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## The Singing of the People

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

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How many times have we heard the word “people” throughout the ecclesiastical debates of the last decades? I think this word has been cited more even than the very name of Jesus, who, in fact, has seen His feast (of the Holy Name of Jesus) even removed from the liturgical calendar in 1969 before it was replaced, on a lower note, in 2002.

Church officials, like other politicians, know that to give credence to their own arguments, they must appeal to some external entity, which can validate any assertion. This entity is the people. Certainly, politicians use appropriate synonyms like “the Americans,” in the same way we have lately heard Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump insert the two words “American people” every half-sentence. Still, those who take the matter seriously know that often things done in the name of the people—the real, flesh-and-blood people—either have little merit, or little interest.

### Distinguishing between religious and liturgical song

In the liturgical sphere, when so many reforms have been passed as being “for the people,” one of the hot topics has been that of the people’s religious singing. In the decades preceding *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC), one could already see renewed interest in song for the people, thanks to the undoubted spur of the Cecilian Movement. Their battle cry “Let the people sing!” summarized the intentions of a vast and penetrating action, fought with the good means of the press and practical field work.

From the beginning of the 20th century to the ‘70s, thousands upon thousands of songs of various types were cranked out, on texts that weren’t directly biblical (and there was a reason for this which we will see further along).

Although, in this specific field, the Second Vatican Council left the door open (in line with all prior documents), yet this door was damaged by an unstoppable force. I am of the opinion that SC, in complete accord with prior literature, was (exceedingly) surpassed by the immediately following applications. It looks complicated, but it isn’t: it was taken much further than what SC had prescribed. In fact, there was a real betrayal.

Let’s start with a citation from SC, which says in chapter VI, paragraph 118: “Religious singing by the people is to be intelligently fostered so that in devotions and sacred exercises, as also during liturgical services, the voices of the faithful may ring out according to the norms and requirements of the rubrics.” A few observations: it says “religious singing by the people is to be intelligently fostered.” This expression warrants a moment of reflection. Let us be careful, since the singing of the people is not liturgical singing (which, according to article 116 just before this quote is Gregorian chant with polyphony secondarily). The singing of the people is called “religious”, describing a repertoire which was never intended for strictly liturgical needs but for other devotional and non-devotional moments (as treated in the pre-Conciliar documents we will read). One could argue that in paragraph 118 it says that this singing has its place “during liturgical services,” but it is important that this be “according to the norms and requirements of the rubrics.” Now we will see what the rubrics said up until that time.

### Official documents from Pope St. Pius X to Pius XII

Let’s begin with Pope St. Pius X’s *Motu Proprio “Tra le Sollecitudini”* (11/22/1903). Chapter III, paragraph 7, already says something which leaves little room for interpretation: “The language proper to the Roman Church is Latin. Hence it is forbidden to sing anything whatever in the vernacular in solemn liturgical functions - much more to sing in the vernacular the variable or common parts of the Mass and Office” (1). Regarding vernacular singing, it says a bit later (VI, 21):

“In processions outside the church the Ordinary may give permission for a band, provided no profane pieces be executed. It would be desirable in such cases that the band confine itself to accompanying some spiritual canticle sung in Latin or in the vernacular by the singers and the pious associations which take part in the procession.” Religious singing by the people (even if it is not explicitly called that), then, is outside solemn liturgy.

In “*Divini Cultus Sanctitatem*” (12/20/1928), Pope Pius XI strongly reiterates the directives of Pius X, especially where he requests a necessary, greater involvement of the people in liturgical singing, which ought to mean greater participation in Gregorian chant, with the objective that: “In order that the faithful may more actively participate in divine worship, let them be made once more to sing the Gregorian Chant, so far as it belongs to them to take part in it” (DCS, IX). Next we have the “*Mediator Dei*” (11/20/1947) of Pope Pius XII. This document is without doubt the most articulate on the topic of liturgy: this in a period marked by changes and advances.

This solemn word from the Holy Father sought to establish firm guidelines and stem possible deviations.

