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Part II

In the last installment of this article, we examined the definition of sacred music and found that the authors of the *Instruction* of 1958 were using a definition that was clearly wider than the one Pius X used in his *Motu Proprio* of 1903. We also analyzed the problem of "popular religious song," and discovered that this type of music, insofar as it is allowed in the Holy liturgy, and without its proper safeguards, was a liturgical novelty contrary to the principles of Pius X's reform, as well as the traditional practice of Catholic sacred music throughout the ages.

In this second installment, we will examine the problem of the directive in the *Instruction* that gives preference to Gregorian chant to the ***virtual exclusion*** of all polyphonic music – even the sacred polyphonic music of the 16th Century. In order to address this problem, we begin with some observations on the tendency among some contemporary traditionalists to advocate the elimination of polyphonic sacred music in the Tridentine liturgy.

I. Chant vs Sacred Polyphony: The Problem

In an article in *The Remnant* entitled "Are Traditionalists Preserving Tradition," Dr. John Kaess notes the all-too-common tendency today of certain traditionalist priests and lay people to give preference to chant to the virtual exclusion of sacred polyphony:

"How bad is this problem? In too many 'traditional' parishes, polyphony is being suppressed and choirs are being discouraged or disbanded. Even the organ is being gradually suppressed. This is *not* tradition."[i]

I have also encountered this same attitude among some traditionalists as mentioned above by Dr. Kaess, and it immediately raises the question of the origin of this curious notion. Where do some traditionalists get this idea?

It appears that one very probable source is the *Instruction* of 1958; in the last sentence of paragraph No. 16 of the *Instruction,* we find a very interesting, and, as we shall see later, novel concept being promoted:

"16. Gregorian chant is the sacred chant, proper and principal of the Roman Church. Therefore, not only can it be used in all liturgical actions, but unless there are mitigating circumstances, it is *preferable* to use it ***instead of other kinds of sacred music."[ii]***

The last clause of this quotation introduces the idea that it is "… *preferable to use Gregorian*

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chant instead of other kinds of sacred music." Granted, this is not a precept, that is, it does not bind under pain of sin; rather, it is a directive, an invitation, so to speak, to use chant instead of other types of sacred music. Thus, those who wish to do the will of the Church, even where obedience is not mandatory (St. Thomas Aquinas calls this "perfect obedience")[iii] are therefore encouraged to use Gregorian chant to the exclusion of all other types of sacred music. This immediately raises the crucial question of whether this directive is in conformity to the traditional practice of sacred music. In other words, is there any real evidence to support a traditional practice of suppressing (or even downplaying) polyphony for an all-Gregorian chant liturgy? Let us investigate this question by means of a brief examination of the history of Catholic sacred music. If there is a tradition of suppressing the use of polyphonic sacred music, it will be found in the history of Church music.

The best way to discover the main legislative principles of Catholic sacred music is to consult papal legislative documents on sacred music. Thus, our primary focus will be on these important documents as they relate to the history of sacred music. Moreover, papal legislative documents, since they emanate from the highest authority of the Church, normally take precedence over other documents that are issued by other official organs of the Church. In addition, other sources will be consulted, including music theory treatises of the time, as well as other types of written communication in this brief survey of sacred music history.

II. Chant vs Sacred Polyphony: A Brief History of Catholic Sacred

Polyphony

a) 95 A.D. to the Dawn of Polyphony

If we desire to find an actual period in Church history in which only Gregorian chant was used in the liturgy, we must go back well before the 8th Century, since prior to the beginning of sacred polyphony there was no polyphonic music as we know it today. This polyphonic art had to be invented, and then systematically developed. This development took several centuries to accomplish.[iv] Gregorian chant itself appears to go back to the earliest days of the Church. The very first official legislation on sacred music comes from the year 95 A.D. with a document authored by Pope Clement I, the fourth Pope of the Church. This piece is concerned with a positive precept for the use of chant in the Divine Offices, and a negative precept that forbids the singing of psalms and hymns outside of liturgical services, i.e. in non-liturgical settings, such as pagan festivals.[v] During this time, of course, the chant is passed down by means of an oral tradition. Chant will not even begin to develop a notational system of its own until about the 8th Century.[vi] It will then take

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another three centuries or so to create a fully developed notational system.

Several other Popes legislate regarding sacred music during the 1st through the 8th Centuries; for example, Pope St. Damasus (366-384) orders the chanting of psalms day and night in all churches. He orders this to be done by priests, monks, and bishops.[vii] This is also the period of the great contributions of Pope St. Gregory the Great (540- 604), after whom the chant is named. Gregory is the Pope who codifies the chant, and provides it with a uniformity that is preserved to this day; he also develops what **will** become important components of the *Ordo* of the Mass with the introduction of the Proper of the Saints, the Proper of the Time, and the Common Masses and Prayers. Fr. Hayburn aptly summarizes Pope St. Gregory's contributions:

"Gregory's work is not principally a creative work but rather one of compilation. He gathered up the treasures of antiquity and exercised a creative influence on the ages to come. He established rules, organized the practice of the chant, suppressed things contrary to the Christian spirit, made additions more in keeping with the correct sentiments of public prayer, and codified the customs of both East and West. Moreover, he made these reforms obligatory for the entire Church."[viii]

Now Pope St. Gregory the Great *never* mentions, either explicitly or implicitly, polyphonic sacred music in any of his legislation or, for that matter, in any of his numerous letters. In fact, *no Pope* from these early times issued any legislation concerning polyphonic sacred music; this is because one obviously cannot legislate that which, in all probability, does not yet exist, at least before 800 A.D.

