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THE SONG OF MOTHER CHURCH

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HE LULLABY of a mother is to put her baby to sleep, but the song of Mother Church is to lead her children to greater devotion by singing the praises of God. Both types of music have a purpose, and a lullaby that served only to irritate the baby would hardly be of any use. In like manner, when any other music is substituted in the Church for that which leads the soul to closer union with God, one knows that such music does not attain the purpose of the true song of the Church. The exciting history of how the Church almost lost its original melodies and how Gregorian Chant was eventually rescued, is one of those little known pages of Church history. Few Catholics in America realize that by the hard work of a group of Benedictine monks of the last century, and the unstinted efforts of a Sister and a lay-woman of today, they are the beneficiaries of the true song of the Church.

The name of St. Gregory the Great has justly become inseparably connected with the word chant. It is true that the Church had music before he began his reign, but it was because of this Pope's unifying and systematizing the material at hand that the lasting results found in plain chant were produced. In the early days of Christianity, there were four types of Church music in the West: Ambrosian, Gregorian, Gallican, and Mozarabic. The relation of these four among themselves has been described as that of Latin to its daughter languages of Italian, French, and Spanish. Of the four, that known as Gregorian has survived and is considered the purest and highest expression of Church music.

Since Gregory was pontiff during that era known as the Age of Christianization, the song of Mother Church traveled with her mis-

sionaries as they went on their apostolic journeys over the then known world. Hence when the monks went to foreign lands, as St. Augustine to England, they took with them the sacred music. Thus throughout all of Europe, the Church was displaying not only its unity in doctrine but also in chant. Canterbury, for instance, soon became famous as a center of Gregorian Chant. This same effect was produced in almost all the territories converted to Christianity. The four hundred year period from the seventh century to the eleventh was to witness the spread and magnificent growth of plain chant. Free in its rhythm and reverent in its expression, the chant was ingrained in the people of those days and was the logical result of the spirituality of the time. This space of four centuries constitutes the golden age of the chant.

TINKLING CYMBALS

Gradually, however, and at first without any disastrous consequences, the chant was changed. The total corrupting influence did not strike until the Renaissance. This period of restoring all things to the false god of art for itself, delivered the fatal blow to Gregorian chant. Composers of melodies looked down upon the old method of composition as something barbaric. Worse than that, they became more interested in making themselves famous than in creating music suitable to the Mass and other church functions. Singers, for their part, often would completely ignore the text of the chant and improvise additions of their own, hoping to show off their ability and virtuosity. Even copyists began to interpret the music to fit their own tastes and thus distorted the entire tradition of Gregorian chant.

Except for the religious orders which maintained some semblance of the early chant, this type of Church music was dead. Its requiem was sung with double alleluias at the beginning of the Renaissance, and its demise was hailed as a time for rejoicing. Plainchant was not to survive even as an heirloom. At least an heirloom can be examined although it is out of its proper surroundings. The Gregorian chant on the contrary had been unceremoniously buried and apparently no possibility remained to exhume its remains at a later date. For all practical purposes plain chant as known in the early Church was gone, lost for good, something to read about but never again to be heard. The unhealthy climate of a Protestant Europe was destroying everything noble and elevating of the old Christian order.

The parallel took place in architecture, sculpture, and painting, where the individual artist became the important figure. Once cathedrals were but the inevitable expression of a Catholic people. Men produced masterpieces and their names remained unknown, because

the cathedral was the edifice constructed by all the people. It was their church, their work of art. The same happened in sculpture and painting. It must not be wondered at then that it also occurred in the chant. Sacred music was not guided by humility of heart but spurred on by the vanity of fame.

With the Renaissance began the dark ages of Church music. The technique of correct composition was in great danger of being lost forever. Even the Dominican chant, which has preserved many melodies older than the Gregorian used by the Roman Rite, suffered a decadence. The true principles of plain chant were completely and universally ignored, and the melodies composed after the Renaissance were based on false notions of this type of music. The laity no longer possessed the true spirit of the chant, and the books of the monks had been so altered that their accuracy was greatly doubted.

The notable contributions of Pierluigi da Palestrina in the sixteenth century did little to restore Plainchant. Although polyphony is established as proper Church music, it cannot be placed above the chant for simplicity and beauty. Under the influence of Palestrina has developed that classical polyphony so frequently misused in our church choirs of today who turn it into an operatic production. Thus by the time of the early nineteenth century the plain chant was so utterly devoid of its spirit that the Holy Week services were described by Mendelssohn as "insignificant dull music." He was not prompted by any prejudice; he was merely stating a fact.

The true chant had been silenced now from the time of the Renaissance when Mendelssohn made his remark. The devastating influence of the Protestant Revolt on all Christendom had made it possible that Catholics for centuries would tolerate an inferior worldly music to the true melodies of the chant. The people did not apparently perceive the truth that what they had was not music flowing from a genuine spirit of the Faith, but rather the musical expression of men who were more skilled at composing arias than the humble rhythm of Gregorian chant.

