred music now almost the norm rather than the exception. We shall summarize here some of the elements that contribute to the present deplorable situation of sacred music and of the liturgy.

1. There has been a loss of understanding of the “musical shape of the liturgy,” that is, that music is an inherent part of the very essence of liturgy as public, formal, solemn worship of God. We are not merely to sing *at* Mass, but to *sing the Mass*. Hence, as *Musicam Sacram* itself reminded us, the priest’s parts should be chanted to the tones given in the Missal, with the people making the responses; the singing of the Ordinary of the Mass in Gregorian chant or music inspired by it should be encouraged; and the Propers of the Mass, too, should be given the pride of place that befits their historical prominence, their liturgical function, and their theological depth. Similar points apply to the singing of the Divine Office. It is an exhibition of the vice of “liturgical sloth” to refuse to sing the liturgy, to use “utility music” rather than sacred music, to refuse to educate oneself or others about the Church’s tradition and wishes, and to put little or no effort and resources into the building up of a sacred music program.

2. This loss of liturgical and theological understanding goes hand-in-hand with an embrace of secularism. The secularism of popular musical styles has contributed to a desacralization of the liturgy, while the secularism of profit-based commercialism has reinforced the imposition of mediocre collections of music upon parishes. It has encouraged an anthropocentrism in the liturgy that undermines its very nature. In vast sectors of the Church nowadays there is an incorrect relationship with culture, which can be seen as a “web of connections.” With the actual situation of our liturgical music (and of the liturgy itself, because the two are intertwined), we have broken this web of connection with our past and tried to connect with a future that has no meaning without its past. Today, the Church is not actively using her cultural riches to evangelize, but is mostly used by a prevalent secular culture, born in opposition to Christianity, which destabilizes the sense of adoration that is at the heart of the Christian faith.

Pope Francis, in his homily for the feast of Corpus Christi on June 4, 2015, has spoken of “the Church’s amazement at this reality [of the Most Holy Eucharist]. . . An astonishment which always feeds contemplation, adoration, and memory.” In many of our Churches around the world, where is this sense of contemplation, this adoration, this astonishment for the mystery of the Eucharist? It is lost because we are living a sort of spiritual Alzheimer’s, a disease that is taking our spiritual, theological, artistic, musical and cultural memories away from us. It has been said that we need to bring the culture of every people into the liturgy. This may be right if correctly understood, but not in the sense that the liturgy (and the music) becomes the place where we have to exalt a secular culture. It is the place where the culture, every culture, is brought to another level and purified.

3. There are groups in the Church that push for a “renewal” that does not reflect Church teaching but rather serves their own agenda, worldview, and interests. These groups have members in key leadership positions from which they put into practice their plans, their idea of culture, and the way we have to deal with contemporary issues. In some countries powerful lobbies have contributed to the *de facto* replacement of liturgical repertoires faithful to the directives of Vatican II with low-quality repertoires. Thus, we end up with repertoires of new liturgical music of very low standards as regards both the text

and the music. This is understandable when we reflect that nothing of lasting worth can come from a lack of training and expertise, especially when people neglect the wise precepts of Church tradition:

On these grounds Gregorian Chant has always been regarded as the supreme model for sacred music, so that it is fully legitimate to lay down the following rule: the more closely a composition for church approaches in its movement, inspiration and savor the Gregorian form, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes; and the more out of harmony it is with that supreme model, the less worthy it is of the temple. (St. Pius X, *Motu Proprio Tra le Sollecitudini*)

Today this “supreme model” is often discarded, if not despised. The entire Magisterium of the Church has reminded us of the importance of adhering to this important model, not as way of limiting creativity but as a foundation on which inspiration can flourish. If we desire that people look for Jesus, we need to prepare the house with the best that the Church can offer. We will not invite people to our house, the Church, to give them a by-product of music and art, when they can find a much better pop music style outside the Church. Liturgy is a *limen*, a threshold that allows us to step from our daily existence to the worship of the angels: *Et ideo cum Angelis et Archángelis, cum Thronis et Dominationibus, cumque omni militiá cælestis exercitus, hymnum glóriæ tuæ cánimus, sine fine dicéntes...*

4. This disdain for Gregorian chant and traditional repertoires is one sign of a much bigger problem, that of disdain for Tradition. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* teaches that the musical and artistic heritage of the Church should be respected and cherished, because it is the embodiment of centuries of worship and prayer, and an expression of the highest peak of human creativity and spirituality. There was a time when the Church did not run after the latest fashion, but was the maker and arbiter of culture. The lack of commitment to tradition has put the Church and her liturgy on an uncertain and meandering path. The attempted separation of the teaching of Vatican II from previous Church teachings is a dead end, and the only way forward is the hermeneutic of continuity endorsed by Pope Benedict XVI. Recovering the unity, integrity, and harmony of Catholic teaching is the condition for restoring both the liturgy and its music to a noble condition. As Pope Francis taught us in his first encyclical: “Self-knowledge is only possible when we share in a greater memory” (*Lumen Fidei* 38).

5. Another cause of the decadence of sacred music is clericalism, the abuse of clerical position and status. Clergy who are often poorly educated in the great tradition of sacred music continue to make decisions about personnel and policies that contravene the authentic spirit of the liturgy and the renewal of sacred music repeatedly called for in our times. Often they contradict Vatican II teachings in the name of a supposed “spirit of the Council.” Moreover, especially in countries of ancient Christian heritage, members of the clergy have access to positions that are not available to laity, when there are lay musicians fully capable of offering an equal or superior professional service to the Church.

