

## WHY CHOIRS?

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Why do we have music in our churches? What purpose do the organ, the musicians, and the choirs serve? These may seem unnecessary questions, yet there is no doubt but that many a person has asked them of himself, especially after hearing a strangled and clamorous outburst of "sacred music" from some well-meaning but hopelessly inadequate group of choristers. Protestant churches usually can boast a well-organized choir and a musical service that is truly musical. This is due to the fact that music is the most important part of Protestant church services, the chief attraction to the members of the congregation. Catholic churches, however, depending on supernatural motives to secure good attendance, very often tolerate music that is far from attaining its true object. This condition, of course, is by no means the rule, but it is nevertheless deplorably common.

Some of our choirs are of that well-known, earnest type—th volunteer choir. This consists chiefly of a number of unorganized, and often untrained, singers, able to produce some sort of melody with a certain amount of vehemence. How often the outpourings of such a choir resemble a yelling contest wherein the leather-lunged strive lustily for the survival of the fittest! How often some calliope soprano will screech herself hoarse above the other singers, lest mother, six seats from the front, may miss the dulcet tones of her daughter's vocal outburst! Or it may be—and often is—a vigorous youth, proud of his trombone bass, bellowing till the very rafters creak in protest, while his veins swell with tortured blushes! Multiply this by the number of "singers," then contemplate the result. Deplore the vanished recollection of the pious worshippers; tremble for the prayer interrupted, and the execration upon choirs arising in its place!

But we have many good choirs. Our "big" churches contain the city's best singers, guided and instructed by a master in the art of music. Certainly. But is the true end of sacred music always attained? Many an humble layman goes to such a church, kneels down, and quietly waits, expectantly, to be ravished by its celebrated music. Suddenly a tremendous crash puts all pious thoughts to headlong flight—the organist has begun the deadly work. Vast bass tremblings pour down from the gallery, befuddling his ears. Meanwhile, treble screechings race up and

down the key-board like shivers on one's spine. Gradually the roar dies away, and a soprano begins to sing. The sweetness of the melody is just beginning to affect the audience when a throaty tenor bursts upon the peaceful scene, thrilling the auditors with his perilous foothold on the high notes. This is more than the bass can endure, and he grumbles out his bellowed protest. Altos join the fray, struggling with a host of harmony's higher exponents. Soon all is harmonic chaos. The sopranos scream, the tenors howl, the altos moan and the basses roar, while above the frightful din is heard the anguished struggle of the unquenchable organ to maintain its supremacy. When the outburst finally ceases, it is indeed difficult for the hearer to realize that he is really in a church.

Thus two extremes unite in producing the same effect. If the choir be crude, its efforts to aid piety are mere distractions; if it be too "classical," the result is the same. We might treat here also of the sad fact of inappropriate hymns, but space forbids. The above is amply sufficient to raise the question, "Why choirs?" Let us seek the answer, not in musical text-books—they will mislead; not in recent decrees or opinions upon the subject—they are not yet widely known. But let us go back to the very foundation of the subject, to the beginning of the human race itself. There we can trace the reason for sacred music.

There can be no question but that religious worship was the most important ceremony of primitive man, just as it is today, and just as it has been universally among all peoples in every age. Almighty God, whether considered as the beneficent Creator and Preserver, or as the Avenging Judge, always received the highest homage man could offer Him. Thus, religion became employed in sacrificing to the Almighty the most beautiful productions of nature, whether animal victims, the fruits of the field, or the productions of human art. The idea of worship sought expression in the most beautiful manner, by use of the most beautiful means possessed. It had a twofold effect. It not only expressed an individual's personal fervor in an external way, but it also helped to excite similar devotion in onlookers. This, in fact, is the keynote of religious ceremonies—to express piety externally, and thus excite it in others.

The first product of human art, one of the first human inventions, was a musical instrument to accompany the wild chant of primitive religion. For the satisfaction of all true sons of Erin

it may be mentioned, parenthetically, that this instrument, the first which has mention in the Bible, was the harp!<sup>1</sup> It presupposed vocal music, just as the latter presupposed those interior feelings of heart and mind which found expression in song. But whatever the nature of the melody, it was merely the outward act of worship—the offering of prayer in its most pleasing outward form.<sup>2</sup> It was not sung to please the ear alone, any more than religious dances were performed to delight the eye. Springing from the heart, they sought to utilize the outward senses of the audience only as channels to reach the heart.<sup>3</sup> Music and dancing were intimately connected in ancient religious worship, and poetry was not long in joining them. Rhythmic sounds inspired rhythmic motion, and this extended itself to the words of the singer. We shall refer to these later on.

The Bible contains a great number of references to both vocal and instrumental music, showing its prominence. Its frequent mention in the Psalms needs no comment. David had seven choirs singing around the Ark of the Covenant;<sup>4</sup> St. Paul, writing to the Ephesians, showed what religious song should be.<sup>5</sup> The Apocalypse has beautiful descriptions of the heavenly choirs singing before the Almighty's throne.<sup>6</sup> If song played such a prominent part in the religious life of the Jews, as shown by Biblical statements, it was of no less importance among the early Christians. This we know both from history and from tradition. And justly so. From apostolic times down to the present day, Christian worship, as expressed in the Catholic Church, offers every incentive to musical devotion in practically every part of our beautiful liturgies. The Hidden Presence in our churches has ever inspired talented musicians to sing Its praises; the hallowed atmosphere is always a source of inspiration. If, indeed, music is of such importance to other cults, what should it be in ours? If even the crude barbarians stimulate piety and fervor by their wild songs and weird instruments,<sup>7</sup> what power have we in our wealth of inspiration? We have asked the question, "Why choirs?" And we answered it by showing the true end of all