MUSICAL MONKS

Yet as always happens, some men remained calm and fought against the almost over-whelming tide of secularization which had stealthily crept into the very souls of the faithful. Finally, at long last, the great restoration came. In 1833 Dom Prosper Guéranger, O.S.B. founded and became first Abbot of the Benedictine Monastery of Solesmes in France. The abbey had not been in use since 1791. Already famous as a liturgist, Dom Guéranger gave the impetus which

has lead to the discovery of the original melodies of Gregorian chant. The tremendous labors of Dom Joseph Pothier and the careful research into the principles of plain chant by Dom André Mocquereau resulted in a clarification and distinction of Gregorian music from the corrupted Church music then existing. The effects of these discoveries have not yet been fully realized.

Divine Providence was generously removing the veil which had hidden all the traditional music from the eyes and ears of men who desired the song of Mother Church from its purest font. There was now revealed and soon evident to those who understood anything about the plain chant the reason why it had held so great a sway in the early centuries of the Church. It was also clear why it was so repulsive after the Reformation. The musical heresies after the period of the Protestant Revolt were no less pernicious in their way than the doctrinal heresies of the self-styled reformers.

Yet, even though Solesmes might establish the plain chant to its pristine beauty, there was little prospect of another musical evangelization of the world as had occurred under Gregory the Great. Solesmes was but one abbey and would have little influence on the rest of the Church. But once again, God had forces at work to guarantee that soon the Universal Church would be singing melodies sweeter to the angels than the discordance of the previous four centuries. On May first, 1895, Guiseppe Sarto, Patriarch of Venice, published a Pastoral letter to his clergy on the subject of Church music. He was no stranger in this matter. When he was Bishop of Mantua, he had taken personal charge of the singing lessons in his seminary and in 1894 presented a complete document on Church music to the Sacred Congregation of Rites.

The Cardinal's letter hit directly at the wretched state of affairs in ecclesiastical music. He pleaded for nothing less than the true Gregorian chant and the stricter form of polyphony. His directness in criticism of the music in vogue in Italy at the time brings a smile to one's lips. He wrote in part: "Its inner character is frivolity without reserve. Its melodic form, even though it flatters the ear exceedingly, is sweet to excess, its rhythm is that of the most danceable Italian poetry, its object only to please the senses, and consequently it contains nothing but musical effects; naturally, the more affected are its concertized solos, and the louder its choruses, the more it pleases the masses. . . . There is always an aria for bass, a romance for tenor, the duet, cavatina, cabaletta and the final chorus. . . . I will not call attention to the fact that often these theatrical melodies are combined with the Holy Text; even more frequent new ones have been created, but

always fashioned after those of the theater; and one has thereby so violated the secrets of our Faith as to merit the reproach of Christ to the desecrators of the Temple of Jerusalem: You however have made it a den of thieves."

To the objection that the people would not appreciate the chant, the Cardinal had an answer. "Spoiled taste also rises up as an enemy of sacred music, since undeniably worldly music, because it is easily understood, and above all easily grasped from a rhythmical standpoint, is all the more pleasing the less the hearer has had the benefit of a good musical education. . . . But without pointing out especially that mere pleasure never furnishes a true critical judgment in holy things, and that one should not give in to the people in things that are not good, but should teach and educate them—I say that the misuse of the word people is exercised too much; for in reality they give evidence of being more devout and serious than one usually thinks."

MOTU PROPRIO

Perhaps nothing would have come of this zealous prelate's observations, were it not for the fact that in 1903 Cardinal Sarto became Pope Pius X. On the feast of St. Cecilia November 22, 1903, this great Pontiff, holy both by reason of his office and by personal sanctity, promulgated the famous *Motu Proprio* on plain chant. The following year the Holy Father established a Papal Commission to work on the restoration of plain chant and intrusted the burden of the work to the monks of Solesmes. Hence after long centuries of the Church without the official music of Her early days, and after the hard years of labor carried on by the monks of Solesmes, the song of Mother Church was beginning once again to become the melody of Her children. The dark ages were over. A new and perhaps golden era was dawning.

However, it was one thing to have the Pope express his will on a subject and quite another to have it followed. Not that any disobedience would be expected, but the cold fact was that too few knew anything about Gregorian chant to make the reform of Pius X effectual. Especially in America, one could only hope for a hearty and genuine goodwill to cooperate and then let it go at that. Such fortunately was not to be the case. Just about this time, in fact only a few months after the publication of the *Motu Proprio*, a woman well versed in music entered the Church. She is Mrs. Justine Ward. Added to her natural vitality for a worthy cause was the zeal for the Faith found so frequently in converts. In 1910 Mrs. Ward came in contact with the Very Reverend Dr. Shields, then head of the Educational Depart-

ment of Catholic University of America. At his request she undertook the task of composing textbooks for the music course to be used and sponsored by the Catholic Sisters College in the National Capital. Mrs. Ward also established the now famous Pius X School of Music. In 1929 her generosity extended itself to founding a trust fund to further the growth of Gregorian chant.

