

Prayer Has Become Music

The spirituality of Gregorian chant

A casual perusal of the titles in any religious bookstore today will quickly alert you that there is a decided interest in spirituality of all forms. Books on “music and spirituality” are especially popular today as many authors, not only from the music field, but also from the medical, psychological, and scientific disciplines are advocating the connection between music, health, and spirituality. With the unexpected acclaim of the 1994 CD, Chant, recorded by the Spanish Benedictine monks of Silos in Spain, Gregorian chant was rediscovered by a new generation and suddenly thrust into the spotlight of the popular recording world.

Last year, in 2008, it happened again. This time the Cistercian monks of Stift Heiligenkreuz in Austria hit the charts with their best-selling CD, Chant: Music for Paradise. In a fast paced world where stress and tension have become commonplace, chant allures people with its timeless and haunting melodies. For many it has the ability to bring a sense of calm and peace that they do not experience in other forms of music.

Chant is music that is deeply rooted in Christian worship and prayer. Our worship has been shaped by its musical language, simplicity and beauty for centuries. It has enabled generations of ordinary men and women to enter into prayer and to participate in the liturgy even at times when the role of the assembly was non-vocal. The transcendent nature of chant has the ability to arouse the spiritual longings of those who are disposed toward the sanctification of all that is truly human. Its ethereal sound provides a means to musically express the mystery of God. When music is both an art form and a vehicle for communicating a sacred text it can sometimes be forgotten that the primary purpose of chant is the sung prayer of the Church. It does not exist merely to be an artistic masterpiece but to nourish the soul. And in order to do that it has to express the thoughts and feelings that are fundamental to prayer. Even though these thoughts and feelings are different for each person and difficult to articulate, nonetheless, the experience that it brings about is the same for each person, that is, the movement or desire to pray. Some attribute this to its gentle simplicity. Even despite its sometimes elaborate technique there is nothing contrived or dramatic about it to weary or distract the listener. Unlike some contemporary compositions Gregorian chant does not employ mediocrity. Liturgical prayer is never enhanced by mediocre music. In fact, the Church has always stressed the importance of

excellence in all art forms that are employed in the liturgy, especially music. In chapter six on “Sacred Music,” of *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of Vatican II, we read: “The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art... Therefore sacred music is to be considered the more holy, the more closely connected it is with the liturgical action, whether making prayer more pleasing, promoting unity of minds, or conferring greater solemnity on the rites.” The essential relationship between music and liturgy goes much deeper than its use as a tool. If music is the wordless expression of a person’s soul, then truly sacred music should be considered not only an aid to prayer, but prayer itself.

In Gregorian chant in particular, many feel that this ancient song of the Church does enjoy and express in a special way something of that quality of timelessness which is ever ancient and ever new, and has the ability to proclaim in a unique way the newness of life in the Spirit of Jesus. The contemplative, pure, and spiritual elements of chant are precious qualities which help us to reach out beyond our immediate conditions to the ineffable, the eternal, the mystery of divine beauty and truth. This is not to say that Gregorian chant is superior to, or better than other forms of liturgical music that have come down to us over the centuries, or that it has some special abilities that enable people to pray and to experience transcendence. No music is *sacred* in itself. But during the use of plainchant as an *instrument* in the Church’s liturgy over the centuries, it has embodied something of the holy and acceptable prayer of Christ himself.

What is it in chant that gives it its transcendental or “sacred” character? In a series of lectures given by Dom Jacques Hourlier, OSB, a monk of Solesmes, on “The Spirituality of Gregorian Chant,” in 1976, he answers the question by saying that: “Quite simply, it is the chant’s intrinsic nature and the use to which it has been put. Its prime, if not unique, objective is to serve as a vehicle for prayer.” Although the chant can also contribute to the “consolation and sanctification of the faithful,” this is a secondary goal, always closely linked to the chant’s primary, God-centered purpose.”

The effect of music on many people is so strong because music is the wordless expression of our soul. It is because of this relationship between humankind and music that music is considered by the Church to be a necessary or integral component of liturgical prayer. Music, then, is the articulation of our inner religious life and as such is not only an aid to the

liturgy, but liturgical prayer itself. The prayer of Gregorian chant is the public prayer of the Church; it leads to union with God. Gregorian chant invites individuals to receive tradition and, ultimately, to receive Christ. But to do so requires humility and wisdom. For many people throughout the ages, Gregorian chant has been experienced as exceptionally conducive to silence and meditation (perhaps one of the reasons it has survived in monasteries). Each piece is an invitation to prayer and has the ability to place you in an atmosphere of prayer, day by day. There are also “chant lovers,” for whom Gregorian chant is a purely aesthetic experience of “art music.” I have no doubt that this kind of “aesthetic experience” could lead people to God. However, its real purpose is to lift your mind and heart to God, which is the purpose of all prayer. In the words of Auguste LeGuennant, a twentieth century French church musician who devoted his life to the promotion of chant: “Prayer has become music.”

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