

# Letter on Sacred Music in the Liturgy at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church

September 3, 2010

The Memorial of St. Gregory the Great, pope and doctor of the Church

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,  
to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.  
Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,  
as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom,  
and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.  
And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,  
giving thanks to God the Father through him.<sup>1</sup>*

Dear friends in Christ,

It gives us great joy to announce and present an exciting new program of Sacred Music for our parish. Undoubtedly you have noticed and wondered about the recent changes in the music for Mass. Several of you have expressed enthusiasm toward this music; others at times have expressed frustration about the unfamiliarity of the music. Several weeks ago, in a bulletin letter, we articulated the two primary concerns of our music ministry, which we received from Pope St. Pius X:

Sacred music, being a complementary part of the solemn Liturgy, participates in the general scope of the Liturgy, which is the **glory of God** and the **sanctification and edification of the faithful.**<sup>2</sup>

We ask for your joyful patience and prayers as we go through a period of renewal with regard to sacred music. Know that we take each step with the above concerns in mind, as part of a continuous effort to move toward the sacred mysteries of the Mass with greater devotion and love. *Where we are now* is not the same as *where we are going*. In this pastoral letter we hope to address all questions about **why** certain changes must take place and **what** those changes will look like.

Part of this letter is a critique of certain kinds of music *as they are used in the Liturgy*. We do not wish to offer a subjective opinion about such music, nor do we cast judgment upon those who are attached to such music, which has its own merits outside the Liturgy. We offer this letter as an explanation of how we can apply the Church's music guidance to our parish and as an invitation to join us in our ongoing renewal.

## I. Introduction

Before proceeding with the rationale for changes, we must establish some essential principles: the necessity for renewal, the attitude we must bring to that renewal, and the nature of liturgical participation.

---

<sup>1</sup>Col 3:15-17.

<sup>2</sup>Pope St. Pius X, *Tra le Sollecitudini* [TLS], 1903. Emphasis added.

## Renewal

The nature of the Christian Church involves many levels of constant renewal, both personal and ecclesial, i.e., for each individual Christian and for the community as a whole.

And he who sat upon the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.”<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.<sup>4</sup>

Now he has promised, “yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” This phrase, “yet once more,” indicates *the removal of what is shaken*, as of what has been made, *in order that what cannot be shaken may remain*. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire.<sup>5</sup>

The history of the Liturgy is constantly growing into an ever new Now, and it must also repeatedly *prune back a Present which has become the Past, so that what is essential can re-appear with new vigor*. The Liturgy needs growth and development as well as purgation and refining and in both cases needs to preserve its identity and that purpose without which it would lose the very reason for its existence. And if that is really the case, then the alternative between “traditionalists” and “reformers” is woefully inadequate to the situation. He who believes that he can only choose between Old and New, has already traveled a good way along a dead-end street.<sup>6</sup>

So renewal for us involves “shaking away” or “pruning” what obscures the unshakable mysteries, revealing to us these mysteries in their shining splendor, and doing so with “new vigor.” It can be difficult, however, to deal with the removal of those things that obscure if we have built up an attachment to *them* rather than to the mysteries that lie beneath.

## Liturgical norms

Sacred music is an unnecessarily controversial subject. We say “unnecessarily” because many people tend to bring their personalities and preferences to the table in a way that obscures the goals articulated above. When we approach the Liturgy, we surrender our own wants and desires and preferences, any selfishness, and manifest that we are one body, not a collection of individuals. “You are not your own,” St. Paul reminds us.<sup>7</sup> And Pope John Paul II admonishes us in these words:

*Liturgy is never anyone’s private property, be it of the celebrant or of the community in which the mysteries are celebrated. The Apostle Paul had to address fiery words to the community of Corinth because of grave shortcomings in their celebration of the Eucharist resulting in divisions and the emergence of factions.<sup>8</sup> Our time too calls for a renewed awareness and appreciation of liturgical norms as a reflection of, and a witness to, the one universal Church made present in every celebration of the Eucharist. Priests who faithfully celebrate Mass according to the liturgical norms, and communities which conform to those norms, quietly but eloquently demonstrate their love for the Church.<sup>9</sup>*

---

<sup>3</sup>Rev 21:5.

<sup>4</sup>2 Cor 5:17.

<sup>5</sup>Heb 12:26-29. Emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup>Ratzinger, Joseph Cardinal. “‘In the Presence of the Angels I will Sing your Praise’: The Regensburg Tradition and the Reform of the Liturgy” in *A New Song for the Lord*, 1995. Emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup>1 Cor 6:19.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. 1 Cor 11:17-34.

