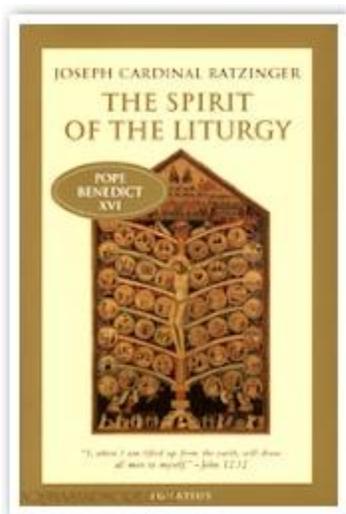


# Music and Liturgy

- POPE BENEDICT XVI

*The importance of music in biblical religion is shown very simply by the fact that the verb "to sing" (with related words such as "song", and so forth) is one of the most commonly used words in the Bible. It occurs 309 times in the Old Testament and thirty-six in the New.*



Areas of his existence are awakened that spontaneously turn into song. Indeed, man's own being is insufficient for what he has to express, and so he invites the whole of creation to become a song with him: "Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn! I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations. For your steadfast love is great to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds" (Ps 57:8f.). We find the first mention of singing in the Bible after the crossing of the Red Sea. Israel has now been definitively delivered from slavery. In a desperate situation, it has had an overwhelming experience of God's saving power. Just as Moses as a baby was taken from the Nile and only then really received the gift of life, so Israel now feels as if it has been, so to speak, taken out of the water: it is free, newly endowed with the gift of itself from God's own hands. In the biblical account, the people's reaction to the foundational event of salvation is described in this sentence: "[T]hey believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses" (Ex 14:31). But then follows a second reaction, which soars up from the first with elemental force: "Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord" (15:1). Year by year, at the Easter Vigil, Christians join in the singing of this song. They sing it in a new way as their song, because they know that they have been "taken out of the water" by God's power, set free by God for authentic life. (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, pp 136-7)

## Liturgical Music Flows From Love

The singing of the Church comes ultimately out of love. It is the utter depth of love that produces the singing. "*Cantare amantis est*", says St. Augustine, singing is a lover's thing. In so saying, we come again to the trinitarian interpretation of Church music. The Holy Spirit is love, and it is he who produces the singing. He is

the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit who draws us into love for Christ and so leads to the Father. (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p 142)

In liturgical music, based as it is on biblical faith, there is, therefore, a clear dominance of the Word; this music is a higher form of proclamation. Ultimately, it rises up out of the love that responds to God's love made flesh in Christ, the love that for us went unto death. After the Resurrection, the Cross is by no means a thing of the past, and so this love is always marked by pain at the hiddenness of God, by the cry that rises up from the depths of anguish, *Kyrie eleison*, by hope and by supplication. But it also has the privilege, by anticipation, of experiencing the reality of the Resurrection, and so it brings with it the joy of being loved, that gladness of heart that Haydn said came upon him when he set liturgical texts to music. Thus the relation of liturgical music to logos means, first of all, simply its relation to words. That is why singing in the liturgy has priority over instrumental music, though it does not in any way exclude it. It goes without saying that the biblical and liturgical texts are the normative words from which liturgical music has to take its bearings. This does not rule out the continuing creation of "new songs", but instead inspires them and assures them of a firm grounding in God's love for mankind and his work of redemption. (*The Spirit of Liturgy*, p 149)

### **Sacred Music in the West**

In the West, in the form of Gregorian chant, the inherited tradition of psalm-singing was developed to a new sublimity and purity, which set a permanent standard for sacred music, music for the liturgy of the Church. Polyphony developed in the late Middle Ages, and then instruments came back into divine worship — quite rightly, too, because, as we have seen, the Church not only continues the synagogue, but also takes up, in the light of Christ's Pasch, the reality represented by the Temple. Two new factors are thus at work in Church music. Artistic freedom increasingly asserts its rights, even in the liturgy. Church music and secular music are now each influenced by the other. This is particularly clear in the case of the so-called "parody Masses", in which the text of the Mass was set to a theme or melody that came from secular music, with the result that anyone hearing it might think he was listening to the latest "hit". It is clear that these opportunities for artistic creativity and the adoption of secular tunes brought danger with them. Music was no longer developing out of prayer, but, with the new demand for artistic autonomy, was now heading away from the liturgy; it was becoming an end in itself, opening the door to new, very different ways of feeling and of experiencing the world. Music was alienating the liturgy from its true nature.

