

## THE SPIRIT OF THE CHANT SUNG AT MASS

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THE entire liturgy of the Catholic Church is one of rare beauty and meaning. No ceremony is found that does not carry with it rich symbolism in some form or other. Perhaps in no case is this more striking than in the music sung at Mass. Old as the Church, having grown up with the liturgy itself and having influenced it to a great extent, the Chant, the official music of the Church, is best suited for the Church's requirements. Not only is the chant rich in historical facts, but it brings to the congregation every emotion and feeling that the great Sacrifice should produce in the hearts of the faithful.

In order to avoid confusion and misunderstanding in terminology, this article considers the chant sung during Mass solely from a liturgical standpoint, that is, its place and meaning in the Mass. The term "music" is here understood in its broad sense "the inspiring of the soul with all that is good, virtuous, and beautiful." (Definition of music from Plato). The word "chant" is understood as the Church music of the early Middle Ages before the advent of polyphonic; the official ecclesiastical music as proscribed by Pius X. The chant has no proper time value, each note being the same, thus giving to the music a continuous rhythm and even cadence. It is commonly known as Plain Chant or Gregorian Chant.

The "Introit" is the key to the entire Mass. ("Ingressa" in the Ambrosian rite; "officium" in the Dominican and Mozarabic). With fidelity it strikes a note of joy, sorrow, jubilation, petition or hope, in brief, every religious sentiment with which the soul should be filled during the ecclesiastical year. It consists of an abbreviated psalm preceded by an antiphon, usually taken from the Scriptures and ending with the doxology. It announces the feast to be celebrated. The "Introit" has been ascribed to St. Jerome but it was in use in the Church at Milan before St. Jerome ever came to Rome. It is most probable, however, that St. Jerome introduced the singing of the psalm after the anti-

phon. Pope Celestine I (423-432) was the first to have it officially incorporated in the Mass, he prescribed that "at the beginning of the Mass an entire psalm be sung 'antiphonatum,'" that is, alternately by two choirs. The music of the "Introit" is simple but it is in its simplicity that the beauty and feeling are expressed.

The "Kyrie" had its origin in the Greek Church. It was sung at Rome at the end of the litanies up to the eleventh century when we find it introduced into the Mass by order of the Roman liturgy. (*Ordo Romanus* XI, no. 63). It is one of the most touching and beautiful parts of the chant. "Lord have mercy," a cry of supplication to heaven that God might hear and grant our requests. And what great significance the three repetitions bear; one to God the Father for His bountiful goodness and mercy; "Christe Eleison" to God the Son, our Redeemer; "Kyrie" again to the Holy Ghost, our consoler and sanctifier.

"Gloria in Excelsis," the hymn of the angels, words the angelic choir sung over the manger in Bethlehem. This is also of Greek origin being ascribed to St. Hilary of Portiers (?-366). In its present form the "Gloria" dates back to the Council of Nice in 325. Till the eleventh century the "Gloria" was sung only by bishops on great feast days such as Easter and Christmas but near the close of the century the privilege of intoning it was extended to priests also. Since the year 1272 when Pope St. Pius V revised the missal the "Gloria" is said in the Mass whenever the "Te Deum" is said in the Divine Office, Holy Thursday and Holy Saturday being the exceptions. It is a song of praise and thanks to God for all things. Its music in the chant gives to the Mass a spirit of joy and gladness and because of this is omitted in Masses for the dead and during Advent and Lent.

The Church has assigned to the choir, a selected group of singers, usually men, the task of executing in the name of the congregation the various parts of the Mass that are to be sung. These parts are very appropriately inserted in the liturgy of the Mass, the chant following the "Gloria" shows this to good advantage. This music is known as the "Intermediary Chant" and follows immediately after the singing of the epistle, thus connecting the epistle with the gospel. It consists of the "Gradual step" together with an "Alleluia" or as in Lent the "Tract." The object and meaning of this chant can be determined easily. It forms a part of the whole, connecting the note of joy or sorrow that was begun at the "Introit." The chant has been found

in the most ancient of the Roman Ordos; St. Augustine also mentions it several times in his writings. (Sermon 176, no. 1). Its meaning is always more or less obvious, either a plea for mercy to God or expressing some virtue of the Saint celebrated, it bears out the fundamental thought of the Mass. In a word the Intermediary Chant is an echo of what precedes and prepares the way for the gospel that follows.

There then follows the profession of our faith, the "Credo," the Nicene Creed formulated at the Council of Nice, 325, and developed at the Council of Constantinople, 381. The "Credo" was not used in the Roman Liturgy until the eleventh century, but was sung in France and Germany from the eighth. In 1014, when Henry II, Emperor of Germany, came to Rome for his coronation he noticed the "Credo" was not sung during Mass. Speaking to the Holy Father, the pope ordered it to be sung at the Mass of Coronation; this custom then continued till Pope Benedict VIII had it officially inserted in the Mass in 1048. The "Credo" contains the great dogmas of our faith; the music is always strong and massive bringing out in bold relief the treasures that God has given us. The "Credo" is proper to all Masses on Sundays, to all feasts of Our Lord and His Blessed Mother, to the feasts of the Apostles, Doctors of the Church, the Angels and the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene.

The "Offertory" is most beautiful in its meaning for the faithful. It brings most impressively to them the great mystery which is about to take place. By it both the priest and people express their desire that God will assist them with His grace in order that they may the better celebrate the Eucharistic Sacrifice. From the times of the Apostles the "Offertory" has been in use in the Church, from the time of St. Peter to the eleventh century it was the custom to form a procession and offer to God the gifts of the faithful. This procession was accompanied by the singing of a psalm and it is from this custom that the offertory chant comes. In the twelfth century the singing of the psalm was abridged and preceded by an antiphon; today, however, the "Offertory" is usually made up of the antiphon alone, the psalm being dropped. The same spirit pervades the chant of the "Offertory" that is to be found in the "Introit" and "Gradual." It helps to awaken our thoughts and feelings anew, and prepare us more earnestly for the Sacrifice.