6. We also see the problem of inadequate (at times, unjust) remuneration of lay musicians. The importance of sacred music in the Catholic liturgy requires that at least some members of the Church in every place be well-educated, well-equipped, and dedicated to serve the People of God in this capacity. Is it not true that we should give to God our best? No one would be surprised or disturbed knowing that doctors need a salary to survive, no one would accept medical treatment from untrained volunteers; priests have their salaries, because they cannot live if they do not eat, and if they do not eat, they will not be able to prepare themselves in theological sciences or to say the Mass with dignity. If we pay florists

and cooks who help at parishes, why does it seem so strange that those performing musical activities for the Church would have a right to fair compensation?<sup>1</sup>

### **Positive Proposals**

It may seem that what we have said is pessimistic, but we maintain the hope that there is a way out of this winter. The following proposals are offered *in spiritu humilitatis*, with the intention of restoring the dignity of the liturgy and of its music in the Church.

1. As musicians, pastors, scholars, and Catholics who love Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony, so frequently praised and recommended by the Magisterium, we ask for a re-affirmation of this heritage alongside modern sacred compositions in Latin or vernacular languages that take their inspiration from this great tradition; and we ask for concrete steps to promote it everywhere, in every church across the globe, so that all Catholics can sing the praises of God with one voice, one mind and heart, one common culture that transcends all their differences. We also ask for a re-affirmation of the unique importance of the pipe organ for the sacred liturgy, because of its singular capacity to elevate hearts to the Lord and its perfect suitability for supporting the singing of choirs and congregations.

2. It is necessary that the education to good taste in music and liturgy start with children. Often educators without musical training believe that children cannot appreciate the beauty of true art. This is far from the truth. Using a pedagogy that will help them approach the beauty of the liturgy, children will be formed in a way that will fortify their strength, because they will be offered nourishing spiritual bread and not the apparently tasty but unhealthy food of industrial origin (as when “Masses for children” feature pop-inspired music). We notice through personal experience that when children are exposed to these repertoires they come to appreciate them and develop a deeper connection with the Church.

3. If children are to appreciate the beauty of music and art, if they are to understand the importance of the liturgy as *fons et culmen* of the life of the Church, we must have a strong laity who will follow the Magisterium. We need to give space to well-trained laity in areas that have to do with art and with music. To be able to serve as a competent liturgical musician or educator requires years of study. This “professional” status must be recognized, respected, and promoted in practical ways. In connection with this point, we sincerely hope that the Church will continue to work against obvious and subtle forms of clericalism, so that laity can make their full contribution in areas where ordination is not a requirement.

4. Higher standards for musical repertoire and skill should be insisted on for cathedrals and basilicas. Bishops in every diocese should hire at least a professional music director and/or an organist who would follow clear directions on how to foster excellent liturgical music in that cathedral or basilica and who would offer a shining example of combining works of the great tradition with appropriate new compositions. We think that a sound principle for this is contained in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 23: “There must be no innovations unless the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires them; and care must be taken that any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing” (SC 23).

5. We suggest that in every basilica and cathedral there be the encouragement of a weekly Mass celebrated in Latin (in either Form of the Roman Rite) so as to maintain the link we have with our liturgical, cultural, artistic, and theological heritage. The fact that many young people today are

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<sup>1</sup> See Canon 231.

rediscovering the beauty of Latin in the liturgy is surely a sign of the times, and prompts us to bury the battles of the past and seek a more “catholic” approach that draws upon *all* the centuries of Catholic worship. With the easy availability of books, booklets, and online resources, it will not be difficult to facilitate the active participation of those who wish to attend liturgies in Latin. Moreover, each parish should be encouraged to have one fully-sung Mass each Sunday.

6. Liturgical and musical training of clergy should be a priority for the Bishops. Clergy have a responsibility to learn and practice their liturgical melodies, since, according to *Musicam Sacram* and other documents, they should be able to chant the prayers of the liturgy, not merely say the words. In seminaries and at the university, they should come to be familiar with and appreciate the great tradition of sacred music in the Church, in harmony with the Magisterium, and following the sound principle of Matthew 13:52: “Every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old.”

7. In the past, Catholic publishers played a great role in spreading good examples of sacred music, old and new. Today, the same publishers, even if they belong to dioceses or religious institutions, often spread music that is not right for the liturgy, following only commercial considerations. Many faithful Catholics think that what mainstream publishers offer is in line with the doctrine of the Catholic Church regarding liturgy and music, when it is frequently not so. Catholic publishers should have as their first aim that of educating the faithful in the sane Catholic doctrine and good liturgical practices, not that of making money.

8. The formation of liturgists is also fundamental. Just as musicians need to understand the essentials of liturgical history and theology, so too must liturgists be educated in Gregorian chant, polyphony, and the entire musical tradition of the Church, so that they may discern between what is good and what is bad.

## **Conclusion**

Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, has reminded us of the way faith binds together past and future:

As a response to a word which preceded it, Abraham’s faith would always be an act of remembrance. Yet this remembrance is not fixed on past events but, as the memory of a promise, it becomes capable of opening up the future, shedding light on the path to be taken. We see how faith, as remembrance of the future, *memoria futuri*, is thus closely bound up with hope. (*LF* 9)

This remembrance, this memory, this treasure that is our Catholic tradition is not something of the past alone. It is still a vital force in the present, and will always be a gift of beauty to future generations. “Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel” (Is 12:5–6).