At this point the Council of Trent intervened in the culture war that had broken out. It was made a norm that liturgical music should be at the service of the Word; the use of instruments was substantially reduced; and the difference between secular and sacred music was clearly affirmed. (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, pp 145-6)

### **Religious and Liturgical Music**

Whether it is Bach or Mozart that we hear in church, we have a sense in either case of what *gloria Dei*, the glory of God, means. The mystery of infinite beauty is there and enables us to experience the presence of God more truly and vividly than in many sermons. But there are already signs of danger to come. Subjective experience and passion are still held in check by the order of the musical universe, reflecting as it does the order of the divine creation itself. But there is already the threat of invasion by the virtuoso mentality, the vanity of technique, which is no longer the servant of the whole but wants to push itself to the fore. During the nineteenth century, the century of self-emancipating subjectivity, this led in many places to the obscuring of the sacred by the operatic. The dangers that had forced the Council of Trent to intervene were back again. In similar fashion, Pope Pius X tried to remove the operatic element from the liturgy and declared Gregorian chant and the great polyphony of the age of the Catholic Reformation (of which Palestrina was the outstanding representative) to be the standard for liturgical music. A clear distinction was made between liturgical music and religious music in general, just as visual art in the liturgy has to conform to different standards from those employed in religious art in general. Art in the liturgy has a very specific responsibility, and precisely as such does it serve as a wellspring of culture, which in the final analysis owes its existence to cult. (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, pp 146-7)

## The Challenge of Popular Music

After the cultural revolution of recent decades, we are faced with a challenge no less great than that of the three moments of crisis that we have encountered in our historical sketch: the Gnostic temptation, the crisis at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modernity, and the crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century, which formed the prelude to the still more radical questions of the present day. Three developments in recent music epitomize the problems that the Church has to face when she is considering liturgical music. First of all, there is the cultural universalization that the Church has to undertake if she wants to get beyond the boundaries of the European mind. This is the question of what inculturation should look like in the realm of sacred music if, on the one hand, the identity of Christianity is to be preserved and, on the other, its universality is to be expressed in local forms. Then there are two developments in music itself that have their origins primarily in the West but that for a long time have affected the whole of mankind in the world culture that is being formed. Modern so-called "classical" music has maneuvered itself, with some exceptions, into an elitist ghetto, which only specialists may enter — and even they do so with what may sometimes be mixed feelings. The music of the masses has broken loose from this and treads a very different path.

On the one hand, there is pop music, which is certainly no longer supported by the people in the ancient sense (*populus*). It is aimed at the phenomenon of the masses, is industrially produced, and ultimately has to be described as a cult of the banal. "Rock", on the other hand, is the expression of elemental passions, and at rock festivals it assumes a cultic character, a form of worship, in fact, in opposition to Christian worship. People are, so to speak, released from themselves by the experience of being part of a crowd and by the emotional shock of rhythm, noise, and special lighting effects. However, in the ecstasy of having all their defenses torn down, the participants sink, as it were, beneath the elemental force of the universe. The music of the Holy Spirit's sober inebriation seems to have little chance when self has become a prison, the mind is a shackle, and breaking out from both appears as a true promise of redemption that can be tasted at least for a few moments. (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, pp 147-8)

## Music and Logos

Not every kind of music can have a place in Christian worship. It has its standards, and that standard is the Logos. If we want to know whom we are dealing with, the Holy Spirit or the unholy spirit, we have to remember that it is the Holy Spirit who moves us to say, "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor 12:3). The Holy Spirit leads us to the Logos, and he leads us to a music that serves the Logos as a sign of the *sursum corda*, the lifting up of the human heart. Does it integrate man by drawing him to what is above, or does it cause his disintegration into formless intoxication or mere sensuality? That is the criterion for a music in harmony with *logos*, a form of that *logiké latreia* (reason-able, *logos*-worthy worship) of which we spoke in the first part of this book." (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p 151 )

