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REPERTOIRES OF THE PAST AND NEEDS OF THE PRESENT

Here is a new article penned by Maestro Aurelio Porfiri, continuing the series of letters of *Paix liturgique* dedicated to the relationship between liturgical music and the extraordinary form of the Roman rite.

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In the field of liturgical music, we have witnessed a heated debate between those who defended the rights of their traditional patrimony and those who defended the rights of the contemporaneity of their repertoires. Now, we must understand what is meant by “contemporaneity.”

If you surf around American sites offering work to church musicians, you will notice that those referring to “contemporary choir” mean this contemporaneity in the sense of singing in the style of pop, rock, etc. However, in reality, there are thousands and thousands of church musicians who are fully “contemporaries” (being alive beyond any reasonable doubt) and who still refer to an ancient (perennial) wisdom when they have to write for the liturgy without having to worrying about cultural fashions imposed by the great record labels that make and unmake musical fashions in order to propose ever new material and turn ever higher profits. Therefore, we must first of all re-appropriate the meaning of “contemporary”—a “contemporary” that means the best we have today, and not the result of the colonization of a cultural industry that goes its own ways which are not, naturally, of a spiritual nature.

Gregorian Chant and Polyphony

When we speak of repertoires of the past in liturgy, we cannot not refer to the great musical traditions that have enriched the Eucharistic celebration in the last two millennia—principally, Gregorian chant and Renaissance polyphony. These are two great glories of our tradition, and we should take care to prevent them from becoming “cultural goods” in the sense of museum pieces. If these repertoires are not fertile, but left to be observed in the same way as by those who walk through the halls of a museum observing paintings that have perhaps been removed from their natural context to be ordered to criteria foreign the intentions of the artists who created those same works, one is betraying the essence of these repertoires.

Art is not effective when we control it, but when it controls us. We must abandon ourselves to art in its natural environment, and in our case this environment is the liturgy. If we “museumize” these repertoires, even within the liturgy, rendering them sterile, we only betray their essence, their fecund capacity which has given life through all ages to great music (and to great art in general). The philosopher Marcello Veneziani says it very well: “The trouble is that beauty just is, while ugliness advances, moves, speaks, acts. Beauty is inert, passive, defenseless, while ugliness advances, infiltrates, agitates. Beauty is a legacy, a lineage, sometimes a ruin, in any case declined toward the past or lost in antiquity; while ugliness is a language, a mode of doing, of understanding and of willing, between the technique and the administration. This is our economical and metaphysical, aesthetic and social, urbanistic and literary tragedy. The beautiful attains the sphere of being, but not that of the eternal and immutable. The ugly, on the other hand, attains the sphere of doing and of becoming, and is viral, expansive, progressive” (Veneziani, 2015). With the “museum” behavior many of us have, we risk confining and driving this great beauty of our tradition into a condition of sterility, because by its very nature, as Veneziani tells us, beauty is enclosed in itself, while ugliness tends to invade. To fight this invasion of ugliness, it is up to us to always render beauty, even musical beauty, fertile. Only in this dynamic dialog between tradition and the present does beauty continue to live and to be a fruitful mother.

In order to do this, we must re-think the concept of tradition as many hold it, even within environments friendly to the extraordinary form of the Roman rite. This idea of tradition is tied to the idea of past. Tradition is the past. I think this idea is completely erroneous. Tradition is the future: tradition is possibility of new life that springs from a river which runs from time immemorial: “Nostalgia for the future. Perfect expression because it indicates the circularity of time, the necessity of marrying the memory of the past to the expectation of the future and to restore to continuity among generations the most vivid sense of tradition which comes from afar and pitches forward into the future. Just as the history of the twentieth century has demonstrated, the future without tradition loses

itself in the night of the present: every attempt to live the future, erasing the origin, has dragged even the future into the death of history. He who kills his own father is destined to suppress his own children, or makes himself to be killed by them, by a perverse tradition. The future is tradition in its coming version, it is its tomorrow. Every new beginning is a return to the origin. However, tradition is now wounded, wrinkled, betrayed, and its contours, its vocabulary, its meanings are redefined. Anyway, it is a comfort to notice in an immersed, rather a submerged society, in the present, rising and glowing traces, signs of pregnancy, indications of future. After us there will not be the flood, but there will be the future of others. We were not the first, nor will we be the last” (Veneziani, 2015).

