

Introduction

On June 19, 2025, in an article on an event sponsored by the *Domenico Bartolucci Foundation* that commemorated the 500th anniversary of the birth of the great Catholic composer Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, Pope Leo XIV, who was invited to the event, had the opportunity to hear a choir singing various Catholic sacred polyphonic compositions. He then commented on the *importance* of Catholic *polyphonic* sacred music at the event.

The article is originally from a Spanish-language publication, *ACI Prensa*, published on June 19, 2025, and written by Eduardo Berdejo. It was then translated into English and published by the *Catholic News Agency* (CNA).[\[1\]](#)

After hearing the choir sing several Catholic polyphonic sacred music selections, the pope made a number of very interesting comments on the music. This essay will explore those comments and provide some commentary on the pope's thinking for a contextual understanding of his thoughts relative to the Church's official *traditional* teaching on Catholic sacred music. All of the quotes from Pope Leo XIV are taken directly from the article as found in the CNA publication.

It is important to note that the pope's comments from this article are not always *verbatim* quotes from specific documents, papal or otherwise. Rather, with a couple of exceptions, they are mostly statements based on the substance of official documents on Catholic sacred music that reflect the traditional teaching of the theory and *praxis* of sacred *polyphonic* music. The pope is not officially promulgating any document himself, but rather, he is making statements and observations that confirm his considerable understanding of true Catholic sacred music. I have divided the quotes into six sections, each with a different number, for easy identification. These numbers do not appear in the original Spanish article, nor in the CNA translation.

The Three Categories of Catholic Sacred Music

In order to understand the context of Leo XIV's comments, it is crucial to know the *three categories* of Catholic sacred music. This division is found in numerous Church documents, but is also very clearly articulated in Pope Pius X's famous *motu proprio* titled: *Tra le Sollecitudini*, which promulgated his extensive reform of Catholic sacred music back in 1903. There, Catholic sacred music is divided into *three principal categories*: 1) Gregorian chant; 2) 16th Century sacred polyphonic music; and 3) Modern Catholic sacred music. (N.B. This division is ***not*** my personal opinion, but *clearly* and *explicitly* indicated in Pope Pius X's *Motu Proprio of 1903*, as well as in many other official papal and non-papal sacred music documents promulgated by the Church over the years.[\[2\]](#)) I will explain each category

briefly.

1. Gregorian Chant

Gregorian chant is the official repertoire of solemn *monophonic* liturgical plainsong of the Roman Catholic Church. Here, "monophonic" refers to the fact that chant consists of a *single melody*, with no non-vocal instrumental accompaniment, nor any other simultaneous melodic parts in the composition. It probably had its beginning in the very early Church, and was systematically developed over many centuries, first as a strictly oral tradition, and then later, around the 8th Century, it began to develop its own unique type of music notational system that eventually became a distinct medieval chant notation that can be found even in modern, contemporary publications of the chant. It was also codified during the reign of Pope Gregory the Great, hence the name "Gregorian chant."

- 16th Century Polyphonic Sacred Music

This is the *polyphonic* sacred music brought to its florescence in the latter half of the 16th Century (about 1550 to 1600). It has its origins in the medieval period in the latter part of the 9th Century, where it is closely associated with the Gregorian chant. It develops out of the next logical compositional step of bringing two or more Gregorian chant-like melodies into a harmonious polyphonic whole. This, of course, is the very essence of the art of Western *counterpoint*, and it diligently preserves the *sensus sacrae* of the Gregorian chant, but in a polyphonic textural whole rather than a single, monophonic (single-melody) texture. It is also known as the "*ars perfecta*," but is sometimes referred to as "Renaissance music," for it reaches its perfection or flowering (florescence) in the late Renaissance period. However, not all "Renaissance music" is Catholic sacred music. The Renaissance style period (1450-1600) also includes a variety of secular music, and also, after 1521, Protestant "sacred music." In order to avoid this confusion in his music documents, Pope Pius X simply calls it "*16th Century polyphonic sacred music*," or just "*classical polyphony*."