<sup>9</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 52. Emphasis added.

Therefore the measure of liturgical appropriateness for sacred music should be not our personal preferences but the **liturgical norms of the Church**. For an authentic renewal, we cannot retain personal attachments to things that should be “shaken away,” or else we continue to obscure the mysteries by holding them captive to our selfishness. As we continue to study the **liturgical documents as guides to our renewal**, they become the “pruning shears” that we use to reveal the underlying beauty of the Liturgy.

### Active participation

A few weeks ago the bulletin column on sacred music addressed the concept of *active participation*. Let us revisit the highlights of that short article.

The person to coin this phrase was Pope St. Pius X, whom many consider to be the father of the modern liturgical reform. In 1903, he referred to “active participation in the most holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church.”<sup>10</sup> Ever since, every church document or commentary on Liturgy has used this phrase, pointing to it as the “aim to be considered before all else, for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.”<sup>11</sup> When acclamations, gestures, and singing are integrated into the Liturgy, they can reinforce the faith within our hearts.

Many people understand active participation to mean that everyone should always be “doing something,” engaging in as much outward activity as possible. The Church, however, teaches us about the **essential internal nature of active participation**—in fact, even *reverent silence* is considered active participation!<sup>12</sup> As the US Bishops have recently told us, “**The assembly participates actively as they unite themselves interiorly** to what the ministers or choir sing, so that by listening to them they may raise their minds to God.”<sup>13</sup> This is what we should strive to do, for instance, as the cantor sings the verses of the Responsorial Psalm or as the choir sings an anthem of praise after communion.

This is not meant to imply that there is anything wrong with congregational singing, which, on the contrary, is the “primary liturgical song.”<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Pope John Paul II challenged us to develop our *interior* meditation: “In a culture which neither favors nor fosters meditative quiet, *the art of interior listening* is learned only with difficulty. Here we see how the Liturgy, though it must always be properly inculturated, must also be counter-cultural.”<sup>15</sup>

## II. The Need for a Parish Sacred Music Renewal

At this point we should reiterate something said previously; namely, that critiques are directed not toward particular persons or groups of people but toward certain types of music *as they are used in the Liturgy*. There are many issues addressed about which some will say, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?”<sup>16</sup> We ask that you *seek the truth with your whole heart* in prayer and sincerity.<sup>17</sup>

Today . . . the meaning of the category “sacred music” has been broadened to include repertoires that cannot be part of the celebration without violating the spirit and norms of the Liturgy itself. . . . [N]ot all forms of music can be considered suitable for liturgical celebrations.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>10</sup>TLS, introduction.

<sup>11</sup>*Sacrosanctum Concilium* [SC]: the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Vatican Council II, 1963, no. 14.

<sup>12</sup>SC 30.

<sup>13</sup>United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, 2007, no. 12. Emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup>*Sing to the Lord* 28.

<sup>15</sup>Pope John Paul II, Address to Bishops of the Northwest Provinces of the USCCB, in *Ad Limina Addresses: The Addresses of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Bishops of the United States, February 1998-October 1998*, no. 3. Emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup>John 6:60.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Jer 29:13; Jos 24:14; Phil 4:6; Col 4:2.

<sup>18</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Chirograph of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II for the Centenary of the Motu Proprio Tra le Sollecitudini on Sacred Music*, November 11, 2003, no. 4. Emphasis added.

This quote from Pope John Paul II explains that not all sacred music can be admitted to the Liturgy. A particular point of contention in today's Church is the state of **contemporary Christian music**, the predominant genre in hymnals such as *Glory & Praise* and *Spirit & Song*. Our parish has in the past used this music at all Sunday Masses in varying degrees. How do we properly evaluate the liturgical suitability of such music?

### Liturgical vs. devotional

Throughout her history, the Church has permitted and promoted non-liturgical popular devotions that foster a particular approach to spiritual life by certain persons or within various groups.

Popular piety is an expression of faith which avails of certain cultural elements *proper to a specific environment* which is capable of interpreting and questioning in a lively and effective manner the sensibilities of those who live in that same environment.<sup>19</sup>

Such devotions have taken a myriad of forms. No list could be exhaustive, but the following are a few examples: religious plays and pageants, vernacular hymns and songs, Eucharistic devotions, collections of prayers such as the the rosary and various chaplets, pilgrimages to holy places, veneration of relics, litanies, novenas, processions, and meditation guides.<sup>20</sup> All of these are laudable to the extent that they lead to greater participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, which is a wholly different kind of worship.

