**Gregorian Chant**

In chant, the solemnity of the text is raised to an exalted level by being cantillated, or intoned, to a musical line. The rhythm of chant is free and is governed more by the rhythms of speech than by imposed musical patterns. The melody is indicated by small signs above the text, sometimes square or diamond-shaped notations called *neumes*, first written down in the tenth century. It was not until the end of the eleventh century that the pitches were accurately written using a system of letters. The first few chants of the Church were sung in Hebrew and then in Greek.

A legend dating from the ninth century tells how Pope Saint Gregory I (590-604) compiled the body of plainchant. It is said that he carefully collected and wisely arranged music that had been handed down over the centuries. This music, called Gregorian chant, spread to all parts of Christian Europe and is still sung daily in many religious houses throughout the world.

While it has been tradition to attach Gregory's name to chant, the available evidence does not support this. Apart from insufficient documentation, liturgical and musical analysis has found no strong evidence that the melodies first written down in the ninth century could be as old as Gregory. Nevertheless, we are certain that Pope Saint Gregory is responsible for assembling a liturgical book (*antiphonus cento*), and also for protecting the purity and integrity of sacred chant by prescribing laws and regulations over it.

Prayer, meditation, reverence, awe, and love — Gregorian chant carries them in rhythm and melody. More than any other music with lyrics, chant is "heightened speech." In chant the music and prose are perfectly integrated. Its function is to add solemnity to Christian worship. In sacred music, the text is at the heart of the composition (John Piunno, “Gregorian Chant: Back to Basics in the Roman Rite,” *Catholic Culture*, retrieved 30 Apr. 2015).

John Piunno brilliantly explains the beauty of Gregorian Chant, it’s appropriateness for the liturgy, its origin, and the reason for its name (the connection to Pope Saint Gregory I). The reason it is so critical to discuss Gregorian Chant is found in section 116 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (which was discussed last week): “The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services” (SC 116 § 1).

The Council Fathers did not intend that Gregorian Chant be the exclusive form of sacred music, since the document goes on to say “other kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, are by no means excluded from liturgical celebrations, so long as they accord with the spirit of the liturgical action” (SC 116 § 2); but, again, in the Roman liturgy, Gregorian Chant is to have this pride of place.

Therefore, in line with the recommendations discussed last week, it is essential that the effort to recover the tradition of sacred music involves, in a special way, the recovery of chant. Fortunately, there has been an effort among some Catholic publishers to make pew missals and hymnals available which seek to make the recovery of chant a reality: for example, the Lumen Christi Missal (Illuminare Press), the Saint Isaac Jogues Missal & Hymnal (Corpus Christi Watershed), the Ignatius Pew Missal (Ignatius Press), and the Parish Book of Chant (Church Music Association of America).

Let’s close with the words of Pope-Emeritus Benedict XVI from 2007:

In the[art of proper celebration], liturgical song has a pre-eminent place. Saint Augustine rightly says in a famous sermon that "the new man sings a new song. Singing is an expression of joy and, if we consider the matter, an expression of love". The People of God assembled for the liturgy sings the praises of God. In the course of her two-thousand-year history, the Church has created, and still creates, music and songs which represent a rich patrimony of faith and love. This heritage must not be lost. Certainly as far as the liturgy is concerned, we cannot say that one song is as good as another. Generic improvisation or the introduction of musical genres which fail to respect the meaning of the liturgy should be avoided. As an element of the liturgy, song should be well integrated into the overall celebration. Consequently everything – texts, music, execution – ought to correspond to the meaning of the mystery being celebrated, the structure of the rite and the liturgical seasons. Finally, while respecting various styles and different and highly praiseworthy traditions, I desire, in accordance with the request advanced by the Synod Fathers, that Gregorian chant be suitably esteemed and employed as the chant proper to the Roman liturgy (*Sacramentum Caritatis* 42).