- Modern Catholic Sacred Music

Technically, this category includes all polyphonic Catholic sacred music (and any new unaccompanied chant compositions) composed after the year 1600 up to the present time. It would thus include the Catholic sacred music of the following historical style periods: the Baroque period (1600-1750), the Classical period (1750-1820), the Romantic period (1820-1900), the 20th Century, and the 21st Century up to the present. It would also include any Catholic sacred polyphonic music with or without orchestral and/or organ accompaniment, as well as Gregorian chant accompanied by four-part harmony, typically on the organ, which latter Pius X refers to as "*falso bordone*." [\[3\]](#)

True historical Gregorian chant from the first category is sung *without any kind of instrumental or vocal accompaniment*, while “accompanied Gregorian chant” is a *polyphonic adaptation* of the chant. To say that “accompanied Gregorian chant” falls into the first category is a *contradiction in terms*, because true *monophonic* music, *by definition*, has *one melody only*, while *polyphonic* music has numerous melodies in different voice parts sounding at the same time. In a *broader sense*, the term “polyphonic” can also refer to a single melody that is accompanied by block chords, or broken chords (arpeggios), as in typical Catholic hymns. This latter is sometimes described as having “homophonic texture.” On the other hand, a multi-melodic composition within a complex contrapuntal texture that permeates *all* of the voice parts is “polyphonic” (or even better: “contrapuntal”) in the *strict sense*.

Pope Leo XIV on Catholic Polyphonic Sacred Music

In his comments on the music that Pope Leo heard at the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the birth of Palestrina, the Holy Father focuses his thoughts principally on Catholic *polyphonic* sacred music. Most of his comments are on the music of the second of the three categories: 16th Century polyphonic sacred music, and in particular, the great polyphonic sacred music of Palestrina. He later includes comments on Catholic sacred music from the third category: Modern Catholic sacred music. In this last context, he mentions the polyphonic sacred music of the late Cardinal Domenico Bartolucci (1917-2013), who was a director and composer for the *Sistine Chapel Choir*.

In the following commentary, I will quote the Holy Father’s words from the article and then compare his statements to the official teaching of the traditional Roman Catholic Church on sacred music.

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina

1. “Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina was, in the history of the Church, one of the composers who most contributed to the promotion of sacred music, for ‘the glory of God and the sanctification and edification of the faithful’ in the difficult yet passionate context of the Counter-Reformation,” Leo XIV said.”

Here, Pope Leo XIV begins with praise for the sacred music of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina. Born around 1525 in a small town near Rome called “Palestrina,” Palestrina (1525-1594) is considered to be one of the greatest composers of all time, and, besides some secular madrigals, composed numerous and profoundly religious liturgical sacred music for the Catholic Church, particularly exemplifying the musical reforms of the Council of Trent (1545-1563). He is mentioned *specifically* by Pope St. Pius X in his *Motu Proprio* of 1903 as

the composer *par excellence* of Catholic sacred polyphonic music. However, this should not be taken to mean that Palestrina was the only great composer of Catholic 16th Century sacred polyphonic music. Other great composers of the late 16th Century, such as William Byrd (ca. 1540-1623), Tomás Luis de Victoria, (1548-1611), and Orlando di Lasso (1532-1594) among others, also composed extraordinarily beautiful sacred liturgical music for the Church.

Remote Final Cause

Pope Leo then connects Catholic sacred music with its purpose, or final cause, by quoting (almost *verbatim*) the words of Pius X's *Motu Proprio* of 1903 (and repeated in many other Church documents on sacred music), that the purpose of sacred music is for “. . . *the glory of God and the sanctification and edification of the faithful.*” In his *Motu Proprio* of 1903, Pope Pius X explains that the remote goal of Catholic sacred music is the honor and glory of God, which is the highest goal that any music, sacred or otherwise, can achieve.

Proximate Final Causes

When Pope Leo uses the phrase “*sanctification and edification of the faithful,*” he is referring to sacred music's more *proximate* final causes, one of which is helping to *sanctify* the faithful, which means that sacred music, with its *sensus sacrae*, helps to dispose the faithful to the graces of the sacraments and the liturgy of the Church, and thus assists the faithful in the acquisition of sanctifying graces, which graces, of course, are absolutely *essential for salvation*.