[E]very liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the Priest and of his Body, which is the Church, is *a sacred action surpassing all others*. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree.<sup>21</sup>

While popular piety fosters our personal spirituality, in the Liturgy we are **drawn into an action of Christ** together with his Church—a movement initiated by Christ, through the Church, and not by our own actions.

In the earthly Liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly Liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle. With all the warriors of the heavenly army we sing a hymn of glory to the Lord; venerating the memory of the saints, we hope for some part and fellowship with them; we eagerly await the Saviour, Our Lord Jesus Christ, until he our life shall appear and we too will appear with him in glory.<sup>22</sup>

Because the Liturgy is an action of the whole Church, with God and all the angels and saints, elements of our earthly celebration should reflect the *transcendence* of the Liturgy; in other words, what is appropriate for personal piety is not necessarily appropriate for the corporate Liturgy.

The pious exercises of the Christian people and other forms of devotion can be accepted and recommended provided that they do not become substitutes for the Liturgy or integrated into the Liturgical celebrations. An authentic pastoral promotion of the Liturgy will know how to build on the riches of popular piety, purify them and direct them towards the Liturgy as an offering of the peoples.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Pope John Paul II, address to the *Plenary Meeting of The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments* [CDW address], 2001, no. 4. Emphasis added.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, 2001, no. 30.

<sup>21</sup>SC 7. Emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup>SC 8.

<sup>23</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Vicemus Quintus Annus*, 1988, no. 18.

Forms of piety that are heavily influenced by secular culture need a period of experimentation where their successes and failures can be evaluated outside the Liturgy. In the case of contemporary Christian music, music in popular styles previously alien to the Catholic Liturgy was thrust into the Mass without having the opportunity to develop in the realm of popular piety. The entire genre was accepted wholesale with very little musical or theological vetting. Such a radical departure from the previous tradition in practice entailed—whether intentionally or unintentionally—abandoning that which was handed down before. Thus part of our renewal is a recovery of both old and new music that flows from the authentic tradition.

Care must be taken to ensure the quality, both of the texts and of the melodies, so that what is proposed today as new and creative will *conform to liturgical requirements and be worthy of the Church's tradition* which, in the field of sacred music, boasts a **priceless heritage**.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, all new forms must follow in the previous tradition, rather than reject it.

### Challenges of contemporary Christian music

While the Church “admits into celebrations even the most modern music, as long as it respects both the liturgical spirit and the true values of this art form,” it remains “necessary to pay special attention to the new musical expressions to *ascertain whether they too can express the inexhaustible riches of the Mystery* proposed in the Liturgy.”<sup>25</sup> Pope Benedict XVI summarizes this tension:

[Consider] 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.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, for the sake of preserving the identity of Christianity, we must use caution in bringing cultural elements into the Liturgy. Two particular concerns with the use of contemporary Christian music in a liturgical context are theologically problematic texts and an inappropriate musical style. Both factors are unfortunately supported by marketing attitudes. The repertoire in question—contemporary Christian music—is notably a descendant of 1960's and 1970's American musical theater songs and popular rock and roll; importing such music into the Church inevitably entails an acceptance of the profit-turning market values attached to it.

The corporations that currently primarily market contemporary Christian music reflect these values. For instance, the texts, as noted above, often focus on self and contain ambiguous doctrine, thus appealing to a wider audience. The repertoire represents the most popular songs that have survived market competition, rather than the most theologically sound and liturgically appropriate. The major publishers insist that parishes should purchase their music selection guides—which of course are partial toward their own hymnals. Subscription hymnals tempt parishes to stay “up to date” on the latest styles and songs. All these factors reflect an attempt by an industry to conform the Church to worldly attitudes,<sup>27</sup> despite the best intentions of those who derive spiritual benefit from this music.

### Questionable texts

Many contemporary Christian songs have excellent texts, whether original or derived from Scripture or other sacred writings and rites. Unfortunately, many other songs currently in use contain texts directly contrary to the spirit of the Liturgy.

<sup>24</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Dies Domini of the Holy Father John Paul II to the Bishops, Clergy, and Faithful of the Catholic Church on Keeping the Lord's Day Holy*, no. 50. Emphasis added.

<sup>25</sup>*Chirograph* 10, 7. Emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup>Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 2000, p. 147.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Romans 12:2.

