

# Divini Cultus

*Apostolic constitution on the liturgy and sacred music  
Given December 20th 1928*



Pope Pius XI

*Pius, Servant of the Servants of God, For Everlasting Memory*

Since the Church has received from Christ her Founder the office of safeguarding the sanctity of divine worship, it is certainly incumbent upon her, while leaving intact the substance of the Sacrifice and the sacraments, to prescribe ceremonies, rites, formulae, prayers and chant for the proper regulation of that august public ministry, whose special name is "Liturgy", as being the eminently sacred action.

For the Liturgy is indeed a sacred thing, since by it we are raised to God and united to Him, thereby professing our faith and our deep obligation to Him for the benefits we have received and the help of which we stand in constant need. There is thus a close connection between dogma and the sacred Liturgy, and between Christian worship and the sanctification of the faithful. Hence Pope Celestine I saw the standard of faith expressed in the sacred formulae of the Liturgy. "The rule of our faith", he says, "is indicated by the law of our worship. When those who are set over the Christian people fulfill the function committed to them, they plead the cause of the human race in the sight of God's clemency, and pray and supplicate in conjunction with the whole Church".

These public prayers, called at first "the work of God" and later "the divine office" or the daily "debt" which man owes to God, used to be offered both day and night in the presence of a great concourse of the faithful. From the earliest times the simple chants which graced the sacred prayers and the Liturgy gave a wonderful impulse to the piety of the people. History tells us how in the ancient basilicas, where bishop, clergy and people alternately sang the divine praises, the liturgical chant played no small part in converting many barbarians to Christianity and civilization. It was in the churches that heretics came to understand more fully the meaning of the communion of saints; thus the Emperor Valens, an Arian, being present at Mass celebrated by Saint Basil, was overcome by an extraordinary seizure and fainted. At Milan, Saint Ambrose was accused by heretics of attracting the crowds by means of liturgical chants. It was due to these that Saint Augustine made up his mind to become a Christian. It was in the churches, finally, where practically the whole city formed a great joint choir, that the workers, builders, artists, sculptors and writers gained from the Liturgy that deep knowledge of theology which is now so apparent in the monuments of the Middle Ages.

No wonder, then, that the Roman Pontiffs have been so solicitous to safeguard and protect the Liturgy. They have used the same care in making laws for the regulation of the Liturgy, in preserving it from adulteration, as they have in giving accurate expression to the dogmas of the faith. This is the reason why the Fathers made both spoken and written commentary upon the Liturgy or "the law of worship"; for this reason the Council of Trent ordained that the Liturgy should be expounded and explained to the faithful.

In our times too, the chief object of Pope Pius X, in the *Motu Proprio* [*Tra le Sollecitudini*] which he issued twenty-five years ago, making certain prescriptions concerning Gregorian Chant and sacred music, was to arouse and foster a Christian spirit in the faithful, by wisely excluding all that might ill befit the sacredness and majesty of our churches. The faithful come to church in order to derive piety from its chief source, by taking an active part in the venerated mysteries and the public solemn prayers of the Church. It is of the utmost importance, therefore, that anything that is used to adorn the Liturgy should be controlled by the Church, so that the arts may take their proper place as most noble ministers in sacred worship. Far from resulting in a loss to art, such an arrangement will certainly make for the greater splendor and dignity of the arts that are used in the Church. This has been especially true of sacred music. Wherever the regulations on this subject have been carefully observed, a new life has been given to this delightful art, and the spirit of religion has prospered; the faithful have gained a deeper understanding of the sacred Liturgy, and have taken part with greater zest in the ceremonies of the Mass, in the singing of the psalms and the public prayers. Of this We Ourselves had happy experience when, in the first year of Our Pontificate, We celebrated solemn High Mass in the Vatican Basilica to the noble accompaniment of a choir of clerics of all nationalities, singing in Gregorian Chant.

It is, however, to be deplored that these most wise laws in some places have not been fully observed, and therefore their intended results not obtained. We know that some have declared these laws, though so solemnly promulgated, were not binding upon their obedience. Others obeyed them at first, but have since come gradually to give countenance to a type of music which should be altogether banned from our churches. In some cases, especially when the memory of some famous musician was being celebrated, the opportunity has been taken of performing in church certain works which, however excellent, should never have been performed there, since they were entirely out of keeping with the sacredness of the place and of the Liturgy.