## Liturgical Dancing

Dancing is not a form of expression for the Christian liturgy. In about the third century, there was an attempt in certain Gnostic-Docetic circles to introduce it into the liturgy. For these people, the Crucifixion was only an appearance. Before the Passion, Christ had abandoned the body that in any case he had never really assumed. Dancing could take the place of the liturgy of the Cross, because, after all, the Cross was only an appearance. The cultic dances of the different religions have different purposes — incantation, imitative magic, mystical ecstasy — none of which is compatible with the essential purpose of the liturgy of the "reasonable sacrifice". It is totally absurd to try to make the liturgy "attractive" by introducing dancing pantomimes (wherever possible performed by professional dance troupes), which frequently (and rightly, from the professionals' point of view) end with applause. Wherever applause breaks out in the liturgy because of some human achievement, it is a sure sign that the essence of liturgy has totally disappeared and been replaced by a kind of religious entertainment. Such attractiveness fades quickly — it cannot compete in the market of leisure pursuits, incorporating as it increasingly does various forms of religious titillation. I myself have experienced the replacing of the penitential rite by a dance performance, which, needless to say, received a round of applause. Could there be anything farther removed from true penitence? Liturgy can only attract people when it looks, not at itself, but at God, when it allows him to enter and act. Then something truly unique happens, beyond

competition, and people have a sense that more has taken place than a recreational activity. None of the Christian rites includes dancing. (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, pp 198-9)

### On External Actions

Of course, external actions — reading, singing, the bringing up of the gifts — can be distributed in a sensible way. By the same token, participation in the Liturgy of the Word (reading, singing) is to be distinguished from the sacramental celebration proper. We should be clearly aware that external actions are quite secondary here. *Doing* really must stop when we come to the heart of the matter: the *oratio*. It must be plainly evident that the *oratio* is the heart of the matter, but that it is important precisely because it provides a space for the *actio* of God. Anyone who grasps this will easily see that it is not now a matter of looking at or toward the priest, but of looking together toward the Lord and going out to meet him. The almost theatrical entrance of different players into the liturgy, which is so common today, especially during the Preparation of the Gifts, quite simply misses the point. If the various external actions (as a matter of fact, there are not very many of them, though they are being artificially multiplied) become the essential in the liturgy, if the liturgy degenerates into general activity, then we have radically misunderstood the "theo-drama" of the liturgy and lapsed almost into parody. True liturgical education cannot consist in learning and experimenting with external activities. Instead one must be led toward the essential *actio* that makes the liturgy what it is, toward the transforming power of God, who wants, through what happens in the liturgy, to transform us and the world. In this respect, liturgical education today, of both priests and laity, is deficient to a deplorable extent. Much remains to be done here. (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, pp 174-5)

### Silence

We are realizing more and more clearly that silence is part of the liturgy. We respond, by singing and praying, to the God who addresses us, but the greater mystery, surpassing all words, summons us to silence. It must, of course, be a silence with content, not just the absence of speech and action. We should expect the liturgy to give us a positive stillness that will restore us. Such stillness will not be just a pause, in which a thousand thoughts and desires assault us, but a time of recollection, giving us an inward peace, allowing us to draw breath and rediscover the one thing necessary, which we have forgotten. That is why silence cannot be simply "made", organized as if it were one activity among many. It is no accident that on all sides people are seeking techniques of meditation, a spirituality for emptying the mind. One of man's deepest needs is making its presence felt, a need that is manifestly not being met in our present form of the liturgy. For silence to be fruitful, as we have already said, it must not be just a pause in the action of the liturgy. No, it must be an integral part of the liturgical event. (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p 209)



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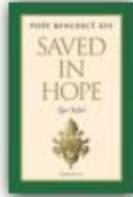
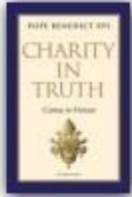
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## The Author



Pope Benedict XVI is the author of *Jesus of Nazareth, Vol II*, *Jesus of Nazareth, Vol I*, *Caritas in Veritate: Charity in Truth*, *Saved in Hope: Spe Salvi*, *God Is Love: Deus Caritas Est*, *The End of Time?: The Provocation of Talking about God*, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*, *Salt of the Earth: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church at the End of the Millennium*, *God and the World: Believing and Living in Our Time*, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, *Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *Introduction to Christianity*, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977*, *Behold the Pierced One*, and *God Is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life*.

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