Just so, the great repertoires of the past ought to make us feel this “nostalgia for the future,” and should not be a refuge in which to hide (and not heal) a dysfunction in current (civil and ecclesiastical) society, a dysfunction which ought to be fought against in the present for the future, not lived in the present for the past. For the rest, these are concepts which are found also in the writings of another thinker of Tradition like Roger Scruton who advises us that tradition is not opposition to progress and worship of the past, but requires fecundity for the future.

We must certainly distinguish between dynamism and fecundity, insofar as the former is the vehicle of the ugly (according to Veneziani), while fecundity gives us a renewal of the beautiful that is not necessarily more beautiful than that which preceded it, but permits them to revive in new generations. In this sense, Scruton tells us in *How to be a Conservative* (2014) that tradition is not an instinct of accumulation, but rather resources of meaning for the future. He explains that the most relevant social traditions are not mere arbitrary usages, survived in the modern world: they are, rather, forms of knowledge, they contain what remains of so many trial and error attempts, which came about because people sought to adequate their behavior to the behavior of others. To say it in game theory language, traditions are solutions found to “coordination problems” which emerged over the course of time. These exist because they supply indispensable information, without which a society is incapable of reproducing itself. If we carelessly destroy them, we will have erased the guarantees offered by one generation to the next. When we speak of tradition, we do not mean an arbitrary collection of rules and conventions: we speak of answers that have been found to perennial questions. These answers are tacit, shared, embodied in social practices and in implicit expectations. Those who make them are not necessarily able to explain them, and even less able to justify them. Therefore Burke described them as “prejudices” and defended them based on the fact that, even if the foresight of reason is limited in each individual, in society there is a “capital” of reason that can be discussed and refuted only at one’s own risk and peril. The reason is manifested in that which is not reasoned, and perhaps cannot be reasoned, and it is exactly this which we glimpse in traditions, including those which have abnegation at their heart, like military honor, family ties, formative forms and routes, charitable institutions, and rules of politeness.

If we apply this passage to liturgical traditions, including musical ones, we have the most reasonable explanation for how to understand the traditional patrimony of liturgical music and how to make use of it in order for it to be a “capital of reason” which one generation passes along to another. Therefore one we must pass from an evolutionistic paradigm through which one form improves in its evolutions to a specifically more adaptive one through which a form is not essentially better than the preceding one but has some characteristics allowing for a better adaption in a changed environment. Unfortunately we live in a time when some prefer to put out fires and try to light others with ever wetter matches and others who, instead of tending the fire, venerate the ashes. These, especially the former, and dominating attitudes.

A Past that Cannot Return

It does not make sense to take refuge in an idea of the past that cannot return. The irony of all this that these battles to “defend tradition” (but really to stifle it) are fought by well-intentioned people on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Blogs, Websites, etc.—all technological tools which, if their idea of progress (always repeating the “safe repertoires of the past) were applied, would never have existed. Remember that the Renaissance composers, whom we venerate as great maestros (and they were), made contemporary music in their time, experimenting, sometimes writing compositions at the limits of what would have been accepted. But today we hold them as creators of strongly liturgical repertoires. They certainly are. This is possible because they anchored themselves to the great ritual and musical tradition and renewed it without betraying it. They fed the fire, renewing it in its immutability. This is true tradition, not that which puts out the fire in order to light a new one without knowing yet how.

The fear of the future is fear of life. Simply taking refuge in the oft-idealized past is symptomatic of quite different (deeper) problems. Of course, in order to renew the repertoires of the past, these must always be present. One can renew only that which one knows well, which does not bar that the past from still being close to what is new. This is exactly the way in which progress is made. I should not cite the already overly-quoted expression that to see better we must climb on the shoulders of giants, but I cannot deny that there is something true in this. Certainly we should not forget that to innovate in the true sense we must be anchored in that tradition which seeks to feed the fire. This has been clearly one of the enormous errors committed in the name of liturgical reform, but the risk is that one go from eradication to blind and sterile preservation. As said above, the key word for an effective path in the name of tradition is not so much ‘renewal’ as ‘fecundity.’