Of course, Pius XII actively encouraged the participation of the faithful at the Eucharistic Sacrifice. However, one must carefully distinguish his intentions from various mis-readings. Above all, he begins by stating that not all the baptized participate with the same priesthood in the liturgy, which would downplay the hierarchical priesthood. Certainly the faithful also offer the sacrifice, but in a different way. The Church declares this and the rites themselves show it (the priest offers in union with the people) with the offering of the bread and wine to the priest and through the priest who acts *in persona Christi* who is the Head and who makes the offering for all the members. In this document, too, he points out the need to give back to the people the chance to unite with the ministers and schola at least with the simplest Gregorian chant melodies. There is also, however, a significant step towards religious singing by the people: “We also exhort you, Venerable Brethren, to promote with care congregational singing, and to see to its accurate execution with all due dignity, since it easily stirs up and arouses the faith and piety of large gatherings of the faithful. Let the full harmonious singing of our people rise to heaven like the bursting of a thunderous sea and let them testify by the melody of their song to the unity of their hearts and minds, as becomes brothers and the children of the same Father.” (paragraph 194). In sum, he follows the same line drawn by his illustrious predecessors, with even greater care for modern cases coming from the liturgical movement, and finally, explicitly mentions congregational religious singing. (2)

### The Importance of the Encyclical “*Musicae Sacrae Disciplina*”

From the same Pius XII, we have the encyclical “*Musicae Sacrae Disciplina*” (MSD, 12/25/1955). Here, after discussing that sort of music which is “liturgical” *par excellence* (Gregorian chant, polyphony) he says: “We must also hold in honor that music which is not primarily a part of the sacred liturgy, but which by its power and purpose greatly aids religion. This music is therefore rightly called religious music. The Church has possessed such music from the beginning and it has developed happily under the Church’s auspices. As experience shows, it can exercise great and salutary force and power on the souls of the faithful, both when it is used in churches during non-liturgical services and ceremonies, or when it is used outside churches at various solemnities and celebrations. The tunes of these hymns, which are often sung in the language of the people, are memorized with almost no effort or labor. The mind grasps the words and the music. They are frequently repeated and completely understood. Hence even boys and girls, learning these sacred hymns at a tender age, are greatly helped by them to know, appreciate and memorize the truths of the faith. Therefore they also serve as a sort of catechism. These religious hymns bring pure and chaste joy to young people and adults during times of recreation. They give a kind of religious grandeur to their more solemn assemblies and gatherings. They bring pious joy, sweet consolation and spiritual progress to Christian families themselves. Hence these popular religious hymns are of great help to the Catholic apostolate and should be carefully cultivated and promoted” (paragraphs 36-37).

Even though the same things are repeated in these documents, there is ever-greater attention dedicated to religious congregational singing. Even so, he insists: “Where, according to old or immemorial custom, some popular hymns are sung in the language of the people after the sacred words of the liturgy have been sung in Latin during the solemn Eucharistic sacrifice, local Ordinaries can allow this to be done ‘if, in the light of the circumstances of the locality and the people, they believe that (custom) cannot prudently be removed.’ The law by which it is forbidden to sing the liturgical words themselves in the language of the people remains in force, according to what has been said” (MSD, 47).

Citing canon law, he points out that it is liturgical singing which covers the words of the missal, and these parts may not be sung in the vernacular. This much-cited document is very important and certainly indicates a new attention to and perspective on many aspects of sacred music. Even though he confirms the teaching of his predecessors, he clearly addresses the problem of the faithful’s participation differently (even citing bilingual booklets as a good example). Further on he says:

“As We have said before, besides those things that are intimately associated with the Church’s sacred liturgy, there are also popular religious hymns which derive their origin from the liturgical chant itself. Most of these are written in the language of the people. Since these are closely related to the mentality and temperament of individual national groups, they differ considerably among themselves according to the character of different races and localities. If hymns of this sort are to bring spiritual fruit and advantage to the Christian people, they must be in full conformity with the doctrine of the Catholic faith. They must also express and explain that doctrine accurately. Likewise they must use plain language and simple melody and must be free from violent and vain excess of words.

Despite the fact that they are short and easy, they should manifest a religious dignity and seriousness. When they are fashioned in this way these sacred canticles, born as they are from the most profound depths of the people's soul, deeply move the emotions and spirit and stir up pious sentiments. When they are sung at religious rites by a great crowd of people singing as with one voice, they are powerful in raising the minds of the faithful to higher things. As we have written above, such hymns cannot be used in Solemn High Masses without the express permission of the Holy See. Nevertheless at Masses that are not sung solemnly these hymns can be a powerful aid in keeping the faithful from attending the Holy Sacrifice like dumb and idle spectators. They can help to make the faithful accompany the sacred services both mentally and vocally and to join their own piety to the prayers of the priest. This happens when these hymns are properly adapted to the individual parts of the Mass, as We rejoice to know is being done in many parts of the Catholic world. (...) Hence We can do no less than urge you, venerable brethren, to foster and promote diligently popular religious singing of this kind in the dioceses entrusted to you. There is among you no lack of experts in this field to gather hymns of this sort into one collection, where this has not already been done, so that all of the faithful can learn them more easily, memorize them and sing them correctly. (...) Thus there will be hope of happily attaining what everyone desires, namely the disappearance of worldly songs which because of the quality of their melodies or the frequently voluptuous and lascivious words that go with them are a danger to Christians, especially the young, and their replacement by songs that give chaste and pure pleasure, that foster and increase faith and piety. May it thus come about that the Christian people begin even on this earth to sing that song of praise it will sing forever in heaven: 'To Him who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb, blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever' (MSD, 62-68).