One of the most fortunate events in Mrs. Ward's amazing career as sponsor of Gregorian music in our country, was her trip to Quarr Abbey of Solesmes in 1921. There this skilled musician studied the principles of plain chant from the greater master Dom Mocquereau himself. His praise of Mrs. Ward's work after many months of study at Solesmes is fitting tribute to her boundless enthusiasm for what has been her life work. Not only was Mrs. Ward captivated by the charm of the sacred melodies, but she was most anxious to share this treasure with others. Dom Morquereau has described her books on chant as a "real stroke of genius."

What had happened was that an outlet for the Gregorian chant as restored at Solesmes now had been given to America. Sisters College adopted the Ward Method and determined to educate the children of Catholic schools in the true melodies of this ancient and sacred music. Since those early days of the 1920's, the Ward Method has remained the very core of the movement to revive Gregorian chant in America. Sisters College continues to be the humble and all too long hidden source of its now gushing stream.

In 1927 a new figure appeared at Sisters College in the person of Sister Agnesine, S.S.N.D. She brought with her a profound knowledge of her subject and a dynamic spirit of inculcating the chant. The community of Sisters to which she belongs, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, has used the Ward Method in their schools which number over a hundred from Massachusetts to Puerto Rico. Directed primarily to children, the Church can look for great things from a youthful America trained in the melodies of the Church.

AMERICA SINGS

Sister Agnesine has done tremendous work in making the Gregorian chant known in places in our country which otherwise would never be reached. To do this she conducts a special class for students for the priesthood, Sisters, ex-G.I.'s, and lay people. These are to be apostles of the chant. To the future priest, Sister Agnesine particularly addresses herself. In her first class she points out that the course in chant is not to teach the students how to sing a few Masses well, but to open to them the whole Liturgical Year. Ultimately she wishes

all Catholic children to have such a love for the Mass and the liturgy along with the chant that Catholic life in America will become more integrated. Sister Agnesine's advice to clerics is to make chant their hobby. Apparently she had read the words of Rabanus Maurus, who, living in the ninth century, wrote: A cleric who does not sing, is not a complete cleric. Of course how well he sings depends on his vocal equipment!

The connection between Solesmes and Sisters College is one of close cooperation and deep interest on the part of the monks. On October 29th, 1946, the present Abbot of Solesmes, Dom Germain Cozien, visited, with Mrs. Ward, the class of religious and lay folk being instructed by Sister Agnesine. It was no perfunctory gesture of politeness but a genuine concern for the work being done. The distinguished guest remained for the entire period listening to the students sing the melodies of the Gregorian chant. At the conclusion of this unusual recital, the Abbot praised the excellent results. True to his vocation as priest, Dom Cozien reminded the students that Church music is not to be identified with any other type of music. One can learn it to its technical perfection and still not be pleasing to God. The doctrine of the Church, the use of Her channels of grace, all this must prepare the soul before one can hope to have the song of Mother Church burst forth from a heart full of love for God.

Hence the link between Solesmes and America has been made. Yet the success of the work of Mrs. Justine Ward and Sister Agnesine cannot be measured. It goes on in parish schools and receives no great publicity. Nevertheless, this important apostolate of plain chant is rapidly becoming a mighty force in saving our youth from the evils of the day and leading the laity to a more correct participation in the Mass. The hidden labor of spreading the chant deserves greater recognition. Too few know that such a school exists where people are taught and trained to teach the chant. Thus the announcement of the first National Chant Convention to be held in America comes as good news. On March 19th and 20th of this year, those interested in Gregorian chant and sacred music will gather at Sisters College, Washington, D.C., to consider the progress of Church music in America and its possibilities for greater development. It was most fitting that the feast of St. Joseph was designated as the opening day of the Convention. As Patron of the Universal Church he is guardian of all Her works.

A Solemn Mass sung in the traditional Gregorian chant according to the principles so scientifically and painstakingly rediscovered by the monks of Solesmes will be celebrated on the feast of St. Joseph.

Second Vespers of the Office of that day will be chanted. The choir will be composed of priests and clerics studying chant at Sisters College. During the Convention, the important subjects of teaching methods and ways of increasing interest in the chant will be discussed. The total result should be most encouraging.

Thus just forty years after the first official publication and approval of the new reform, that of the *Graduale* on August 7, 1907, the Catholics in America have an unprecedented opportunity to learn more about plain chant and join their voices in the song of Mother Church. Then the words of St. Paul used in the epistle for the feast of the Holy Family will take on new meaning: "And may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts. . . . Let the word of Christ dwell in you abundantly: in all wisdom teach and admonish one another by psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing in your hearts to God by His grace." (Col. 3, 15-17)

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