Forms of popular religiosity can sometimes appear to be corrupted by factors that are inconsistent with Catholic doctrine. In such cases, they must be patiently and prudently purified through contacts with those responsible and through careful and respectful catechesis—unless radical inconsistencies call for immediate and decisive measures.<sup>28</sup>

Religious songs in styles from the popular culture fall under this category of “popular religiosity” and often contain one or more of the errors described below.

- *Texts distorted to support a political agenda:* The application of inclusive language to God or the insertion of an explicit social justice connotation, for example, may disrupt the Church’s theological understanding of a text with Scriptural or liturgical origin.
- *Texts that celebrate the congregation:* Such songs are self-focused (“I,” “me,” “we,” “us,” etc.) rather than God-focused. Instead of praising God, they often praise the congregation. Some of these songs do not even refer to God at all.
- *Texts in which the people take on the part of God:* In these songs, the people sing God’s words, whether taken from Scripture or presumed by a composer; in essence, the congregation “plays the part” of God as if in a stage drama. Because these texts often have God singing about how wonderful and merciful he is, in practice it becomes the members of the congregation singing about how wonderful and merciful *they* are. Whether or not this is intentional, the long-term effect can be one of making “us” all too comfortable with taking on the words of God ourselves.
- *Texts in which the speaker’s identity is ambiguous:* These songs often freely swap between the voice of God and the voice of “us.” They are difficult to follow, and at the first reading, it is often not clear who the speaker is until halfway through a verse.
- *Texts with ambiguous or misleading theology:* Songs in this category allow—and often invite—theological interpretations at odds with Catholic teaching. This is a particular problem with Eucharistic songs, many of which present an incomplete (or even incorrect) doctrine on the Eucharist.

## Musical style

While “[the Church] has admitted styles from every period, in keeping with the natural characteristics and conditions of people and the needs of the various rites,”<sup>29</sup> prudence demands careful consideration of music based on popular styles before admitting them to the Liturgy.

The musical judgment asks whether this composition has the necessary aesthetic qualities that can bear the weight of the mysteries celebrated in the Liturgy. It asks the question: **Is this composition technically, aesthetically, and expressively worthy?**

This judgment requires musical competence. *Only artistically sound music will be effective and endure over time.* To admit to the Liturgy the cheap, the trite, or the musical cliché often found in secular popular songs is to cheapen the Liturgy, to expose it to ridicule, and to invite failure.<sup>30</sup>

Many contemporary Christian songs employ musically cliché elements that appeal to emotions and create good feelings that may be confused with real inspiration. While authentic liturgical music inspires awe in the sacred mysteries and often a deep elevation of emotion, the “cheap” or “trite” overly emotive music derived from popular styles instead breeds an unhealthy familiarity. In essence this reduces the mystery

<sup>28</sup>CDW Address 5.

<sup>29</sup>SC 123.

<sup>30</sup>*Sing to the Lord* 134-135. Emphasis added.

to something comfortable and familiar rather than transcendent; God is made to fit in a friendly, familiar package. Appropriate liturgical music, on the other hand, points *beyond* the ordinary, familiar experience of everyday life, drawing us into the solemn heavenly Liturgy where “earth unites with heaven”<sup>31</sup> and where we sing *with the angels and saints*, not just figuratively but really.

Through Christ the angels of heaven offer their prayer of adoration as they rejoice in your presence forever. *May our voices be one with theirs* in their triumphant hymn of praise: Holy, holy, holy Lord . . . .<sup>32</sup>

Now, *with angels and archangels, and the whole company of heaven, we sing* the unending hymn of your praise: Holy, holy, holy Lord . . . .<sup>33</sup>

In this section thus far we have discussed the music closely related to “soft rock” and musical theater genres. There is another set of spiritual dangers associated with music derived from heavier rock and roll styles. Our present pope warns of these dangers:

“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.<sup>34</sup>

### III. Toward an Authentic Parish Renewal

An authentic renewal must not only point out problems of the past but also move toward the future. Now we will discuss the foundation for a renewal of sacred music in our parish.

#### The *priceless heritage*

There is a great treasury of music from which we may draw. It reaches back to the earliest centuries of the Church and extends even to the present day. This music comes from many different eras, places, and styles, but all of it has the potential to lift us out of the ordinary and draw us into the presence of God. Authentic, enduring sacred music *points not to itself but to the mysteries* of the Liturgy, and in particular the mystery of the Eucharist.