Another *proximate* final cause is the *edification* of the faithful, which means that the music is designed to be clothed with the beauty of melody and harmony so as to give a deeper *meaning* to the text. Pope Leo expands upon this concept in the next set of quotes from section Number 2:

2. “His [Palestrina's P.B] solemn and austere compositions, inspired by Gregorian chant, closely unite music and liturgy, ‘both by giving prayer a sweeter expression and fostering unanimity, and by enriching the sacred rites with greater solemnity,’” the pontiff added.

In this regard, Leo XIV said that polyphony “is a musical form full of meaning, both for prayer and for Christian life,” since “it is inspired by the sacred text, which it seeks to clothe with an appropriate melody so that the faithful may better understand the text.”

The pope explained that polyphonic music “achieves this goal by entrusting the words to several voices, each of which repeats the words in its own unique way, with varied and

complementary melodic and harmonic movements."

In this section, the Holy Father highlights three aspects that give deeper meaning to the text in Palestrina's music: first, the close *unanimity* between the music and its liturgical text, along with the enrichment of the sacred rites with greater solemnity; second, the way music assists the faithful with beautiful melody in *understanding* the text; and third, with remarkable insight: how the imitative polyphonic texture of Palestrina's music (an important compositional technique of Catholic sacred music of the 16th Century), specifically achieves this goal: ". . . by entrusting the words to several voices, each of which repeats the words in its own unique way, with varied and complementary melodic and harmonic movements." Additionally, note that the pope acknowledges the *inspiration* of Gregorian chant on Palestrina's music. This statement is true and applies to all of the compositions of the great Catholic sacred music composers of 16th Century, as well as the works of Catholic composers of the first and third categories. In other words, the sacred music in *all three categories* must have the *sensus sacrae*.

Compositional Skills of the Church Composer

In the next section, Number 3, the pope briefly elaborates further on more of the compositional details of how Palestrina and the composers of the 16th Century are able to create their sacred musical effects:

3. "Finally, everything harmonizes thanks to the skill with which the composer develops and interweaves the melodies, respecting the rules of counterpoint, echoing them, sometimes even creating dissonances that later find resolution in new chords," he noted.

Leo XIV said that "the effect of this dynamic unity in diversity — a metaphor for our common journey of faith under the guidance of the Holy Spirit — is to help the listener enter ever more deeply into the mystery expressed by the words, responding, if appropriate, with responsories or in alternations."

Here, he brings in the notion of the "dynamic of unity in diversity" that he asserts is ". . . a metaphor for our common journey of faith under the guidance of the Holy Spirit," which assists the listener to come to know more deeply the mystery expressed by the words. This is not just an understanding of the words, as in a mere translation, but a deeper (intellectual) *understanding* of the *mystery* as expressed by the words in an imitative, developmental context, as well as *experienced* by the music's ability to move the *emotions* of the listener.

The Rules of Counterpoint

The pontiff continues his comments on the compositional skills and learning *required* of the Church composer that are absolutely *essential* to raise the music to the level of being able to express the mysteries of the text. Please note the reference in the above quote to the importance of “*respecting the rules of counterpoint*” as a *requisite*, or *sine qua non* for acquiring the many compositional skills *necessary* to be a true compositional master of Catholic sacred music. One must *master* the art of music composition, which requires many years of study, training, and practice. The art of Catholic sacred music composition must *never* be entrusted to musical hacks, dabblers, and other incompetent amateurs,[4] (such as those who only know three or four chords on a guitar or a piano, but who know little to nothing about the *art of music composition*.[5] This again, by the way, is ***not*** my personal opinion, but the *constant teaching* of the Church on the *praxis* of Catholic sacred music. Pope St. Pius X in all of his official sacred music documents, both papal and episcopal, as well as all of the pre-Conciliar popes before Vatican II, in their official papal documents on sacred music *constantly* emphasized the importance of the mastery of the *art* of Catholic sacred music, both in itself, that is, in *composition*, and in the *way the music is performed*. The art of Catholic sacred music, therefore, *mandates professional-level training*.[6]