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<sup>1</sup> Helps to Bible Study—Oxford.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. McCollough, "Primitive Music," *Encycl. Rel.*, Edinburgh, 1917.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> 2 Kings, vi, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ep. v, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Apoc. iv, v, vii, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Hose & McDougall, "Pagan Tribes of Borneo," London, 1912.

religious music—to express the worshipper's own devotion, and to stimulate similar fervor in others. This is the natural end of sacred song, this is the purpose for which it was universally utilized. Do our choirs fulfil the requirements of sacred music? Do they attain the very end for which they are instituted? Do they express devotion and make the hearts of others thrill with spiritual fervor? Not always. Frequently the reverse is the case. Sometimes the melodies sung are sufficient of themselves to attain the purpose, because the audience finds the choir's faults dimmed by the melody's sweetness. There is scarcely a Catholic heart that will not throb anew with religious fervor when the "Adeste Fideles" is sung. Who will restrain his tears in Lent when the "Stabat Mater" so vividly portrays Our Mother of Sorrows? Thus, a proper selection of music is conducive to piety, just as operatic "sacred" song tends to destroy it. Church music should emphasize the sanctuary—not the organ-loft. When a choir is so "good" that people attend the church rather to hear the music than to assist at the sacred function, then it is in the wrong place; it should leave the hallowed edifice and seek the plaudits of a grand opera audience. The choir should be the gentle guide which gathers the wandering attention of worshippers and leads it to the Tabernacle. If it does not do this, it is a failure; when it distracts the people, it is worse than useless—it is injurious.

An excellent remedy for these evils is that offered by our Holy Father Pius X (f. m.). He would have had the churches return to the golden age of ecclesiastical music by casting out frivolous and worldly music, substituting in their place what rightly belongs there—Gregorian chant. There is something indescribably celestial about this ancient melody of our Church that proves its sacred worth by its elusive nature. It must, when rendered correctly, lead the thoughts of all towards heaven. Sung by a choir of boys—themselves a reminder of cherubic choirs—it touches the heart of the hearer, filling him with a spiritual joy, with a sweetness entirely lacking in modern music. That it should be the *only* sacred music of religious communities whose number permits, needs no assertion here. It can never confuse the untutored mind with a maze of harmonic developments; nor can it obscure one's thought by quantity of production. It savors of heaven, therefore it directs the audience towards celestial contemplation; it is symbolic of the supernal

choirs, and thus is a most apt medium of praise to our Eucharistic God.

We spoke before of the connection between song and dancing, and their relation to poetry. The three arise from the same cause—a desire for beautiful expression; they proceed in the same manner—by measured rhythm; and they have the same effect—the arousing of beautiful thoughts and feelings in others. No sane Catholic would tolerate for an instant the introduction of worldly dances and poetry to aid his prayers in church; why, then, can we listen supinely to so-called sacred music that savors of everything but spirituality? We may be pleased by it sometimes, and yet wonder why our thoughts are distracted from the sacred functions in the sanctuary. No man of education will deny the beauty of poetical prose; why, then, should he declaim against its musical counterpart—Gregorian chant? The analogy holds good.

Choir service has peculiar interest for all Dominicans, whose Order has fostered the true idea of Church music for seven hundred years. Our duty is to give to others the fruits of our contemplation. What more apt means than our liturgical chant?<sup>8</sup> Our very Constitutions mention it as such.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, there are so many beautiful hymns in our sacred repertoire, hymns composed by Dominicans, that it should be our pride to bestow their sweetness upon the laity. It entails long and patient labor, perhaps, but that is the end of our life, our means to reach heaven. But, like many other possessors of unrecognized treasures, we sometimes rest complacently and permit our wealth of sacred music to remain neglected and unsung.

If our choir be mediocre, it can still produce effective results. "He who has not, gives not;" says the proverb; and it is equally true that he who has can give. Therefore, if the ordinary choir be inspired and stimulated by religious feeling, if it have a pious musical atmosphere, most certainly will this find expression in its singing, and just as surely will it charm its way into the hearts of the worshippers. If, however, the choir be of the highest type, its efforts to promote piety will be fruitless unless the members have a realization both of their sacred function and of the sacred location wherein they exercise it. If they have nothing, they can give nothing. To the highly-trained choirs of our churches,

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<sup>8</sup> Constituciones S. O. P., Prologus.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

which exploit their talent in the most highly florid music obtainable, we offer those golden words of Mazzini, Master in the Milan Conservatoire: "The end of musical art is not to astonish but to *move!*"<sup>10</sup>

Whatever be the music of our choirs, let Dominican choristers, both lay and religious, strive earnestly to secure in our churches an answer to our question—and a practical answer: religious thought expressed in song, exciting fervor in the hearts and minds of the people.

—Bartholomew Reilly, O. P.

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<sup>10</sup> Quot. by Shakespeare, "Art of Singing," Boston, 1910.

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### AMERICA'S FLOWER

After the Latin.

Lima, the City of the Kings,  
A royal gift and worthy, brings:  
A Rose divine, replete with grace,  
Fresh culled from out the Holy Place.

More charming than the starry night,  
Or than the day-star's beam more bright!  
Her choice was Mary's better part:  
The love of God within her heart.

Demons and all the might of hell  
Could never shake this citadel.  
Alone, this gentle, high-born maid  
By worldly scorn was undismayed.

Regard, O Rose, our humble prayer:  
That we, betimes, with thee may share  
Supernal glory's glad release  
From sin—and everlasting peace!

To Christ, thy Spouse, a joyous song  
Be carolled by the seraph-throng;  
The Father and the Holy Ghost  
Be lauded by the cherub-host!

—Chrysostom Kearns, O. P.