

CHIROGRAPH OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF
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FOR THE CENTENARY OF THE MOTU PROPRIO TRA LE SOLLECITUDINI,
ON SACRED MUSIC

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1. Motivated by a strong desire “to maintain and promote the decorum of the House of God”, my Predecessor St Pius X promulgated the Motu Proprio Tra le Sollecitudini 100 years ago. Its purpose was to renew sacred music during liturgical services. With it he intended to offer the Church practical guidelines in that vital sector of the Liturgy, presenting them, as it were, as a “juridical code of sacred music”[1]. This act was also part of the programme of his Pontificate which he summed up in the motto: “Instaurare omnia in Cristo”.

The centenary of the Document gives me the opportunity to recall the important role of sacred music, which St Pius X presented both as a means of lifting up the spirit to God and as a precious aid for the faithful in their “active participation in the most holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church”[2].

The holy Pontiff recalls that the special attention which sacred music rightly deserves stems from the fact that, “being an integral part of the solemn Liturgy, [it] participates in the general purpose of the Liturgy, which is the glory of God and the sanctification and edification of the faithful”[3]. Since it interprets and expresses the deep meaning of the sacred text to which it is intimately linked, it must be able “to add greater efficacy to the text, in order that through it the faithful may be... better disposed for the reception of the fruits of grace belonging to the celebration of the most holy mysteries”[4].

2. The Second Vatican Council followed up this approach in chapter VI of the Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium on the Sacred Liturgy, in which the ecclesial role of sacred music is clearly defined: “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 this pre-eminence is that, as sacred melody united to words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn Liturgy”[5]. The Council also recalls that “Sacred Scripture, indeed, has bestowed praise upon sacred song. So have the Fathers of the Church and the Roman Pontiffs who in more recent times, led by St Pius X, have explained more precisely the ministerial function exercised by sacred music in the service of the Lord”[6].

In fact, by continuing the ancient biblical tradition to which the Lord himself and the Apostles abided (cf. Mt 26: 30; Eph 5: 19; Col 3: 16), the Church has encouraged song at liturgical celebrations throughout her history, providing wonderful examples of melodic comment to the sacred texts in accordance with the creativity of every culture, in the rites of both West and East.

The attention my Predecessors thus paid to this delicate sector was constant. They recalled the fundamental principles that must enliven the composition of sacred music, especially when it is destined for the Liturgy. Besides Pope St Pius X, other Popes who deserve mention are Benedict XIV with his Encyclical *Annus Qui* (19 February 1749), Pius XII with his Encyclicals *Mediator Dei* (20 November 1947) and *Musicae Sacrae Disciplina* (25 December 1955), and lastly Paul VI, with the luminous statements that punctuated many of his Speeches.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council did not fail to reassert these principles with a view to their application in the changed conditions of the times. They did so specifically in chapter six of the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Pope Paul VI then saw that those principles were translated into concrete norms, in particular with the Instruction *Musica Sacram*, promulgated on 5 March 1967 with his approval by the Congregation then known as the Sacred Congregation for Rites. In this same context, it is necessary to refer to those principles of conciliar inspiration to encourage a development in conformity with the requirements of liturgical reform and which will measure up to the liturgical and musical tradition of the Church. The text of the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* in which it is declared that the Church “approves of all forms of true art which have the requisite qualities[7], and admits them into divine worship”, finds satisfactory criteria for application in nn. 50–53 of the above-mentioned Instruction *Musica Sacram*[8].

3. On various occasions I too have recalled the precious role and great importance of music and song for a more active and intense participation in liturgical celebrations[9]. I have also stressed the need to “purify worship from ugliness of style, from distasteful forms of expression, from uninspired musical texts which are not worthy of the great act that is being celebrated”[10], to guarantee dignity and excellence to liturgical compositions.

In this perspective, in the light of the Magisterium of St Pius X and my other Predecessors and taking into account in particular the pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council, I would like to re-propose several fundamental principles for this important sector of the

life of the Church, with the intention of ensuring that liturgical music corresponds ever more closely to its specific function.