In their texts and melody, the prefaces of the Mass are the most solemn and sublime chants of the Church, and it is as a conclusion of this most glorious of music that the "Sanctus" is always written. This hymn of praise is composed of words taken from the Scriptures, and consist in two parts. The first, honors the Blessed Trinity as is done in heaven by the angelic choir, (Apocal. Ch. 4-v. 8) the latter part consists of words spoken to Christ on His entrance into Jerusalem. The "Sanctus" like the Offertory reaches back to the time of the Apostles. As early as the Council of Vaison (529) the "Sanctus" was ordered to be sung at "all" Masses. The beauty, grandeur and origin of this hymn cannot be surpassed. St. Chrysostom exclaims, "O marvellous gift of Christ; on high the angelic choirs sing glory to the Lord, on earth, men sing in the Church the same canticle in choirs." The chant of the "Sanctus" is always in keeping with its divine origin and lends incomparable color and expression to the singing of the Mass.

Pope Sergius I (687-701) is the first pontiff to order the singing of the "Agnus Dei" in the Mass. Before his time this prayer was chanted by priest and people alike in times of trouble and strife and only the one plea was offered, that of mercy. It was not till the twelfth century that the petition for "peace" was added, this, owing to the trials and distress under which the Church was then laboring. In the chant the choir repeats the exact words of the priest at the altar. "Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world have mercy on us." Words filled with meaning, beautiful in form, they awaken compunction for sin and sorrow for having offended the Great Lamb who so willingly laid down His life for us.

It was during the Last Supper that the "Communion" now used in the liturgy had its origin. In St. Matthew we read that after Our Divine Saviour had instituted the Mass "a hymn being said, they went out unto Mount Olivet" (Matt. ch. 26-v. 30). In the earliest times the Christians, holding fast to this custom chanted a psalm during the distribution of the Eucharist in order to intensify the devotion of the faithful. This custom was followed till the eleventh century when owing to its great length the psalm was shortened and a verse added, today however, the psalm has been completely omitted and nothing but the verse is used. The "Communion" chant has in like manner been changed until now it is usually sung after Communion and in the



form of a thanksgiving. The melodies of the Communion are the most impressive of Gregorian Chant, not only are they filled with inspiration but the words as we find them today in all the Masses strike the same note that we find at the "Introit," bringing out the thought again that was characteristic of the feast or saint celebrated.

On certain days in the ecclesiastical year the joyful praise of the "Alleluia" or the mournful melody of the "Tract" continues to resound in a prolonged canticle called the "Sequence." Early in the ninth century it became the custom to prolong the singing of the last notes of the Alleluia or Tract and to this series of notes various verses were set and culminated in what is now called the "Sequence." The first authentic composition of this kind has been ascribed to St. Notker of St. Gall in 912. The "Sequence" won popular favor and they increased so rapidly that by the end of the ninth century every Sunday and almost every feast had its own proper Sequence. These rapid increases lead to the abuse of making kings, emperors and other famous personages of the day the subject of the Sequence. At the Council of Cologne in 1536 and the Council of Rheims 1564 all but five Sequences were forbidden. These were the "Victimae Pascali" for Easter; "Veni Sance Spiritus" for Pentecost; "Lauda Sion" for Corpus Christi; "Stabat Mater" for the feast of the Seven Dolors of Mary; "Dies Irae" for Masses of the dead. "These hymns," says Cardinal Wiseman, "proved how completely in those golden ages of faith, men might be the tongues of the Church." The authorship of four of these hymns is not fully determined, one alone, the "Lauda Sion" the work of the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas, has never been disputed. In it the great St. Thomas reveals his profound learning and his angelic love for Christ in the Eucharist while the light rhythm of the chant enhances the words "with a grace and sweetness of sound more like an echo from heaven than the mere song of earthly poetry" (Faber). The "Victimae Paschali" owes its composition to Robert, King of the Franks, this however is disputed; in like manner the "Stabat Mater" and the "Veni Sancte Spiritus," some claiming St. Bonaventure as the author, others Pope Innocent III. The "Dies Irae" is conceded to be one of the greatest hymns ever written. It is but natural that the authors wishing to claim it as their own should be numerous. The most probable opinion is that it is the work of a Dominican, Latini Orsini who was

later raised to the cardinalate and is better known as Cardinal Malabranca. (See Dublin Review Vol. XX, 1846). The "Dies Irae" has been proclaimed the most magnificent hymn of the Church and has commanded the admiration of men like Mozart, Sir Walter Scott and Dr. Johnson. The chant however is the soul of the prose, giving it the mournful melody in which this great masterpiece finds its sublime beauty and setting.

Thus the music in the Mass. The various form and composition of the chant admirably and fittingly sets forth the dispositions and feelings of the interior life of the soul. The chant inspires, aids devotion, lifts the mind and heart to God. When music fails to do this, its place is elsewhere than in the Church. The Mass being the supreme act of religion, everything connected with it should be subordinate to it and nothing should accompany it that will in any way hinder the faithful from knowing it better and loving it more. The Church, mindful of this and careful that music does not interfere, has selected that type of music best suited to its requirements, namely, Plain Chant. These simple melodies combined with the beautiful words of the liturgy, lift the mind to God, thus fulfilling the mission of Chant—the glory of God in the Sacrament of the Altar.