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b) The Dawn of Polyphony

The first clear evidence of sacred polyphony occurs late in the 9th Century with a document (written by an anonymous author) known as the *Musica Enchiriadis* (890 A.D.).[ix]

This is a treatise on how to improvise the new sacred polyphonic style known then as *organum.* This style uses a Gregorian chant melody as a *cantus firmus* (literally, a "fixed song"), or, as it is technically described in the treatise: a *"vox principalis"* ("principal voice"), which is then combined with a newly composed melody that has chant-like features.[x] This added second part, which forms a counterpoint to the *cantus firmus* is described in the treatise as a *"vox organalis"* ("organal voice"). All of this music is used in the liturgy of the time in close conjunction with the monophonic Gregorian chant. This is the. first Western sacred polyphony in all of music history, and constitutes the birth of what

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will later become known as Western music. The existence of this treatise also indicates that *organum* is in use well before the appearance of the *Musica Enchiriadis.* Thus, the origins of *organum* may go back as early as perhaps the late 8th Century.

From the period of the late 9th Century to the end of the 13th Century, *organum* undergoes a very complex development in which many of the melodic problems of the art of counterpoint begin to be worked out in detail.[xi] *Organum* remains closely tied to the style of the chant by always utilizing a real Gregorian chant melody as a *cantus firmus,* and is always used in the sacred liturgy.

In terms of Church history, this period is, for the most part, a healthy time for the Church as it progresses from the reign of Charlemagne and the beginning of the Holy Roman Empire, to the high Middle Ages, with its Gothic cathedrals, great scholastic universities, and numerous preacher friars. Most importantly, in this context, there are no papal documents which are concerned with sacred polyphony – nothing to inhibit, much less suppress, the practice of sacred polyphony in the liturgy. The few papal documents on sacred music from this period only address issues related to the chant.[xii]

The situation with sacred polyphony changes, however, as the Catholic Church enters the perilous 14th Century…

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1 Dr. John Kaess, "Are Traditionalists Preserving Tradition?" *The Remnant,* April 30, 2006.

2. *Instruction* of 1958, PLSM, p. 360. Another translation has: *"Gregorian chant is the music characteristic of the Roman Church. Therefore, its* use *is* not *only permitted, but encouraged at al/ liturgical ceremonies above all other styles of music, unless circumstances demand otherwise."*

3. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* Ila llae, Q. 104, reply ad.

5.

4 For example, it will take nearly two centuries just to work out the details of creating truly independent melodic lines.

5. PLSM, pp. 1-2.

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6. See Willi Apel, *Gregorian chant.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1958, pp. 99-132.

7. PLSM, pp. 3-6. Additionally, it should be noted that Pope St. Celestine I (422-432), Pope St. Sixtus (432-440), Pope St. Leo the Great (440-461), Pope Symmacus (498-514), and Pope Hormisdas (514-523) continued the same policy in their own writings and legislation as did Pope St. Clement and Pope St. Damasus.

8. PLSM, p. 9.

9. The origins of sacred polyphony are difficult to determine with genuine precision. There are references to sacred music earlier than the *Musica Enchiriadis* that could be alluding to polyphony, but these passages are too ambiguous in that they could also be referring to monophonic chants just as well. The earliest clear references to simultaneous pitches are found in the 9th Century writings of Hucbald and Regino. These two personages wrote their comments near the time of the appearance of the *Musica Enchiriadis,* that is, in the late 9th Century. For example, Hucbald states:

"Consonance is the judicious and harmonious mixture of two tones, which exists only if two tones, produced from different sources, meet in one joint sound, as happens when a boy's voice and a man's voice sing the same thing, or in that which they commonly call organum." (Hucbald as quoted in *"Music in the Western World: A History in Documents"* selected and annotated by Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin. New York: Schirmer Books, 1984.)

There is also a medieval commentary on the *Musica Enchiriadis* known as the *Scholia Enchiriadis* that also proves conclusively that the author of the *Musica Enchiriadis* is discussing sacred polyphony.

10. By the term "chant-like features," I mean that the mode of the *vox principalis* remains the same in the *vox organalis,* such that the *finalis* is proper to that mode, and that the *ambitus* (range) of the chant tune, and that of the organal voice, remain within an octave. Moreover, the chant tune and organal tune use similar intervals in that steps (i.e. diatonic steps) remain the predominant interval, with larger intervals being less common.

11. Some of these details include the use of parallel, oblique, and contrary motion; the use of octaves, fifths, and fourths as consonant intervals; and a preference for contrary motion as a way of creating independent melodic voices.

12. For example, see the reprimand of Pope Leo IV to Abbot Honoratus excoriating him for neglecting to perform the correct type of chant in his monastery, in *Una Res* in PLSM, p.

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514. Note well that here is a good example of an abuse in the realm of Gregorian chant that required correction, and not suppression.

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