4. In continuity with the teachings of St Pius X and the Second Vatican Council, it is necessary first of all to emphasize that music destined for sacred rites must have holiness as its reference point: indeed, “sacred music increases in holiness to the degree that it is intimately linked with liturgical action”[11]. For this very reason, “not all without distinction that is outside the temple (profanum) is fit to cross its threshold”, my venerable Predecessor Paul VI wisely said, commenting on a Decree of the Council of Trent[12]. And he explained that “if music—instrumental and vocal—does not possess at the same time the sense of prayer, dignity and beauty, it precludes the entry into the sphere of the sacred and the religious”[13]. Today, moreover, the meaning of the category “sacred music” has been broadened to include repertoires that cannot be part of the celebration without violating the spirit and norms of the Liturgy itself.

St Pius X’s reform aimed specifically at purifying Church music from the contamination of profane theatrical music that in many countries had polluted the repertoire and musical praxis of the Liturgy. In our day too, careful thought, as I emphasized in the Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, should be given to the fact that not all the expressions of figurative art or of music are able “to express adequately the mystery grasped in the fullness of the Church’s faith”[14]. Consequently, not all forms of music can be considered suitable for liturgical celebrations.

5. Another principle, affirmed by St Pius X in the *Motu Proprio Tra le Sollecitudini* and which is closely connected with the previous one, is that of sound form. There can be no music composed for the celebration of sacred rites which is not first of all “true art” or which does not have that efficacy “which the Church aims at obtaining in admitting into her Liturgy the art of musical sounds”[15].

Yet this quality alone does not suffice. Indeed, liturgical music must meet the specific prerequisites of the Liturgy: full adherence to the text it presents, synchronization with the time and moment in the Liturgy for which it is intended, appropriately reflecting the gestures proposed by the rite. The various moments in the Liturgy require a musical expression of their own. From time to time this must fittingly bring out the nature proper to a specific rite, now proclaiming God’s marvels, now expressing praise, supplication or even sorrow for the experience of human suffering which, however, faith opens to the prospect of Christian hope.

6. The music and song requested by the liturgical reform—it is right to stress this point—must comply with the legitimate demands of

adaptation and inculturation. It is clear, however, that any innovation in this sensitive matter must respect specific criteria such as the search for musical expressions which respond to the necessary involvement of the entire assembly in the celebration and which, at the same time, avoid any concessions to frivolity or superficiality. Likewise, on the whole, those elitist forms of “inculturation” which introduce into the Liturgy ancient or contemporary compositions of possible artistic value, but that indulge in a language that is incomprehensible to the majority, should be avoided.

In this regard St Pius X pointed out—using the term universal—a further prerequisite of music destined for worship: “...while every nation”, he noted, “is permitted to admit into its ecclesiastical compositions those special forms which may be said to constitute its native music, still these forms must be subordinate in such a manner to the general character of sacred music, that nobody of any nation may receive an impression other than good on hearing them”[16]. In other words, the sacred context of the celebration must never become a laboratory for experimentation or permit forms of composition and performance to be introduced without careful review.

7. Among the musical expressions that correspond best with the qualities demanded by the notion of sacred music, especially liturgical music, Gregorian chant has a special place. The Second Vatican Council recognized that “being specially suited to the Roman Liturgy”[17] it should be given, other things being equal, pride of place in liturgical services sung in Latin[18]. St Pius X pointed out that the Church had “inherited it from the Fathers of the Church”, that she has “jealously guarded [it] for centuries in her liturgical codices” and still “proposes it to the faithful” as her own, considering it “the supreme model of sacred music”[19]. Thus, Gregorian chant continues also today to be an element of unity in the Roman Liturgy.

Like St Pius X, the Second Vatican Council also recognized that “other kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, are by no means excluded from liturgical celebrations”[20]. It is therefore necessary to pay special attention to the new musical expressions to ascertain whether they too can express the inexhaustible riches of the Mystery proposed in the Liturgy and thereby encourage the active participation of the faithful in celebrations[21].

