



Episode 13: Music and *Musicam Sacram*

SUMMARY

The 1967 Instruction, *Musicam Sacram*, is the most definitive statement on music in the Mass since the Second Vatican Council. This Instruction both clarifies and articulates the Church's understanding of sacred music.

Musicam Sacram describes three degrees or categories of texts of the Mass to be sung.

The first category—and the most important—includes the parts of the Mass that are dialogues. Since the Trinity is a “dialogue of love,” how appropriate that we imitate God’s own example! These are the chants that make up the “Order of Mass.” The third edition of the Roman Missal includes the musical patterns for each of these chants—dialogues between the priest and the people, the deacon and the people, and the lector and the people. As Pope Benedict XVI says, “God speaks to and encounters men and women, making himself known in dialogue.” (*Verbum Domini*, n. 22)

The second category includes the “Ordinary of the Mass.” Texts such as the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*,

Creed, and the Lamb of God are found in this group. According to *Musicam Sacram*, they should only be sung if the first category is sung.

The third category is comprised of the “Proper of the Mass.” It is characterized by things that change from Mass to Mass, such as the Entrance Song, the Offertory Song and the Communion Song. In the mind of the Church, these are the last texts to be sung. When we sing the dialogues of the Mass, our prayer resembles more and more the eternal love song of the Trinity.

Musicam Sacram

For the choice of parts to be sung, those should be first that of their nature are more important and particularly those sung by the priest or other ministers and answered by the congregation or sung by the priest and congregation together. (n. 7)

The real solemnity of a liturgical service, it should be kept in mind, depends not on a more ornate musical style or more ceremonial splendor but on a worthy and reverent celebration. (n. 11)

IN THE TRADITION

“The word of God draws each of us into a conversation with the Lord: the God who speaks teaches us how to speak to him. ... In this way our word to God becomes God’s word, thus confirming the dialogical nature of all Christian revelation, and our whole existence becomes a dialogue with the God who speaks and listens, who calls us and gives direction to our lives. Here the word of God reveals that our entire life is under the divine call.”

Pope Benedict XVI
Verbum Domini, n°. 24

“As part of the enhancement of the word of God in the liturgy, attention should also be paid to the use of song at the times called for by the particular rite. Preference should be given to songs which are of clear biblical inspiration and which express, through the harmony of music and words, the beauty of God’s word. We would do well to make the most of those songs handed down to us by the Church’s tradition which respect this criterion. I think in particular of the importance of Gregorian chant.”

Pope Benedict XVI
Verbum Domini, n°. 70

“The dignity and lofty purpose of sacred music consists in the fact that its lovely melodies and splendor beautify and embellish the voices of the priest who offers Mass and of the Christian people who praise the Sovereign God.”

Pope Pius XII
Musicae Sacrae Disciplina, n°. 31

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

✠ “Song and music fulfill their function as signs in a manner all the more significant when they are ‘more closely connected...with the liturgical action,’ according to three principal criteria: beauty expressive of prayer, the

unanimous participation of the assembly at the designated moments, and the solemn character of the celebration.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, n°. 1157

IN THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, stand between the porch and the altar and weep and cry out:

Spare, O Lord, spare your people;
do not close the mouths
of those who sing your praise, O Lord.

Antiphon, Distribution of Ashes
Ash Wednesday

The singing of the people, the ministers, and the Priest Celebrant has a special importance in the celebrations of these days, for when texts are sung, they have their proper impact. Pastors should, therefore, not fail to explain to the Christian faithful, as best they can, the meaning and order of the celebrations and to prepare them for active and fruitful participation.

Rubric 2
Sacred Paschal Triduum

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What distinguishes “sung dialogues” from the singing of hymnody?
2. What is the difference between “singing the Mass” and “singing at Mass”?
3. Why does the Church give “the main place” to Gregorian Chant?

FOR FURTHER READING

Gerald Dennis Gill, *Music in Catholic Liturgy*, (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2009).

Edward Schaefer, *Catholic Music through the Ages*, (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2008).