In order to urge the clergy and faithful to a more scrupulous observance of these laws and directions which are to be carefully obeyed by the whole Church, We think it opportune to set down here something of the fruits of Our experience during the last twenty-five years. We celebrate not only the memory of the reform of sacred music to which We have referred, but also the centenary of the monk Guido of Arezzo. Nine hundred years ago

Guido, at the bidding of the pope, came to Rome and produced his wonderful invention, whereby the ancient and traditional chants might be more easily published, circulated and preserved intact for posterity – to the great benefit and glory of the Church and of art.

It was in the Lateran Palace that Gregory the Great, having made his famous collection of the traditional treasures of plainsong, editing them with additions of his own, had wisely founded his great Schola in order to perpetuate the true interpretation of the liturgical chant. It was in the same building that the monk Guido gave a demonstration of his marvelous invention before the Roman clergy and the Roman Pontiff himself. The pope, by his approbation and high praise of it, was responsible for the gradual spread of the new system throughout the whole world, and thus for the great advantages that accrued therefrom to musical art in general.

We wish, then, to make certain recommendations to the bishops and ordinaries, whose duty it is, since they are the custodians of the Liturgy, to promote ecclesiastical art. We are thus acceding to the requests which, as a result of many musical congresses and especially that recently held at Rome, have been made to Us by not a few bishops and learned masters in the musical art. To these We accord due meed of praise; and We ordain that the following directions, as here-under set forth, with the practical methods indicated, be put into effect.

All those who aspire to the priesthood, whether in seminaries or in religious houses, from their earliest years are to be taught Gregorian Chant and sacred music. At that age they are able more easily to learn to sing, and to modify, if not entirely to overcome, any defects in their voices, which in later years would be quite incurable. Instruction in music and singing must be begun in the elementary, and continued in the higher classes. In this way, those who are about to receive sacred orders, having become gradually experienced in chant, will be able during their theological course quite easily to undertake the higher and “aesthetic” study of plainsong and sacred music, of polyphony and the organ, concerning which the clergy certainly ought to have a thorough knowledge.

In seminaries, and in other houses of study for the formation of the clergy both secular and regular there should be a frequent and almost daily lecture or practice – however short – in Gregorian Chant and sacred music. If this is carried out in the spirit of the Liturgy, the students will find it a relief rather than a burden to their minds, after the study of the more exacting subjects. Thus a more complete education of both branches of the clergy in liturgical music will result in the restoration to its former dignity and splendor of the choral Office, a most important part of divine worship; moreover, the scholae and choirs will be invested again with their ancient glory.

Those who are responsible for, and engaged in divine worship in basilicas and cathedrals, in collegiate and conventual churches of religious, should use all their endeavors to see that the choral Office is carried out duly i.e. in accordance with the prescriptions of the Church. And this, not only as regards the precept of reciting the divine Office “worthily, attentive and devoutly”, but also as regards the chant. In singing the psalms attention should be paid to the right tone, with its appropriate mediation and termination, and a suitable pause at the asterisk; so that every verse of the psalms and every strophe of the hymns may be sung by all in perfect time together. If this were rightly observed, then all who worthily sing the psalms would signify their unity of intention in worshipping God and, as one side of the choir sings in answer to the other, would seem to emulate the everlasting praise of the Seraphim who cried one to the other “Holy, Holy, Holy”.

Lest anyone in future should invent easy excuses for exempting himself from obedience to the laws of the Church, let every chapter and religious community deal with these matters at meetings held for the purpose; and just as formerly there used to be a “Cantor” or director of the choir, so in future let one be chosen from each chapter or choir of religious, whose duty it will be to see that the rules of the Liturgy and of choral chant are observed and, both individually and generally, to correct the faults of the choir. In this connection it should be observed that, according to the ancient discipline of the Church and the constitutions of chapters still in force, all those at least who are bound to office in choir, are obliged to be familiar with Gregorian Chant. And the Gregorian Chant which is to be used in every church of whatever order, is the text which, revised according to the ancient manuscripts, has been authentically published by the Church from the Vatican Press.

We wish here to recommend, to those whom it may concern, the formation of choirs. These in the course of time came to replace the ancient scholae and were established in the basilicas and greater churches especially for the singing of polyphonic music. Sacred polyphony, We may here remark, is rightly held second only to Gregorian Chant. We are desirous, therefore, that such choirs, as they flourished from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, should now also be created anew and prosper especially in churches where the scale on which the Liturgy is carried out demands a greater number and a more careful selection of singers.