8. The importance of preserving and increasing the centuries-old patrimony of the Church spurs us to take into particular consideration a specific exhortation of the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*: “Choirs must be assiduously developed, especially in cathedral churches”[22]. In turn, the Instruction *Musicam Sacram* explains the ministerial task of the

choir: “Because of the liturgical ministry it exercises, the choir (cappella musicale or schola cantorum) should be mentioned here explicitly. The conciliar norms regarding the reform of the Liturgy have given the choir’s function greater prominence and importance. The choir is responsible for the correct performance of its part, according to the differing types of song, to help the faithful to take an active part in the singing. Therefore,... choirs are to be developed with great care, especially in cathedrals and other major churches, in seminaries and in religious houses of study”[23]. The schola cantorum’s task has not disappeared: indeed, it plays a role of guidance and support in the assembly and, at certain moments in the Liturgy, has a specific role of its own.

From the smooth coordination of all—the priest celebrant and the deacon, the acolytes, the altar servers, the readers, the psalmist, the schola cantorum, the musicians, the cantor and the assembly—flows the proper spiritual atmosphere which makes the liturgical moment truly intense, shared in and fruitful. The musical aspect of liturgical celebrations cannot, therefore, be left to improvisation or to the arbitration of individuals but must be well conducted and rehearsed in accordance with the norms and competencies resulting from a satisfactory liturgical formation.

9. In this area, therefore, the urgent need to encourage the sound formation of both pastors and the lay faithful also comes to the fore. St Pius X insisted in particular on the musical training of clerics. The Second Vatican Council also recalled in this regard: “Great importance is to be attached to the teaching and practice of music in seminaries, in the novitiate houses of studies of Religious of both sexes, and also in other Catholic institutions and schools”[24]. This instruction has yet to be fully implemented. I therefore consider it appropriate to recall it, so that future pastors may acquire sufficient sensitivity also in this field.

In the task of training, a special role is played by schools of sacred music, which St Pius X urged people to support and encourage[25] and which the Second Vatican Council recommended be set up wherever possible[26]. A concrete result of the reform of St Pius X was the establishment in Rome in 1911, eight years after the *Motu Proprio*, of the “Pontificia Scuola Superiore di Musica Sacra” (Pontifical School for Advanced Studies in Sacred Music), which later became the “Pontificio Istituto di Musica Sacra” (Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music). As well as this academic institution, which has now existed for almost a century and has rendered a high-quality service to the Church, the particular Churches have established many other schools that deserve to be supported and reinforced by an ever better knowledge and performance of good liturgical music.

10. Since the Church has always recognized and fostered progress in the arts, it should not come as a surprise that in addition to Gregorian chant and polyphony she admits into celebrations even the most modern music, as long as it respects both the liturgical spirit and the true values of this art form. In compositions written for divine worship, therefore, the particular Churches in the various nations are permitted to make the most of “those special forms which may be said to constitute the special character of [their] native music”[27]. On the lines of my holy Predecessor and of what has been decreed more recently by the Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium[28], I have also intended in the Encyclical Ecclesia de Eucharistia to make room for new musical contributions, mentioning in addition to the inspired Gregorian melodies, “the many, often great composers who sought to do justice to the liturgical texts of the Mass”[29].

11. The last century, with the renewal introduced by the Second Vatican Council, witnessed a special development in popular religious song, about which Sacrosanctum Concilium says: “Religious singing by the faithful is to be intelligently fostered so that in devotions and sacred exercises as well as in liturgical services, the voices of the faithful may be heard...”[30]. This singing is particularly suited to the participation of the faithful, not only for devotional practices “in conformity with the norms and requirements of the rubrics”[31], but also with the Liturgy itself. Popular singing, in fact, constitutes “a bond of unity and a joyful expression of the community at prayer, fosters the proclamation of the one faith and imparts to large liturgical assemblies an incomparable and recollected solemnity”[32].

12. With regard to compositions of liturgical music, I make my own the “general rule” that St Pius X formulated in these words: “The more closely a composition for church approaches in its movement, inspiration and savour the Gregorian melodic form, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes; and the more out of harmony it is with that supreme model, the less worthy it is of the temple”[33]. It is not, of course, a question of imitating Gregorian chant but rather of ensuring that new compositions are imbued with the same spirit that inspired and little by little came to shape it. Only an artist who is profoundly steeped in the *sensus Ecclesiae* can attempt to perceive and express in melody the truth of the Mystery that is celebrated in the Liturgy[34]. In this perspective, in my Letter to Artists I wrote: “How many sacred works have been composed through the centuries by people deeply imbued with the sense of mystery! The faith of countless believers has been nourished by melodies flowing from the hearts of other believers, either introduced into the Liturgy or used as an aid to dignified worship. In song, faith is experienced as vibrant joy, love and confident expectation of the saving intervention of God”[35].

