



Episode 12: Music and the Mass

SUMMARY

Music, in the mind of the Church, is not thought of as something added to the Mass; rather, music is an integral component of it. The Church describes her music as a treasure of inestimable value—and indeed, how rich is this musical heritage. As a unique combination of melody and word, sacred music was created for the worship of God; it forms a necessary part of the sacred liturgy.

From the earliest days of the Church, the Catholic tradition has understood the working of the Blessed Trinity as a dialogue of love—not simply a spoken dialogue, but an eternal love song. Fathers of the Church, such as Saint Augustine, show how this sacred music both expresses and inspires our religious devotion.

When we sing at Mass, we follow the example of the Trinity. When we participate in the hymn of praise of Jesus Christ to God his Father, when we join our voices to his, our song at Mass becomes a joining in the eternal love song of heaven.

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

Christ Jesus, high priest of the new and eternal covenant, taking human nature, introduced into this earthly exile that hymn which is sung throughout all ages in the halls of heaven. He joins the entire community of mankind to Himself, associating it with His own singing of this canticle of divine praise.

For he continues His priestly work through the agency of His Church, which is ceaselessly engaged in praising the Lord and interceding for the salvation of the whole world. She does this, not only by celebrating the Eucharist, but also in other ways, especially by praying the divine office. (n°. 83)

Musicam Sacram

Liturgical worship is given a more noble form when it is celebrated in song...

[T]he mystery of the liturgy, with its hierarchical and community nature, is more openly shown, the unity of hearts is more profoundly achieved by the union of voices, minds are more easily raised to heavenly things by the beauty of the sacred rites, and the whole celebration more clearly prefigures that

heavenly liturgy which is enacted in the holy city of Jerusalem.
Pastors of souls will therefore do all they can to achieve this form of celebration. (n°. 5)

IN THE TRADITION

“Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and playing to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.”

Ephesian 5:18b-20

“How I wept, deeply moved by your hymns, songs, and the voices that echoed through your Church! What emotion I experienced in them! Those sounds flowed into my ears, distilling the truth in my heart. A feeling of devotion surged within me, and tears streamed down my face—tears that did me good.”

St. Augustine,
The Confessions

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

✠ “The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for the pre-eminence is that, as a combination of sacred music and words, it forms a necessary or integral part of solemn liturgy.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), n°. 1156

✠ “Song and music are closely connected with the liturgical action. The criteria for their proper use are the beauty expressive of prayer, the unanimous participation of the assembly, and the sacred character of the celebration.”

CCC, n°. 1191

✠ “Religious singing by the people is to be intelligently fostered so that in devotions and sacred exercises, as also during liturgical services, the voices of the faithful may ring out according to the norms and requirements of the rubrics.”

Sacrosanctum Concilium, n°. 118

IN THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Heavenly hosts on high
unite in singing your praises;
men and women on earth
and all creation join in.

Hymn to Christ the King
Palm Sunday

Grant, O Lord our God,
that your obedient family,
whom you have fed with the Bread of heaven,
may follow the example of Saint Teresa
and rejoice
to sing of your mercies for all eternity.

Prayer after Communion
St. Teresa of Jesus, October 15

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does our singing at Mass represent the song of heaven?
2. Since singing combines word and breath. What biblical images does this combination bring to mind?

FOR FURTHER READING

Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Instruction on Music in the Liturgy: Musicam Sacram*, March 5, 1967.

Gerald Dennis Gill, *Music in Catholic Liturgy*, (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2009).