

Music and Worship

In June 2006, a small media frenzy occurred regarding some words spoken by Pope Benedict XVI, in which he supposedly stated that guitar music was no longer acceptable at mass. At least, this is what the North American press were saying. In fact, the Pope was speaking to members of a choir that performs polyphonic (multiple voices in harmony) choral music without instrumental accompaniment, after a concert performed by them in the Sistine Chapel. What he actually said was simply a reaffirmation of the need for continuity with the past in all the Church's music:

An authentic renewal of sacred music can only happen in the wake¹ of the great tradition of the past, of Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony. For this reason, in the field of music as well as in the areas of other art forms, the Ecclesial Community has always encouraged and supported people in search of new forms of expression without denying the past, the history of the human spirit which is also a history of its dialogue with God.²

Benedict wasn't saying that contemporary forms of music are bad. He was saying that any music that is truly "sacred" *must* maintain continuity with the great musical tradition of the Church. In this case, he identifies two elements of that tradition: Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony.

Different Musical "Settings"

Before going on, we should make a distinction. There is a difference between liturgical music and other kinds of devotional music (like some praise and worship music) which are usually sung outside of mass. The liturgy is an act of worship by which the whole Church worships Christ; it doesn't belong to any one believer. Thus, the way it is carried out can't be a free-for-all. It must be regulated by the Church. Further, music must 'fit' with the whole action of the liturgy. Some songs may be great for personal prayer but inappropriate for use at mass. Of course, Catholics can sing songs of praise and worship outside of mass. In the context of a prayer meeting or other non-liturgical, non-official event, the path is, in theory, open to other forms of music.

Music as Prayer

In a sermon, St. Augustine said "*qui cantat, bis orat*" (whoever sings, prays twice). There is something musical within the human spirit. For millenia peoples all over the world have expressed their deepest and strongest sentiments and devotions through music. This music has expressed songs of praise and awe for God (or gods), as well as the passion of human love. When we feel something intensely, we often want to put it to music. I think this explains the popularity of radio call-in shows where the DJ plays a song corresponding to the caller's emotional state.

In the songs of Christian praise and worship, however, songs of praise and awe merge with songs of love. When we sing of our love for God through the words of a song, we are able to speak from the depth of our hearts in a way that is impossible through simple speech. Compared to talking, singing requires 'more' of us. It is a fuller gift of ourselves to God. But there is more than that: music is, quite simply, beautiful. It is sonic art. And when we sing a sweet melody, we not only clothe our prayers in a beautiful sound but we experience something of the beauty of the Lord himself which is reflected in that music.

Today's Music

Let's return to Benedict's excellent point: sacred music must keep with the Church's great tradition. There is in fact a problem today with some "praise and worship" music in that it lacks theological depth,

1 I have given the Vatican's English translation. A better translation, however, would be "An authentic renewal of sacred music can only happen *along the path marked out by* the great tradition of the past . . ."

The Italian word *solo* sometimes means "wake," but it normally means 'groove,' 'rut,' or 'beaten path' which makes more sense here.


2 Benedict XVI. "Address offered at Concert Offered in Honour of the Holy Father Sponsored by the Domenico Bartolucci Foundation". June 24, 2006.

orthodoxy, lyrical beauty, or any connection with scripture or the Church's tradition. I have frequently heard songs at mass whose only redeeming quality seems to be that they are “upbeat.” But a song which lacks all poetry, artistry, and theological substance cannot be used in the liturgy (nor should it be used in any Catholic worship) simply because it has a catchy chorus. The ability to draw people into deep prayer and worship (as opposed to shallow emotionalism) depends not only on the melody but on a song's message. And this is one important area in which we can connect with the past.

We all know that Vatican II allowed the use of English in the liturgy. What most of us don't realize, however, is that Vatican II never intended for Latin to be totally eliminated from the liturgy.³ One way of connecting with the Church's great musical tradition is to re-use ancient hymns. They can be arranged in a modern way, of course, but there is something powerful and moving about singing a song of worship used by people centuries (or even millenia) ago. Another avenue that has been scarcely explored is writing contemporary music (yes, even with guitars!) for ancient texts.⁴

The point here is not that nobody can write new lyrics anymore. The point is that new songs should not be written as if the last 1900 years of Christian music never happened. Benedict was not speaking *ex cathedra*, and it is possible that his own preference for classical and baroque music influenced his remarks. But he is right in stating that if there is to be a renewal in Catholic music it must flower from the tree of the Church's tradition and not simply discard that tradition and attempt to start from scratch.

There is no question that singing to our Lord and Saviour can be a powerful form of prayer. When we sing, our hearts connect to God and behold his beauty in a way that is impossible through mere speech. Yet as Catholics, we know that even personal prayer is not absolutely private (this is why people have spiritual directors). We must not simply pray by ourselves; we must pray with the Church. If we choose to pray through music, then the songs we sing ought also to be beautiful expressions of the Church's faith. When we do this, our hearts rise up to God as we worship not only in spirit, but in truth.



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³ See *Sacrosanctum Concilium (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy)* §36, n. 2-3.

⁴ So far, the Catholic musician Matt Maher is the only person I know of who has begun doing this. On his recent album “Overflow,” he sings an English translation of *Tantum Ergo Sacramentum* and combines it with a chorus of his own composition.