Pardon the long citation, but I think it was too important to skip. Gradually as we venture into the official documents of the Magisterium, we cannot not see how the figure of Pope Pius XII stands out ever more starkly as one of the protagonists of the liturgical movement—he who wisely, calmly opened the official means that certain instances be permanently accepted. The Sacred Congregation of Rites' instruction "De Musica Sacra et Sacra Liturgia" (9/3/1958), reiterates and highlights those gains already noted in Pope Piacelli's prior two documents. It gives pastoral instructions for the practical application of those directives cited above from the two documents.

So far we have seen these recurring points:

- a) liturgical singing *par excellence* is Gregorian chant;
- b) the liturgical language *par excellence* is Latin;
- c) religious congregational singing in the vernacular is encouraged more and more, but it does not belong in solemn liturgies;
- d) this originates from liturgical singing, but is more "of the people" to encourage the participation of the faithful;
- e) it does not replace liturgical singing (which uses official liturgical texts), but, if anything, may follow it.

Vatican II certainly sought stronger encouragement of congregational participation. The whole SC is a continuous, strong call for more "active" participation. It calls for leading the faithful in singing and in the responses, even though it does not force us to go beyond its competence to encourage. Latin remains the liturgical language, and Gregorian chant the liturgical vocal music, and vernacular song is still called "congregational singing." In other words, the push to change is found in the context of the interpretations following the Council, through which there has been a push forward which necessarily leaves us confused.

#### After Vatican II, the Invasion of Congregational Liturgical Singing

The Sacred Congregation of Rites' instruction "*Inter Oecumenici*" (9/26/1964) began to make practical provisions for the implementation of SC, especially regarding the participation of the faithful and the translation of liturgical texts. These first instructions moved the reform in a very precise direction: "The celebrant is not to say privately those parts of the Proper sung or recited by the choir or the congregation" (ch. II, 48a). "In recited Masses the congregation may recite the Lord's Prayer in the vernacular along with the celebrant; in sung Masses the people may sing it in Latin along with the celebrant and, should the territorial ecclesiastical authority have so decreed, also in the vernacular, using melodies approved by the same authority" (ch. II, 48g). Then there is a very important point in Chapter II (57b), which speaks about the parts that may be in the vernacular at Mass: "as befits the circumstances of the place, the chants of the Ordinary of the Mass, namely, the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Credo*, *Sanctus-Benedictus*, *Agnus Dei*, as well as the introit, offertory, and communion antiphons and the chants between the readings." Basically, this started a completely new journey, insofar as here was a transformation from liturgical chant being exclusively Latin to the possibility (so often claimed) of singing in the vernacular. Also because, as it says further along in the document, the schola and organist are a highly qualified part of the assembly of the faithful. In this document, there is no specific reference to liturgical musical styles, which, in my humble opinion, is of no little import.

From the same congregation, we have the instruction "*Musicam Sacram*" (3/5/1967). In the preface, it says: "The following come under the title of sacred music here: Gregorian chant, sacred polyphony in its various forms both ancient and modern, sacred music for the organ and other approved instruments, and sacred popular music, be it liturgical or simply religious." Although the footnote turns our attention to the Instruction "*De Musica Sacra et Sacra Liturgia*," we easily realize that here there is a notable transition. For here, the singing of the people goes beyond its qualification of "religious" to be also called "liturgical," indicating a new development relative to previous liturgical literature, in which popular religious singing was essentially extra-liturgical. Of course, here popular singing begins to mean something different. The whole document asks for such attention from the faithful as to lead them into full participation in the singing. Certainly, it does not deny the traditional repertoire, but uses it in view of new pastoral needs.

The Instruction “*Tres ab Hinc Annos*” (5/4/1967) further expands the possibility of using the vernacular at Mass, including even in the canon itself. After these instructions come more, up to the fifth which came out only recently. Other documents can only follow this path.