Pope Leo XIV continues in section Number 4 with the way that the faithful may *fully participate* in the liturgy:

4. *The pontiff noted that “thanks to this richness of form and content, the Roman polyphonic tradition, in addition to having bequeathed us an immense artistic and spiritual heritage, remains even today, in the musical field, a reference to which we can turn, albeit with the necessary adaptations, in sacred and liturgical composition.”*

In this way, through song, the faithful will be able to participate “fully, consciously, and actively in the liturgy, profoundly involving voice, mind, and heart.”

The Holy Father notes that due to the “*richness of form and content*,” of the *Roman polyphonic tradition*, this music provides Catholic composers an exemplar to which they can turn, but with certain “*adaptations*,” for sacred liturgical composition. These various concepts require some explication.

First, when Leo XIV mentions the “*richness of form and content*,” he is most likely referring to the extremely high quality of the *structure* of these compositions, as well as the high level of *expressive content*, in particular, the *sensus sacrae*.

Musical Structure

In terms of *structure*, this includes the delicate *classical* balance of rhythm and intervals of

the various melodies, which are designed to sound like they are individually crafted Gregorian chant-like melodies. It would also include the extremely intricate proportion and balance of the dissonance treatment characteristic of the "*ars perfecta*." Whole dissertations and treatises on dissonance treatment have been written on the richness of this aspect of 16th Century sacred music alone. "Structure" can also refer to the higher level of the overall *form* of the particular motet, or movement of the Mass, as the case may be. For example, the ABA structure of the text of the *Kyrie eleison* from the Mass can form a musical ABA structure on a higher level.

Expressive Content

Regarding the notion of *expressive content*, Pope St. Pius X in his *Motu Proprio* of 1903, *adamantly stresses* two aspects of what we are calling "expressive content" in Catholic sacred music. Pius X provides two *key concepts* for a correct understanding of the expressive content of a Catholic sacred music composition: 1) the *complete absence* of secular and sentimental expressive content; and 2) a thorough permeation of the *sense of the sacred* (*sensus sacrae*) throughout the *entire composition*. The first means that any musical content of a particular sacred composition that expresses, or connotes, or in any way resembles the expression of secular music (including syrupy, sentimental music), would be *forbidden* in liturgical Catholic sacred music. Second, in addition to the absence of secular and sentimental music is the *complete permeation* of the *sensus sacrae* in every measure and voice part in a sacred Catholic liturgical composition.

The Roman Polyphonic Tradition

The pontiff then mentions the phrase "Roman polyphonic tradition." Here he is distinguishing among the several late 16th Century Catholic polyphonic traditions of various regions in late Renaissance Europe. Besides the Roman tradition, there is the English tradition lead by the great Catholic recusant composer William Byrd (ca.1540-1623); the Spanish tradition lead by the great Catholic composer and priest Tomás Luis de Victoria; and the Franco-Flemish tradition lead by the great composer Orlando di Lasso. Each of the styles of these regions could be likened, by analogy, to linguistic dialects. That is, each style has many factors in common with late 16th Century sacred polyphony, but there are certain stylistic differences among the several regions. All of the composers from these four regions produced great liturgical Catholic sacred music for the Church. However, the pontiffs, at least since the time of Pope St. Pius X have shown a special partiality to the Roman tradition, and in particular, the liturgical sacred works of Palestrina.

The pope then mentions the artistic and spiritual heritage of the Roman tradition, which is true, but, in my opinion, does not necessarily imply something inferior about the composers

from these three other great sacred music European traditions. (Just listen to the sacred works of any of these three composers and you will be absolutely amazed!) Furthermore, Pope Leo XIV stresses that this Roman tradition is a *reference* that we can turn to for inspiration, as a model of excellence, and a purity of sacred music style that composers can search out in their quest to compose authentic Catholic sacred liturgical polyphonic compositions.