Renewed and deeper thought about the principles that must be the basis of the formation and dissemination of a high-quality repertoire is therefore required. Only in this way will musical expression be granted to serve appropriately its ultimate aim, which is “the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful”[36].

I know well that also today there are numerous composers who are capable of making their indispensable contribution in this spirit, increasing with their competent collaboration the patrimony of music at the service of a Liturgy lived ever more intensely. To them I express my confidence, together with the most cordial exhortation to put their every effort into increasing the repertoire of compositions worthy of the exalted nature of the mysteries celebrated and, at the same time, suited to contemporary sensibilities.

13. Lastly, I would like to recall what St Pius X disposed at the practical level so as to encourage the effective application of the instructions set out in his *Motu Proprio*. Addressing the Bishops, he prescribed that they institute in their Dioceses “a special Commission of qualified persons competent in sacred music”[37]. Wherever the papal disposition was put into practice, it has yielded abundant fruit. At the present time there are numerous national, diocesan and interdiocesan commissions which make a precious contribution to preparing local repertoires, seeking to practise a discernment that takes into account the quality of the texts and music. I hope that the Bishops will continue to support the commitment of these commissions and encourage their effectiveness in the pastoral context[38].

In the light of the experience gained in recent years, the better to assure the fulfilment of the important task of regulating and promoting the sacred Liturgy, I ask the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments to increase its attention, in accordance with its institutional aims[39], in the sector of sacred liturgical music, availing itself of the competencies of the various commissions and institutions specialized in this field as well as of the contribution of the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music. Indeed, it is important that the musical compositions used for liturgical celebrations correspond to the criteria appropriately set down by St Pius X and wisely developed by both the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent Magisterium of the Church. In this perspective, I am confident that the Bishops’ Conferences will carefully examine texts destined for liturgical chant[40] and will devote special attention to evaluating and encouraging melodies that are truly suited to sacred use[41].

14. Again at the practical level, the Motu Proprio whose centenary it is also deals with the question of the musical instruments to be used in the Latin Liturgy. Among these, it recognizes without hesitation the prevalence of the pipe organ and establishes appropriate norms for its use[42]. The Second Vatican Council fully accepted my holy Predecessor's approach, decreeing: "The pipe organ is to be held in high esteem in the Latin Church, for it is the traditional musical instrument, the sound of which can add a wonderful splendour to the Church's ceremonies and powerfully lifts up people's minds to God and to higher things"[43].

Nonetheless, it should be noted that contemporary compositions often use a diversity of musical forms that have a certain dignity of their own. To the extent that they are helpful to the prayer of the Church they can prove a precious enrichment. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that instruments are suitable for sacred use, that they are fitting for the dignity of the Church and can accompany the singing of the faithful and serve to edify them.

15. I hope that the centenary commemoration of the Motu Proprio *Tra le Sollecitudini*, through the intercession of their holy Author together with that of St Cecilia, patroness of sacred music, may be an encouragement and incentive to those who are involved in this important aspect of liturgical celebrations. Sacred music lovers, by dedicating themselves with renewed impetus to a sector of such vital importance, will contribute to the spiritual growth of the People of God. The faithful, for their part, in expressing their faith harmoniously and solemnly in song, will experience its richness ever more fully and will abide by the commitment to express its impulses in their daily life. In this way, through the unanimous agreement of pastors of souls, musicians and faithful, it will be possible to achieve what the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* describes as the true "purpose of sacred music", that is, "the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful"[44].

May your example and model in this be the Virgin Mary, whose praise in the Magnificat of the marvels God works in human history remains beyond compare. With this hope, I impart my Blessing to everyone with affection.

Given in Rome at St Peter's on 22 November, the Memorial of St Cecilia, in the year 2003, the 26th of the Pontificate

JOHN PAUL II