A Methodological Criterion

In what way can the repertoires of tradition, of the grand tradition, dialog with contemporaneity? Above all we must claim new criteria of discernment, which the magisterium has solemnly taught. True music for the liturgy is that which possesses certain qualities, which we see identified in this text of Saint Pius X’s *Motu Proprio* (November 22, 1903): “Sacred music, being a complementary part of the solemn liturgy, participates in the general scope of the liturgy, which is the glory

of God and the sanctification and edification of the faithful. It contributes to the decorum and the splendor of the ecclesiastical ceremonies, and since its principal office is to clothe with suitable melody the liturgical text proposed for the understanding of the faithful, its proper aim is to add greater efficacy to the text, in order that through it the faithful may be the more easily moved to devotion and better disposed for the reception of the fruits of grace belonging to the celebration of the most holy mysteries. Sacred music should consequently possess, in the highest degree, the qualities proper to the liturgy, and in particular sanctity and goodness of form, which will spontaneously produce the final quality of universality. It must be holy, and must, therefore, exclude all profanity not only in itself, but in the manner in which it is presented by those who execute it. It must be true art, for otherwise it will be impossible for it to exercise on the minds of those who listen to it that efficacy which the Church aims at obtaining in admitting into her liturgy the art of musical sounds. But it must, at the same time, be universal in the sense that while every nation is permitted to admit into its ecclesiastical compositions those special forms which may be said to constitute its native music, still these forms must be subordinated in such a manner to the general characteristics of sacred music that nobody of any nation may receive an impression other than good on hearing them.”

Sacred music (1) must possess sanctity, goodness of forms, and universality. But these characteristics cannot be isolated from the overall picture developed by this text, since these characteristics are not proper to sacred music but are due to it insofar as they belong to the liturgy itself. Indeed what stands out is the fact that sacred music is a complementary part of the liturgy and participates in its general end, encasing the liturgical text in an appropriate melody. What does this mean? It means we probably need to add another criterion, which strongly and naturally springs from it: ritual pertinence. Now, these four characteristics precede personal tastes, even forming such tastes, in the meaning of the liturgy which is at the basis of our ritual action. It is not something which we create. Certainly the liturgy is developed within a given historical period, but it should not be historicist, in the sense that we should not identify any particular repertoire as absolutely essential in itself, as if certain historical periods are to be absolutized with respect to others. Neither do we think that what is new necessarily improves on what already exists, but simply a reading in light of the contemporaneity of the great deposit of tradition, which does not mutate but is always fruitful.

Romano Amerio said that “the Church changes, but does not mutate” (Amerio, 1996). Thus it is in this spirit that we should always seek within the new for continuity with the great river of tradition, which always finds new routes while still remaining the same. Point 23 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* introduced this methodological criterion: “That sound tradition may be retained, and yet the way remain open to legitimate progress careful investigation is always to be made into each part of the liturgy which is to be revised. This investigation should be theological, historical, and pastoral. Also the general laws governing the structure and meaning of the liturgy must be studied in conjunction with the experience derived from recent liturgical reforms and from the indults conceded to various places. Finally, 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. As far as possible, notable differences between the rites used in adjacent regions must be carefully avoided”. Now, this point should be commented with its wealth of notions, but we will concentrate on the idea of “organic development,” which is interesting for what we want to say.