Mystery Caveat

However, in these comments, the pontiff's message comes with a caveat, that while we can turn to this great artistic and spiritual heritage of the Roman tradition, there will be certain "*necessary adaptations*." On the surface, this statement appears to be somewhat ambiguous. What does this clause mean? What are these "necessary adaptations?"

Here we will have to rely on several possible interpretations to gain some insight into what the pope actually means. Is he suggesting that these "adaptations" might be to compose sacred music for the new rites, in the vernacular, and according to the *Novus Ordo* calendar? Or, is he suggesting that there be adaptations of the principles of Catholic sacred music to contemporary traditional sacred music in churches that offer the Traditional Gregorian Latin Liturgy? This last is possible because contemporary church music often lacks the *sensus sacrae*, either because these liturgies utilize music with too many secular elements, or it is not performed up to the Church's standards, which, in either case, would be clearly contrary to traditional Catholic sacred music principles. At this point, we will need further clarification from the pontiff, himself, on what exactly he means by the word "adaptations."

Active Participation

In the last sentences of section Number 4 above, Pope Leo XIV concludes by stressing that by composers using this exemplar of Catholic sacred music, *the faithful will be able to participate "fully, consciously, and actively in the liturgy, profoundly involving voice, mind, and heart."* In these last sentences, the pontiff is stressing the full, conscious, and *active participation* of the faithful with their voices, minds, and hearts. The key phrase here is "active participation;" but is Leo XIV using this phrase with the same traditional meaning and understanding as that of Pius X, or is he using that of the modernist proponents of the false "Spirit of Vatican II"?

The *traditional* understanding of "active participation" in the context of sacred music, includes the use of the various activities of the mind, the heart, and/or the body (mostly the voice) in the liturgy, and is divided into *two types*: 1) *interior* active participation, and 2)

exterior active participation. *Interior* active participation involves contemplation of the mind and the experience of the heart, without necessarily including *exterior* manifestations of this contemplation. *Exterior* active participation concerns observable human movements, gestures, words, voices, and the like. In the singing of liturgical music, musical participation would normally involve both *interior* and *exterior* active participation, which is evident when a person sings sacred music. While, on the other hand, a person listening to sacred music in *silent contemplation* is actively participating, that participation is *interior*, and not necessarily *external*. Nevertheless, this latter would still be genuine "active participation." The choir members singing a sacred composition, actively participate *exteriorly* with the act of singing, but also experience active *interior* participation with the movement of their emotions, as well as the other effects of the music on their minds, hearts, and souls. On the other hand, most proponents of the false "Spirit of Vatican II" have tended to interpret "active participation" as only active *exterior* participation, while completely ignoring the active *interior* participation that is equal to, or even more important than, active *exterior* participation. Now if the entire congregation sings with the choir, as Leo himself indicates, then most, if not all, of the faithful singing at a liturgy would be engaged in both kinds of active participation in varying degrees. This would then support what the pontiff indicates when he states: "*In this way, through song, the faithful will be able to participate 'fully, consciously, and actively in the liturgy, profoundly involving voice, mind, and heart.'*" Since those who are *fully, consciously, and actively* participating in the liturgy, which profoundly involves the *voice, mind, and heart*, as he indicates, this would truly involve real *interior* and *exterior* active participation. Thus, it appears that the Holy Father is using these concepts in their traditional meanings.

In section Number 5, the pope then brings up an example of a well-known Mass by Palestrina:

5. Pope Leo XIV held up the "Mass of Pope Marcellus" as an example of excellence "as well as the precious repertoire of compositions bequeathed to us by the unforgettable Cardinal Domenico Bartolucci, the illustrious composer and, for almost 50 years, director of the Sistine Chapel Choir."

In this section, Leo XIV spotlights one of the most famous of Palestrina's polyphonic Masses, the "Mass of Pope Marcellus" (*Missa Papae Marcelli*) as an "*exemplar of excellence*," and then makes mention of the compositions of the late Cardinal Domenico Bartolucci, who was also an eminent Catholic sacred music composer himself, and for nearly 50 years, the music director of the *Sistine Chapel Choir*.

