

## Questions On Sacred Music C Association of America

### Q: What is sacred music?

**A:** *Musicam Sacram* (1967) defines sacred music as “that which, being created for the celebration of divine worship, is endowed with a certain holy sincerity of form” (§4). It is not merely music that is religious. Sacred music, says *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), is joined to the liturgical rite to become a necessary and integral part of the solemn liturgy, whose purpose is to glorify God and sanctify the people (§112).

“As a manifestation of the human spirit,” said John Paul II in 1989, “music performs a function which is noble, unique, and irreplaceable. When it is truly beautiful and inspired, it speaks to us *more than all the other arts* of goodness, virtue, peace, of matters holy and divine. Not for nothing has it always been, and will it always be, an essential part of the liturgy.”

### Q: What are the characteristics of sacred music?

**A:** John Paul II urged us to revisit and learn from the *Motu Proprio* of St. Pius X, *Tra le sollecitudini* of November 22, 1903, which says that sacred music has three characteristics: “it must possess holiness and beauty of form: from these two qualities a third will spontaneously arise—universality.”

Concerning *holiness*, for music to be sacred means it is not the ordinary, not the every-day; it is set aside for the purpose of the glorification of God and the edification and sanctification of the faithful. It will therefore exclude all that is ordinary, every-day or profane not only in itself, but in the manner in which it is presented. It will therefore exclude all that is not suitable for the temple. The words of the sacred text in the Liturgy call for a sonic vesture which is likewise sacred. Sacredness, then, is more than individual piety; it is an objective reality.

n speaks more precisely of *bonitate* forms.” This refers to the forms of beauty of the sung liturgy which are reflected—indeed, constituted—by differentiation, by the variety of genres defined by function and style. Sacred music must be true art, says St. Pius X, “otherwise it will be impossible for it to exercise on the minds of those who listen to it that efficacy which the Church aims at obtaining in admitting into her liturgy the art of musical sounds.” Beauty is what holds the truth and goodness to their tasks. As Hans Urs von Balthasar said, without beauty, the truth does not persuade, goodness does not compel. Beauty is that which synthesizes diverse elements into a unified whole: truth, goodness, and the human impulse to worship.

Concerning *universality*, sacred music is supra-national, accessible to those of diverse cultures and groups. Particular cultural forms can be admitted but these forms must be subordinated to the general characteristic. The continuous use of sacred music in all liturgies ensures that it is received naturally by all people as part of the liturgy.

### **Q: Why should we care?**

**A:** In celebrating her liturgy, the Church uses methods that involve the whole person: intellect and will, emotions and senses, imagination, aesthetic sensibilities, memory, physical gestures, and powers of expression. Appropriate feeling is necessary to the communication and assimilation of religious truth. This is why the Church has attached great importance to an appropriate musical expression. Her insistence is upon music of a specific kind, which will not merely stimulate feelings in a general way, but will exemplify Christian truth and convey transcendent mysteries in an appropriate form of expression. As Pope Benedict XVI has written, sacred music “elevates the spirit precisely by wedding it to the senses, and it elevates the senses by uniting them with the spirit.”

### **Q: Isn't this really a matter of taste?**

**A:** Nothing prevents people from preferring one form of music to another. What's more, there is nothing to prevent people from preferring one form of popular *religious* song to another form. But music that is suitable for liturgy must be of a special sort. No longer

be the deciding consideration. “Not all music is considered suitable for liturgical celebrations,” writes John Paul II in his Chirograph on sacred music of November 22, 2003. He quotes Pope Paul VI: “If music—instrumental and vocal—does not possess at the same time the sense of prayer, dignity, and beauty, entry into the sphere of the sacred and the religious is [thereby] precluded.” Indeed, in his general audience on February 26, 2003, John Paul II called for musicians to “make an examination of conscience so that the beauty of music and hymnody will return once again to the liturgy. It is necessary to purify worship of ugliness of style, careless forms of expression, ill-prepared music and texts, which are not worthy of the great act that is being celebrated.”

### **Q: What about “full, conscious, active participation?”**

**A:** This was a primary concern of the council. We can distinguish two forms of participation: internal and external. Since human beings are made up of both body and soul, the “*actuosa participatio*” of human persons is necessarily internal as well as external: the interior element is the “heart” of the matter, which must be expressed in the exterior participation. One kind of external participation is singing.

Pope John Paul II’s *Ad Limina* address to the Bishops of the U. S. (October 9, 1998) says: “active participation does not preclude the active passivity of silence, stillness and listening: indeed, it demands it. Worshippers are not passive, for instance, when listening to the readings or the homily, or following the prayers of the celebrant, and the chants and music of the liturgy. These are experiences of silence and stillness, but they are in their own way profoundly active.”

The call for active participation in singing long predates the Council. Pius X in *Tra le sollicitudini* (1903) speaks of the active participation of the people in the public and solemn prayer of the Church. It was made most explicit in Pius XII’s *Mediator Dei* of 1947.

Many people want to reduce this Church mandate concerning the role of the congregation to a single instruction: sing as much as possible. Any music that people do not or cannot sing is thereby excluded from liturgical use. This interpretation has been specifically rejected by all Popes for a century. Indeed, the post-conciliar *Musicam Sacram*

ing a full choral Ordinary, while the *of the Roman Missal* specifically names parts of the Mass that may be sung by the choir alone. Hence, the conscientious and diligent church musician must not allow himself to be misled by a one-sided misinterpretation of the conciliar texts.

### **Q: What is the sung Ordinary?**

**A:** The Ordinary refers to the parts of the Mass that are generally repeated in each liturgy. These include the introductory and penitential rites, as well as the other main prayers and responses of the Eucharistic Prayers, the communion rite, and the concluding rites. The sung Ordinary refers to five prayers identified by the first word of their texts: Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus (and Benedictus), and Agnus Dei. When people refer to a Mass setting, this is what they mean.

### **Q: What's so great about the organ?**

**A:** Since gaining acceptance for liturgical use in the Middle Ages, the organ has been associated with sacred music. Its method of producing sound recalls the human voice itself, which the Church has given primacy in liturgical music. Its use over the centuries in a solo and supportive role has given the instrument a unique status above all other instruments. As Pope Benedict XVI has said: "The organ has always been considered, and rightly so, the king of musical instruments, because it takes up all the sounds of creation...and gives resonance to the fullness of human sentiments, from joy to sadness, from praise to lamentation. By transcending the merely human sphere, as all music of quality does, it evokes the divine. The organ's great range of timbre, from *piano* through to a thundering *fortissimo*, makes it an instrument superior to all others. It is capable of echoing and expressing all the experiences of human life. The manifold possibilities of the organ in some way remind us of the immensity and the magnificence of God."