Organic Development

The organic development called for in the document cited above guarantees the idea of something which is born from the fertilization of something which already existed. Introducing Dom Alcuin Reid’s book on the organic development within the liturgy, the then Cardinal Ratzinger said: “In the last few decades, the matter of the right way to celebrate the Liturgy has increasingly become one of the points around which much of the controversy has centred concerning the Second Vatican Council, about how it should be evaluated, and about its reception in the life of the Church. There are relentless supporters of reform, for whom the fact that, under certain conditions, the celebration of the Eucharist in accordance with the most recent edition of the missal before the Council—that of 1962—has once more been permitted represents an intolerable fall from grace. At the same time, of course, the Liturgy is regarded as ‘semper reformanda’, so that in the end it is whatever ‘congregation’ is involved that makes ‘its’ Liturgy, in which it expresses itself. A Protestant ‘Liturgical Compendium’ (edited by C. Grethlein [Ruddat, 2003]) recently presented worship as a ‘project for reform’ (pp. 13-41) and thereby also expressed the way many Catholic liturgists think about it. And then, on the other hand, there are the embittered critics of liturgical reform—critical not only of its application in practice, but equally of its basis in the Council. They can see salvation only in total rejection of the reform. Between these two groups, the radical reformers and their radical opponents, the voices of those people who regard the Liturgy as something living, and thus as growing and renewing itself both in its reception and in its finished form, are often lost. These latter, however, on the basis of the same argument, insist that growth is not possible unless the Liturgy’s identity is preserved, and they further emphasise that proper development is possible only if careful attention is paid to the inner structural logic of this ‘organism’: Just as a gardener cares for a living plant as it develops with due attention to the power of growth and life within the plant the rules it obeys, so the Church ought to give reverent care to the Liturgy through the ages, distinguishing actions that are helpful and healing from those that are violent and destructive. If that is how things are, then we must try to ascertain the inner structure of a rite, and the rules by which its life is governed, in order thus to find the right way to preserve its inner force in changing times, to strengthen and renew it” (Ratzinger, 2004).

It seems to me that the direction indicated by the then Cardinal Ratzinger is in line with the true idea of tradition, which is not mere museum preservation (2). This is also in line with the great thinkers in philosophy and theology, such as Cornelio Fabro (1991-1995), who, while remaining faithful to the essence of Thomism, called himself an anti-system thinker, and sought to dialog with contemporary culture without falling in its traps. I do not think that even any conservative scholar holds that Cornelio Fabro’s doctrine not to be orthodox, and he even managed to formulate an Aristotelian and Platonic synthesis in St.

Thomas Aquinas' thought. Cornelio Fabro's student, philosopher Juan José Sanguinetti, affirmed: "Cornelio Fabro showed me a new Thomas Aquinas, whose metaphysical profundity was hidden from me before, who was able to 'dialog' with history's greatest philosophers, like Aristotle, Plato, Hegel, and Heidegger" (Goglia, 2010, p. 272). One need not fear the fruitfulness of tradition, opposing it to what is good in contemporary times (without of course denying the most successful incarnations of the same in the past).

Let us not forget that even the birth of polyphony itself was accompanied by doubts and partial ecclesiastical censures, and that the first attempts would not have been the most successful. Let us consider the first document which mentions polyphony: the *Docta Sanctorum Patrum* (1324) by Pope John XXII in which he took a very cautious position regarding the beginnings of polyphonic singing: "The first researcher to cite the *Docta Sanctorum* and interpret it in its context was the abbot and prince Martin Gerbert in his book *De cantu et musica sacra* from 1774. Gerbert sustained the thesis that John XXII would have prohibited the «cantum organicum et figuratum» ("organic and embellished song"). Other interpretations followed, which considered the *Docta* as an expression of a negative judgment regarding the so-called *Ars nova*, or even as a document emphasizing the close link between church music and the liturgy, and finally as 'yet another in a series of attempts to curb the extravagant liberties regularly taken by singers in performing church music' (Dalglish, 1978). The principal reason for the promulgation of the decree was indicated in the use of a complex polyphony during the liturgical service, in the new autonomy earned by the music at the beginning of the fourteenth century and in the mixing of the spiritual and secular realms in the area of vocal music. One of the most recent commentaries on the *Docta* comes from Paul Zumthor, who sees in the decree a confirmation of his hypothesis that over the centuries, movements acquired greater significance in medieval society" (Klaper, 2010). Thus, even if some people view this document as an attempt to prohibit the emerging style of polyphony, a careful reading shows that it probably only tried to regularize the first attempts of inserting other melodies—which could have acted in consonance with the chant for a different delight and advance (not to be confused with improvement) of the possibilities available to those dedicated to liturgical composition—into the pure monody of Gregorian chant. These attempts were executed by expert singers, not by improvised church musicians with minimal knowledge of prior liturgical repertoires.