### Religious or Liturgical?

I believe that there has been a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of many musicians. The popular religious song, or hymn, is a song which takes a simple, popular text, and which strongly expresses religious sentiments. It usually stems from the musical tradition felt as proper to a certain group of people. Think about the songs from fifty years ago, with popular melodies, heard in our Italian churches, which were attuned to the farming world, which was “the” world in Italy at the time. The people express themselves in the language given them by the historical situation. Therefore, there is no reason to be scandalized if some groups compose hymns in a modern style, insofar as they are just following the footsteps of their predecessors. However, there is real scandal when these songs are given place in the liturgy, which unfortunately happens.

Religious singing instantly expresses religious feeling, giving vent to a sentiment that people feel the need to express. Liturgical singing has a less “personal” and subjective character, giving rise to a decidedly more communitarian and objective dimension. It is not the song of my feeling, or of my neighbor’s, but the sum of the two. This, naturally, does not eschew emotions, but encompasses them in a larger, more spiritual emotion. We voice our most immediate feelings in popular hymns, when we want to cry “Hooray Mary” or “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.” There is nothing negative here, but a beautiful, edifying thing, in my opinion. Everyone uses the means and the language he speaks to express those sentiments.

Liturgical music flows naturally in the language of the addressee, whereas in the case of religious music we hear more the voice of the faithful sending up their prayer. In liturgical singing, we hear the celebration itself, through liturgical (therefore ritual and ritualized) words offering the faithful a bridge to a more profound dimension. This is because liturgical singing is part of a larger project known as celebration. It does not live from the scream of a moment, but gradually expands in sighs and whispers.

A lot of the music we have today in the Ordinary Form of the Mass loses the distinction between religious and liturgical song. The melody of liturgical music should favor union of hearts and not emotional dissonance. The sentiment ought not to divide us in our personal needs, but unite us to each other. The Word goes from “spoken” to “speaking” and calls each and every one. The melody creates harmony. Therefore, a reconsideration of the role of emotions in the liturgy and in liturgical and religious music is called for, noting that the liturgy is not meant to include merely what pleases us, but is built on a foundation that does not come from us.

### The Extraordinary Form Between the Rock of Fossilization and the Hard Place of Archeologism

Having said all this, we must question the role of religious music in the Extraordinary Form, where there is no such confusion between religious and liturgical singing. Now, I see certain dangers I will seek to summarize in two main points: those of musical fossilization and archeologism. For the first point, in designated places of the liturgy, it is good to sing hymns, as has always been done throughout history. However, we must avoid a fossilization of the repertoires, singing only that dozen hymns one hears everywhere, and seek also to recover all those pearls we have lost in dead repertoires. We have thousands and thousands of Marian and Eucharistic tunes for every type of devotion, most of which are forgotten but worthy to be brought back due to their musical value, their reflection of true popular sentiment (and not, as the then Cardinal Ratzinger observed, that “popular” created by the large multinationals), their simplicity, and nobility. We would have to edit a vast repertoire of popular hymns in order to really offer so many people the hidden treasures found in these repertoires. This is true not only for Italy, but for every country, insofar as these treasures of popular singing are hidden everywhere.

As for the second point, musical archeologism, we should not only recover these repertoires, but also somewhat refresh the language. National languages experience a process of change, by which today we do not express ourselves as we did fifty years ago. I think it would be good, especially for those hymns not-yet-memorized by the people, that there be a revision of language done by experts (as occurred for hymns in the past) who do not add theological or liturgical elements contrary to tradition. There are literally thousands of popular songs that could be taken up again which by simply updating the language would work still today. I think it would be a great service to the liturgy and for the edification of the people to do so, retaining the necessary distinction between liturgical and religious singing (which, as we have seen, became ambiguous in certain documents on the application of liturgical reforms).

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(1) This concept is clarified in the following commentary: “The most common liturgical functions, during which no vernacular singing is allowed, are: Mass and solemn Vespers, Solemn processions with the Blessed Sacrament, Solemn Mass and Office of the Dead, Solemn Office of Holy Week. In the non-solemn liturgical functions, such as during low Mass, vernacular singing is permitted. Similarly, before and after solemn liturgies, although this must always respect the sanctity of the church.” (Mons. Giovanni d’Alessi: *Il Motu Proprio sulla musica sacra di S.S. Pio X con note illustrative e la costituzione apostolica Divini cultus sanctitatem di S.S. Pio XI*, 4th edition, edited by the Associazione Italiana S. Cecilia, 1934, p. 108, my translation.)

(2) “Until 1947, no official document ever spoke of congregational singing.” (Annibale Bugnini, “*Liturgia viva*”, editrice Ancora - Milano 1962, p. 58, our translation)