

JOHN PAUL II

THE HYMN OF PRAISE...”*

Your Eminence, Dear Friends,

I cordially greet all of you who are attending the International Congress of Sacred Music, and I express my deep gratitude to the authorities that organized this meeting: the Pontifical Council for Culture, the National Academy of St. Cecilia, the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music, the Rome Opera and the Pontifical Academy of Fine Arts and Letters of the Virtuosi at the Pantheon. I especially thank Cardinal Paul Poupard for his kind words of welcome on your behalf.

I am pleased to greet you, composers, musicians, specialists in liturgy and teachers of sacred music, who have come from all over the world. Your skill provides this congress with a real artistic and liturgical quality and an unquestionably universal dimension. I welcome the distinguished representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Lutheran World Federation, whose presence is a stimulating appeal to share our musical treasures. Such meetings will enable us to advance on the path of unity through prayer, one of whose most beautiful expressions is found in our cultural and spiritual heritages. Lastly, I greet with respect and gratitude the representatives of the Jewish community, who have wished to share their specific experience with specialists in Christian sacred music.

“The hymn of praise, which resounds eternally in the heavenly halls and which Jesus Christ the High Priest introduced into this land of exile, has always been continued by the Church in the course of so many centuries, with constancy and faithfulness, in the marvellous variety of its forms.”¹

* Address to the participants in the International Congress of Sacred Music, Vatican, 27 January 2001. The title was given by the editors. For the original text, see https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2001/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20010127_religious-music.html.

The Apostolic Constitution *Laudis Canticum*, by which Pope Paul VI promulgated the Divine Office in 1970 in the dynamic of the liturgical renewal inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council, well expresses the profound vocation of the Church, called to the daily service of giving thanks in continuous praise of the Trinity. The Church offers her perpetual praise in the polyphony of her many art forms. Her musical tradition is a priceless heritage, for sacred music is called to express the truth of the mystery celebrated in the liturgy.²

Following the ancient Jewish tradition³ in which Christ and the Apostles were raised,⁴ sacred music developed over the centuries on all the continents, in accordance with the special genius of various cultures, revealing the magnificent creative energy expended by the different liturgical families of East and West. The last Council gathered the heritage of the past and undertook a valuable systematic work with a pastoral vision, dedicating a whole chapter of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* to sacred music. At the time of Pope Paul VI, the Sacred Congregation of Rites detailed the implementation of this reflection in the Instruction *Musicam Sacram*⁵.

Sacred music is an integral part of the liturgy. Gregorian chant, recognized by the Church as being “specially suited to the Roman liturgy,”⁶ is a unique and universal spiritual heritage which has been handed down to us as the clearest musical expression of sacred music at the service of God’s word. It had a considerable influence on the development of music in Europe. The learned palaeographic work of the Abbey of Saint-Pierre de Solesmes and the publication of collections of Gregorian chant encouraged by Pope Paul VI, as well as the proliferation of Gregorian choirs, contributed to the renewal of the liturgy and of sacred music in particular.

Although the Church recognizes the pre-eminent place of Gregorian chant, she has welcomed other musical forms, especially polyphony. In any case, these various musical forms should accord “with the spirit of the liturgical action.”⁷ From this standpoint, the work of Pierluigi da Palestrina, the master of classical polyphony, is particularly evocative. His inspiration makes him a model for the composers of sacred music, which he put at the service of the liturgy.

¹ P a u l VI, Apostolic Constitution *Laudis Canticum* Promulgating the Divine Office as Revised in Accordance with the Decree of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican.

² Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, section 112.

³ See 1 Chr 16:4–9.23; Ps 80.

⁴ See Mk 26:30; 5:19; Col 3:16.

⁵ See Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Musica Sacram*. Instruction on Music in the Liturgy, 5 March 1967.

⁶ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, section 116.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

The 20th century, particularly the second half, saw a development of popular religious music in line with the desire expressed by the Second Vatican Council that it be “intelligently fostered.”⁸ This form of singing is particularly suitable for the participation of the faithful, both in devotional practices and in the liturgy itself. It requires of composers and poets qualities of creativity, in order to open the hearts of the faithful to the deeper significance of the text of which the music is the instrument. This is also true of traditional music, for which the Council expressed great esteem and requested that it be given “its proper place both in educating people’s religious sense and in adapting worship to their native genius.”⁹

Popular singing, which is a bond of unity and a joyful expression of the community at prayer, fosters the proclamation of the one faith and imparts to large liturgical assemblies an incomparable and recollected solemnity. During the Great Jubilee, I had the joy of seeing and hearing large numbers of the faithful gathered in St. Peter’s Square celebrating with one voice the Church’s thanksgiving. I once again thank all those who contributed to the Jubilee celebrations: the use of the resources of sacred music, especially during the papal celebrations, was exemplary. Gregorian chant, classical and contemporary polyphony, popular hymns, particularly the *Hymn of the Great Jubilee*, made possible liturgical celebrations which were fervent and of high quality. Organ and instrumental music also had their place in the Jubilee celebrations and made a magnificent contribution to the uniting of hearts in faith and charity, transcending the diversity of languages and cultures.

The Jubilee year also saw the staging of numerous cultural events, particularly concerts of religious music. This form of musical expression, which is as it were an extension of sacred music in the strict sense, is of particular significance. Today, when we are commemorating the centenary of the death of the great composer Giuseppe Verdi, who owed much to the Christian heritage, I wish to thank the composers, conductors, musicians, performers, and also the heads of societies, organizations and musical associations for their efforts to promote a repertoire which is culturally rich and expresses the great values linked to biblical revelation, the life of Christ and the saints, and the mysteries of life and death celebrated by the Christian liturgy. Religious music likewise builds bridges between the message of salvation and those who, while not yet fully accepting Christ, are sensitive to beauty, for “beauty is a key to the mystery and a call to transcendence.”¹⁰ Beauty makes a fruitful dialogue possible.

The application of the Second Vatican Council’s guidelines on the renewal of sacred music and liturgical song—especially in choirs, sacred music groups

⁸ Ibidem, section 118.

⁹ Ibidem, section 119.

¹⁰ J o h n P a u l I I, *Letter to Artists* (Vatican, 4 April 1999), section 16.

and *scholae cantorum*—today requires of pastors and faithful a sound cultural, spiritual, liturgical and musical formation. It also calls for profound reflection in order to define the criteria for creating and disseminating a high-quality repertoire which will enable musical expression to serve its purpose, “the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful,”¹¹ in an appropriate way. This is particularly true for instrumental music. Even if the organ is the instrument of sacred music *par excellence*, today’s musical compositions incorporate ever more diversified instrumental formations. I hope that these riches will help the Church at prayer, so that the symphony of her praise may be attuned to the ‘diapason’ of Christ the Saviour.

Dear friends—musicians, poets and liturgists—your contribution is indispensable. “How many sacred works have been composed through the centuries by people deeply imbued with the sense of the mystery! The faith of countless believers has been nourished by melodies flowing from the hearts of other believers, either introduced into the liturgy or used as an aid to dignified worship. In song, faith is experienced as vibrant joy, love and confident expectation of the saving intervention of God.”¹²

I am sure that you will work generously to preserve and increase the cultural heritage of sacred music in order to serve a fervent liturgy, the privileged place for the inculturation of the faith and the evangelization of cultures. I therefore entrust you to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, who knew how to sing of God’s marvels, as I affectionately impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and all your loved ones.

¹¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, section 112.

¹² J o h n P a u l I I, *Letter to Artists*, section 12.