The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, *greater even than that of any other art*. The main reason for this preeminence is that, as sacred song closely bound to the text, it forms a *necessary or integral part* of the solemn Liturgy.<sup>35</sup>

The various moments in the Liturgy require a musical expression of their own. From time to time this must fittingly bring out the nature proper to a specific rite, now proclaiming God’s marvels, now expressing praise, supplication or even sorrow for the experience of human suffering which, however, faith opens to the prospect of Christian hope.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup>Preface of the Holy Eucharist II.

<sup>32</sup>Preface for the Annunciation. Emphasis added.

<sup>33</sup>Preface of the Holy Eucharist I. Emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup>Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 148. Emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup>SC 112. Emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup>*Chirograph* 5.

Thus, our parish, like many others, will begin to draw more and more from this diverse treasury, which includes Gregorian chant, Renaissance polyphony along with the many polyphonic styles that descended from it, and new compositions.

### 1. Gregorian chant

In the early Church, there were many genres of liturgical chant. Major liturgical centers, such as Rome, Milan, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Constantinople, had their own collections of liturgical chant. With the creation of the Holy Roman Empire in the ninth century came a great consolidation of western Liturgy and chant, holding up Rome as the supreme model. This new consolidation was named *Gregorian* after Pope St. Gregory the Great—who carried out liturgical reforms three centuries earlier—and it became the official music of the Roman Catholic Church.

In its teaching on sacred music, the Second Vatican Council reminds us that “the Church recognizes Gregorian Chant as being specially suited to the Roman Liturgy. Therefore, other things being equal, it should be given **pride of place** in the liturgical services.”<sup>37</sup> With this in mind, Pope John Paul II explains the primacy of Gregorian chant in the Church’s tradition of liturgical music:

St. Pius X pointed out that the Church had “inherited it from the Fathers of the Church,” that she has “jealously guarded it for centuries in her liturgical codices” and still “proposes it to the faithful” as her own, considering it “the supreme model of sacred music.” Thus, Gregorian chant continues also today to be an *element of unity* in the Roman Liturgy.<sup>38</sup>

The US Bishops have likewise given reasons for preserving Latin chant:

[C]are should be taken to foster the role of Latin in the Liturgy, particularly in liturgical song. Pastors should ensure “that the faithful may also be able to say or to sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them.”<sup>39</sup> They should be able to sing these parts of the Mass proper to them, at least according to the simpler melodies.<sup>40</sup>

Gregorian chant is uniquely the Church’s own music. Chant is a living connection with our forebears in the faith, the traditional music of the Roman rite, a sign of communion with the universal Church, a bond of unity across cultures, a means for diverse communities to participate together in song, and a summons to contemplative participation in the Liturgy.<sup>41</sup>

The Second Vatican Council directed that the faithful be able to sing parts of the Ordinary of the Mass together in Latin. In many worshiping communities in the United States, fulfilling this directive will mean introducing Latin chant to worshipers who perhaps have not sung it before.<sup>42</sup>

The bishops go on to give certain chants that should be a bare minimum for every congregation. At St. Elizabeth Ann Seton parish, while all Masses will begin to integrate these essential chants into their musical vocabulary, the 12:30PM Sunday Mass, led by a chant schola (see below), will on a weekly basis use the chant to enrich the Liturgy and allow the exploration of additional chant settings for those who wish to immerse themselves more deeply in this music. Well-known examples you may recognize are the benediction hymn *Tantum ergo* and the Marian antiphon *Regina coeli*. Many of our English hymns are translations of Gregorian chant hymns, among them “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” (*Veni, veni, Emmanuel*), “Come Holy Ghost, Creator Blest” (*Veni, Creator Spiritus*), and “Creator of the Stars of Night” (*Conditor alme siderum*).

<sup>37</sup>SC 121. Emphasis added.

<sup>38</sup> *Chirograph* 7. Emphasis added.

<sup>39</sup>SC 54.

<sup>40</sup> *Sing to the Lord* 61.

<sup>41</sup> *Sing to the Lord* 73.

<sup>42</sup> *Sing to the Lord* 74.

## 2. Renaissance polyphony

The great diverse body of expressive polyphonic choral music from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—as well as music that grew out of it in later centuries—is second only to Gregorian chant in the eyes of the Church. A choir will offer this music at the 10:45AM Sunday Mass. Within this musical patrimony, you may recognize names of Renaissance composers such as Palestrina, Baroque composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach and Georg Friederich Händel (who wrote the famous *Messiah* oratorio from which the “Hallelujah Chorus” is drawn), and Classical composers such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (famous for his *Requiem*).