The Necessity of Knowledge

Technical skill is not accidental (and even what we define as accidental is not really so, as we will see below). The strict and rigorous study of preceding forms allows the embodiment of what Pope Benedict XVI termed "the hermeneutic of continuity" even in the artistic and musical field. Let us not forget also the studies of Archbishop Agostino Marchetto on the interpretation of Vatican II, in line with Benedict XVI—studies which bring to light a rupture within the Church. Nor can we ignore the fact that certain Council documents, because of the way they are formulated, lend themselves easily to misunderstanding: "The word *novus* occurs two hundred and twelve times in Vatican II; much more frequently than in any other council. This large figure includes frequent use of the word in its obvious sense of a relative newness affecting the qualities or accidental properties of things. Thus there is mention of the New Testament (obviously), of new means of communication, new obstacles to the practice of the Faith, new situations, new problems and so on. But in the passage cited (and perhaps too in *Ad Gentes* 1: *nova exsurgit humanitatis condicio*), the word is taken in its more narrow and rigorous sense. It is not merely a case of a new quality or new perfection arising in man, but rather of a novelty in virtue of which the basis of humanity is changed, and there is a new creature in the fullest sense of the term" (Amerio, 1996).

It is thought that this "new" which was demanded in the Council would have been opposed to "traditional," which cannot be evinced by any document taken in its entirety, nor from the whole corpus of the conciliar documents taken together. As we have seen, tradition and organic development is constantly demanded. And here we will not report how these needs for legitimate progress were also demanded by pre-Conciliar popes, always with the warning to not eradicate the roots of tradition. Instead, this is what happened. And what really seems ridiculous is that we speak today of the "Conciliar Mass" or the "Mass of Paul VI" (which actually refer to two different situations) without thinking about the fact that the majority of Masses we see in our parishes are "vaguely inspired" by what the Council and following documents suggested, becoming a sort of autocephalous liturgy in the hands of ill-formed priests, deformed catechists, misinformed laity, and poorly educating sisters (in most cases unfortunately).

The Risk of Innovation

There is no innovation without risk, but in this case it is always a calculated risk because one draws from the "capital of reason" of which Scruton spoke before. Not to say that some innovations have not touched the substance of things, but only certain accidental aspects deemed to be of secondary importance. Even these are important and have to do with the element essential to what it is: "And if all the accidents were to change, how would we be able to tell that the substance of the Church had not changed? What remains of a human person when his whole accidental and historical expression is changed? What remains of Socrates without the ecstasy of Potidaea, without the conversations in the market place, without the Five Hundred and the hemlock? What remains of Campanella without the five tortures, the Calabrian conspiracy, the betrayals and the sufferings? What remains of Napoleon without the Consulate, Austerlitz and Waterloo? Yet all these things are accidental to the man himself. The Platonists, who separated essences from historical events, said the essences could be found beyond the sphere of the planets. And where, pray, are we to find them (Amerio, 1996). Chances are they can always be explored with the prudence of that organic development which is neither obstacle nor impediment but is a guide in a steep path: founded on the "capital of reason" accumulated, it indicates more apt ways to the goal to be reached.

The Possibilities of Beauty

As said above, there are still possibilities of beauty in the Church, which does not mean we must espouse the opinion of those who think we are condemned to venerate a past because we are widows of the present. We are still able to serve the liturgy of the Church within its forms and rites, with the beauty of true art. Of course this is ever more difficult when the Church herself does not have a true policy to promote beauty, seeking through her institutions to pursue cultural and aesthetic ways born outside her banks, and often opposed to her mission. Today it is ever more difficult to make art in the liturgy, when the well-intentioned and -disposed must often, willingly, fight with a mal-formed clergy and without sufficient or solid preparation in the field of liturgical music—a clergy who gropes in the dark of a present which are condemned to live but often not to understand. But the capital of reason still exists, perhaps more stifled than in earlier times, but still exists. There are good musicians and artists, often at the margins of the official Church, which is moved by clericalistic logics which prevent its necessary and healthy changes. But the Church still needs them. The Liturgy still needs them. They are the continuity of a tradition which we must not merely observe, but are like water for a plant, which it needs to continue to bloom.

(1) This paper is not concerned with terminological problems of sacred music, liturgy, ritual, and the like.

(2) Actually, even many museums have for quite some time begun to exhibit work according to the idea of not merely preserving it, but of re-reading what is displayed in the attempt to make it speak almost of itself rather than just exposing it to sterile, external observation.

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