In the final section from the article on the event, the pontiff quotes St. Augustine about singing the Easter *Alleluia*, as encouragement to the singers and faithful who attended the

event. He then concludes with a final blessing.

6. *The Holy Father recalled the words of St. Augustine, who, "speaking of singing the Easter Alleluia, said: 'Let us sing it now, my brothers ... As wayfarers sing, but walk ... Go forward, go forward in good ... Sing and walk! Do not stray from the path, do not turn back, do not stop!'"*

"Let us make his invitation our own, especially in this sacred time of joy. My blessing to all," he concluded.

Summary

The comments of Pope Leo XIV from this event indicate that this pontiff not only understands the *importance* and *power* of traditional *polyphonic* Catholic sacred music, but also that his understanding of this great repertoire of sacred music appears to be mostly a *traditional understanding*, based on the many great papal and non-papal documents from the pre-Conciliar period. He develops this understanding with his comments in the context of the celebration of the 500th year anniversary of the birth of Palestrina, with its special focus on the second category of Catholic sacred music: *16th Century polyphonic sacred music*, as well as the music of the eminent Catholic sacred music composer Cardinal Bartolucci, whose music would fall under the third category of Catholic sacred music. The only problematic passage concerns what the pope means by those "necessary adaptations" that he mentions in section Number 4.

Finally, while it appears by his words that we have a pontiff with a good grasp, and a genuine appreciation of, what traditional Catholic *polyphonic* sacred music is, it is imperative that he also realize that there are serious problems with the new rite that are intrinsic to the rite, and *cannot be fixed*, and that there is no way that the Traditional Latin Mass (TLM) is in any way deficient, or in need of any correction or reform.[\[7\]](#)

Thus, let us pray that our Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV will restore the treasury of Catholic sacred liturgical music according to the true traditions of the Catholic Church; and that he comes to realize that the best policy is to accomplish this restoration with the full enforcement of the Holy Sacrifice of the Traditional Latin Mass, as promulgated by Pope St. Pius V in his Bull: *Quo Primum* of 1570!!

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[1] It appears to have been published by *ACI Prensa* in Spanish, and then translated and published the same day by the *Catholic News Agency*.

[2] I am referring here principally to pre-Conciliar documents on sacred music.

[3] *Falso bordone* is a technical term that signifies a Gregorian chant melody set to four-part triadic harmonies with conventional doublings that retains the declamatory rhythmic style of the chant. There also exist chant settings accompanied by the organ without the declamatory style of the chant. Both of these types are clearly *polyphonic adaptations* of the chant, and in no way are *monophonic*. Thus, if a *falso bordone*, or any other type of accompanied chant are composed after 1600, they belong logically, *qua* polyphony, to the third category: Modern Catholic sacred music.

[4] The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines the word “amateur,” in its 3rd meaning, as “one lacking the skill of a professional, as in an art.” This is the sense of the word “amateur” I am using here.

[5] The stringent musical training for priests and Church choirs is taught and made abundantly clear by the numerous pre-Conciliar Church documents on sacred music. However, there are some priests and lay faithful today, even in the traditionalist movement, who either ignore, or are under the false illusion that Pius X’s reforms on sacred music were merely recommendations. No!! They were mostly *precepts*, which, among other things, established sacred music *Diocesan Commissions* for each diocese of the Church, as well as rigorous music *curricula* in Catholic seminaries, colleges, universities, and the *Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music*. These precepts prove beyond all doubt that Pope St. Pius X in his *Motu Proprio* of 1903, *mandated* the establishment and maintenance of high sacred music standards for the Catholic Church—a mandate continued and enforced by all of the pre-Conciliar popes after Pius X.

[6] The rule about the rigorous musical training for priests and Church choirs does not extend to congregational singing, that is, of those faithful in the pews who sing hymns, and other allowed parts of the Mass; although there would be nothing wrong with those who enjoy singing with the congregation to cultivate their voices by means of voice lessons.

[7] Cf. Dr. Peter A. Kwasniewski, *Close the Workshop: Why The Old Mass Isn’t Broken And The New Mass Can’t Be Fixed*. Angelico Press, 2025.