Choir-schools for boys should be established not only for the greater churches and cathedrals, but also for smaller parish churches. The boys should be taught by the choirmaster to sing properly, so that, in accordance

with the ancient custom of the Church, they may sing in the choir with the men, especially as in polyphonic music the highest part, the cantus, ought to be sung by boys. Choir-boys, especially in the sixteenth century, have given us masters of polyphony: first and foremost among them, the great Palestrina.

As We have learned that in some places an attempt is being made to reintroduce a type of music which is not entirely in keeping with the performance of the sacred Office, particularly owing to the excessive use made of musical instruments, We hereby declare that singing with orchestra accompaniment is not regarded by the Church as a more perfect form of music or as more suitable for sacred purposes. Voices, rather than instruments, ought to be heard in the church: the voices of the clergy, the choir and the congregation. Nor should it be deemed that the Church, in preferring the human voice to any musical instrument, is obstructing the progress of music; for no instrument, however perfect, however excellent, can surpass the human voice in expressing human thought, especially when it is used by the mind to offer up prayer and praise to Almighty God.

The traditionally appropriate musical instrument of the Church is the organ, which, by reason of its extraordinary grandeur and majesty, has been considered a worthy adjunct to the Liturgy, whether for accompanying the chant or, when the choir is silent, for playing harmonious music at the prescribed times. But here too must be avoided that mixture of the profane with the sacred which, through the fault partly of organ-builders and partly of certain performers who are partial to the singularities of modern music, may result eventually in diverting this magnificent instrument from the purpose for which it is intended. We wish, within the limits prescribed by the Liturgy, to encourage the development of all that concerns the organ; but We cannot but lament the fact that, as in the case of certain types of music which the Church has rightly forbidden in the past, so now attempts are being made to introduce a profane spirit into the Church by modern forms of music; which forms, if they begin to enter in, the Church would likewise be bound to condemn. Let our churches resound with organ-music that gives expression to the majesty of the edifice and breathes the sacredness of the religious rites; in this way will the art both of those who build the organs and of those who play them flourish afresh and render effective service to the sacred liturgy.

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. It is most important that when the faithful assist at the sacred ceremonies, or when pious sodalities take part with the clergy in a procession, they should not be merely detached and silent spectators, but, filled with a deep sense of the beauty of the Liturgy, they should sing alternately with the clergy or the choir, as it is prescribed. If this is done, then it will no longer happen that the people either make no answer at all to the public prayers – whether in the language of the Liturgy or in the vernacular – or at best utter the responses in a low and subdued manner.

Let the clergy, both secular and regular, under the lead of their bishops and ordinaries devote their energies either directly, or through other trained teachers, to instructing the people in the Liturgy and in music, as being matters closely associated with Christian doctrine. This will be best effected by teaching liturgical chant in schools, pious confraternities and similar associations. Religious communities of men and women should devote particular attention to the achievement of this purpose in the various educational institutions committed to their care. Moreover, We are confident that this object will be greatly furthered by those societies which, under the control of ecclesiastical authority, are striving to reform sacred music according to the laws of the Church.

To achieve all that We hope for in this matter numerous trained teachers will be required. And in this connection We accord due praise to all the schools and institutes throughout the Catholic world, which by giving careful instruction in these subjects are forming good and suitable teachers. But We have a special word of commendation for the “Pontifical Higher School of Sacred Music”, founded in Rome in the year 1910. This school, which was greatly encouraged by Pope Benedict XV and was by him endowed with new privileges, is most particularly favored by Us; for We regard it as a precious heritage left to Us by two Sovereign Pontiffs, and We therefore wish to recommend it in a special way to all the Bishops.

We are well aware that the fulfillment of these injunctions will entail great trouble and labor. But do we not all know how many artistic works our forefathers, undaunted by difficulties, have handed down to posterity, imbued as they were with pious zeal and with the spirit of the Liturgy? Nor is this to be wondered at; for anything that is the fruit of the interior life of the Church surpasses even the most perfect works of this world. Let the difficulties of this sacred task, far from deterring, rather stimulate and encourage the bishops of the Church, who, by their universal and unflinching obedience to Our behests, will render to the Sovereign Bishop a service most worthy of their episcopal office.