## 3. New compositions

The Second Vatican Council urges composers to add to the treasury:

Composers, animated by the Christian spirit, should accept that it pertains to their vocation to cultivate sacred music and increase its store of treasures. Let them produce compositions which have the qualities proper to genuine sacred music, and which can be sung not only by large choirs but also by smaller choirs, and which make possible the active participation of the whole congregation. The texts intended to be sung must always be in conformity with Catholic doctrine. Indeed, they should be drawn chiefly from the sacred scriptures and from liturgical sources.<sup>43</sup>

In response to the legitimate call from many of you to hear music of modern composers, a choir will lead this music at the 6PM Saturday Mass. The repertoire will be both fresh and authentic, using this “general rule” from Pope John Paul II which is itself based on directives from Pope St. Pius X:

“The more closely a composition for church approaches in its movement, inspiration and savour the Gregorian melodic form, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes; and the more out of harmony it is with that supreme model, the less worthy it is of the temple.”<sup>44</sup> It is not, of course, a question of imitating Gregorian chant but rather of ensuring that new compositions are imbued with the same spirit that inspired and little by little came to shape it. Only an artist who is profoundly steeped in the *sensus Ecclesiae* [sense of the Church] can attempt to perceive and express in melody the truth of the Mystery that is celebrated in the Liturgy.<sup>45</sup>

## Hymnody

The core of the renewal of congregational song is our repertoire of hymns. Because the influx of “contemporary music” replaced many venerable hymns, **we will gradually be recovering a baseline repertoire of old and new hymns** that are strong musically and *rich in theological content*.<sup>46</sup> Though many of them are already well-known to you, there are many more that may seem new. *This, perhaps, is where we request the greatest amount of patience and effort on your part.* New hymns will be repeated multiple times in a short period in order to aid you in learning new music. In time, the parish website will include downloadable melodies (in MIDI or MP3 format) and music (in PDF format) of those hymns that are public domain for anyone who wishes to see and hear upcoming hymns. We also encourage you to use these hymns in your own personal devotion.

In August we began to print monthly Liturgy programs in order to facilitate learning new hymns. Recently, it was announced that a new English translation of the Roman Missal had been approved and will be

<sup>43</sup>SC 121.

<sup>44</sup>TLS 3.

<sup>45</sup>*Chirograph* 12.

<sup>46</sup>Cf. *Sing to the Lord* 27.

implemented beginning in Advent 2011. Since current hymnals will have outdated Mass texts at that point, we will delay purchasing new hymnals for the parish until we can select one that contains both an appropriate hymn repertoire and up-to-date settings of the new Mass translations.

## Instruments

Of all the sounds of which human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, are capable, voice is the most privileged and fundamental. Musical instruments in the Liturgy are best understood as an extension of and support to the primary liturgical instrument, which is the human voice.<sup>47</sup>

### The pipe organ

Regarding the use of instruments in the sacred Liturgy, the Second Vatican Council states the following:

The pipe organ is to be held in high esteem in the Latin Church, for it is the traditional instrument, the sound of which can add a *wonderful splendor* to the Church's ceremonies and powerfully lifts up men's minds to God and higher things. But other instruments also may be admitted for use in divine worship . . . . This may be done, however, only on condition that the instruments are suitable, or can be made suitable, for sacred use; that they *accord with the dignity of the temple*, and that they truly contribute to the edification of the faithful.<sup>48</sup>

The US Bishops add to the discussion by commenting on the thoughts of our present pope:

The organ is accorded “pride of place” because of its **capacity to sustain the singing of a large gathered assembly**, due to both its size and its ability to give “resonance to the fullness of human sentiments, from joy to sadness, from praise to lamentation.” Likewise, “the manifold possibilities of the organ in some way remind us of **the immensity and the magnificence of God.**”

In addition to its ability to lead and sustain congregational singing, the sound of the pipe organ is most suited for solo playing of sacred music in the Liturgy at appropriate moments. Pipe organs also play an *important evangelical role* in the Church's outreach to the wider community in sacred concerts, music series, and other musical and cultural programs.<sup>49</sup>

We regret to say that the “organ” currently in our church is not truly a pipe organ, but merely a synthesizer built to look and sound (somewhat) like an organ. It is also far past its life span: the digital sounds have severely deteriorated to a point where the instrument is barely capable of the expressive possibilities expressed by Pope Benedict XVI above. Furthermore, problems with our sound system setup have magnified the inability of this digital instrument to support congregational singing in the way a real organ could.

Therefore, we are pleased to announce that, in the foreseeable future, **we will begin a new organ fund.** A research committee, under the leadership of our organist Jon Laird will then begin the extensive search process for a new pipe organ.

<sup>47</sup> *Sing to the Lord* 86.

<sup>48</sup> SC 120. Emphasis added.

<sup>49</sup> *Sing to the Lord* 87-88, quoting Pope Benedict XVI, Greeting of the Holy Father on the Occasion of Blessing of the New Organ at Regensburg's Alte Kapelle, Sept 13, 2006. Emphasis added.

## Other instruments

Because of differences in longstanding local cultural practices, Church documents for the most part have not specifically given lists of “approved” or “forbidden” instruments for Liturgy. However, two excerpts on instruments used in the Liturgy can illustrate the practical and theological considerations:

Other instruments can be called upon to give great help in attaining the lofty purpose of sacred music, so long as they play nothing profane, nothing clamorous or strident and nothing at variance with the sacred service or the dignity of the place. Among these the violin and other musical instruments that use a bow are outstanding because, when they are played by themselves or with other stringed instruments or with the organ, they express the joyous and sad sentiments of the soul with an indescribable power.<sup>50</sup>

[F]rom the days when the Ark of the Covenant was accompanied in procession by cymbals, harps, lyres, and trumpets, God’s people have, in various periods, used a variety of musical instruments to sing his praise. Each of these instruments, born of the culture and the traditions of a particular people, has given voice to a wide variety of forms and styles through which Christ’s faithful continue to join their voices to his perfect song of praise upon the Cross. Many other instruments also enrich the celebration of the Liturgy, such as wind, stringed, or percussion instruments “according to longstanding local usage, provided they are truly apt for sacred use or can be rendered apt.”<sup>51</sup>

**We wholeheartedly welcome all instrumentalists** to come forward and give their talents to God through the Liturgy.

Several parishioners have expressed concern about the future of guitars and percussion in our parish Liturgy. We do not believe that these instruments are absolutely excluded from the Liturgy; however, since they are so intimately tied to the contemporary style of music discussed above, their use will be significantly reduced to the point of being extremely rare.

## IV. The New Parish Music Program

### Choirs

Regarding the role of choirs, Pope Benedict XVI comments on a quote from the respected liturgical thinker Phillip Harnoncourt:

“The choir, in other words, is not related to a listening congregation as it is to a concert audience which allows something to be performed for it. Rather the choir is itself part of the congregation and sings for it as legitimate delegate.” The concept of “delegation” is one of the basic categories of all Christian faith, and it applies to all levels of faith-filled reality, and precisely for this reason is also essential in the liturgical assembly.

The insight that we are dealing here with delegation, in fact resolves the apparent conflict of opposites. **The choir acts on behalf of the others and includes them** in the purpose of its own action. Through the sensing of the choir, everyone can be conducted into the great Liturgy of the communion of saints and thus into that interior prayer which pulls our hearts on high and permits us to join with the heavenly Jerusalem in a manner far beyond all earthly expectation.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Pope Pius XII, *Musicae Sacrae*, 1955, no. 59.

<sup>51</sup>*Sing to the Lord* 89-90, quoting Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 2002, no. 393.

<sup>52</sup>Ratzinger, “In the Presence of the Angels,” p.177-178. Emphasis added.

The US Bishops further clarify the need for musically skilled choirs:

The congregation commonly sings unison melodies, which are more suitable for generally unrehearsed community singing. This is the primary song of the Liturgy. Choirs and ensembles, on the other hand, comprise persons drawn from the community who possess the requisite musical skills and a commitment to the established schedule of rehearsals and Liturgies. Thus, they are able to enrich the celebration by adding musical elements beyond the capabilities of the congregation alone.<sup>53</sup>

We are excited to announce **four new choirs**. In a sense they descend directly from our previous choirs; on the other hand, they have completely new missions. We invite all parishioners interested in singing with the music ministry to considering participating in one or more of them.

**St. Dominic Savio Treble Choir** Named after the patron saint of choirboys, the St. Dominic Savio Treble Choir will lead the singing at the Sunday 9AM Mass. Since the Middle Ages, the Church has considered the pure and clear voice of a child to be one of the most angelic and inspiring sounds. The great amount of music, old and new, written for high voices testifies to this tradition. *Open to all children in grades 2-8. No experience required. Rehearsal time TBD.*

**St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Vigil Choir** Taking our parish namesake as its patroness, the St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Vigil Choir will provide music for the Saturday 6PM Mass. In all ages, the Church has promoted fresh, new musical compositions by current composers. There is a great deal of wonderful music from twentieth- and twenty-first-century composers who have set venerated liturgical texts in ever-new ways. *Open to anyone in high school or older with basic music-reading ability. Rehearsals held Wednesdays 7:30-9:30PM in the music room.*

**St. Cecilia Polyphonic Choir** Named after the patroness of music, the St. Cecilia Polyphonic Choir will provide music for the Sunday 10:45AM Mass. Second only to Gregorian chant, the sacred music of the Renaissance has been honored by the Church as a repertoire to be preserved forever. This choir will carry on this tradition, as well as singing music descended from Renaissance polyphony in later periods, even up to the present. *Open to anyone over the age of 16 who is able to read music. Rehearsals held Thursdays 7:30-9:30PM in the music room.*

**St. Ambrose Schola Cantorum** As one of the Church's earliest authors of hymns, St. Ambrose inspired his fourth-century congregation to lift their hearts and minds to God in songs designed to defend against the forces of heresy that were driven by a pagan secular culture. Today, medieval—and especially Gregorian—chant is just as fresh on our lips as it was then and still serves as a bedrock for all sacred music, an impenetrable bulwark against spiritual threats. The St. Ambrose Schola Cantorum will lead the music at the Sunday 12:30PM Mass. *Open to all. No experience required. Rehearsal time TBD.*

**Cantors and psalmists** The ministry of cantor, a “singer and a leader of congregational song,”<sup>54</sup> comes from the ancient Jewish temple practice. Far from being an entertainer, the cantor leads the congregation and takes on solo roles to act in alternation with or on behalf of the congregation. A cantor who sings the Responsorial Psalm also takes the particular role of *psalmist*, a designation indicating the responsibility of proclaiming the Liturgy of the Word. “The psalmist should be able to proclaim the text of the Psalm with clarity, conviction, and sensitivity to the text, the musical setting, and those who are listening.”<sup>55</sup> *Open to singers who possess the requisite vocal and leadership skills.*

<sup>53</sup> *Sing to the Lord* 28.

<sup>54</sup> *Sing to the Lord* 37.

<sup>55</sup> *Sing to the Lord* 35.

## Instrumentalists

**Organists** Since the Middle Ages, the pipe organ has been the one instrument in universal use in the Roman Catholic Church. Organists have the important duty of supporting and driving forward the congregational and choral song and supporting the liturgical action by playing solo pieces and improvisations. Substitutes are occasionally needed when the parish Organist cannot play for certain parish Masses, as well as for some weddings and funerals.

**Solo and ensemble instrumentalists** As stated above, the Liturgy has included a countless variety of instruments ever since the days of the ancient Temple. All manner of string, wind, brass, and percussion instruments have supported the human voice and the organ in expressing the many sentiments contained in the liturgical texts. Soloists will sometimes be needed for Sunday Masses, and ensembles will be assembled for certain solemnities throughout the liturgical year.

## V. Conclusion

In this letter we have done our best to explain the Church's theology of liturgical music especially as it applies to our parish. Our selected quotations from Church documents are only a fraction of the wealth of teaching available on this subject. Please see the Sacred Music portion of the parish website for links to the full documents cited above, as well as many others relating to sacred music. Though the Sacred Music website is under construction, please be patient as a great deal of resources will soon be available.

We also pray that we have communicated the need for patience, understanding, and humility in the ongoing discussion about sacred music. Let the theological virtues of **faith** in the wisdom of God through the Church, **hope** in God's plan for our parish, and **charity** toward one another imbue our attitudes as we proceed through this period of change, at once both exciting and trying. We invite you to approach the heavenly Liturgy with us, to leave behind all worldly concerns, and to drink from the Wellspring of everlasting life:

*The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come."  
And let him who hears say, "Come."  
And let him who is thirsty come,  
let him who desires take the water of life without price.  
How blessed are those invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb.<sup>56</sup>*

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit!<sup>57</sup>

Fr. David Meng, Pastor  
Fr. James Searby, Parochial Vicar  
Mr. Jonathan P. Laird, Organist and Choirmaster  
St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church  
Lake Ridge, VA

<sup>56</sup>Rev 22:17; 19:9.

<sup>57</sup>Cf. Gal 6:18.