

It is not Our intention in what We have just said in praise and commendation of the Gregorian chant to exclude sacred polyphonic music from the rites of the Church. If this polyphonic music is endowed with the proper qualities, it can be of great help in increasing the magnificence of divine worship and of moving the faithful to religious dispositions. Everyone certainly knows that many polyphonic compositions, especially those that date from the 16th century, have an artistic purity and richness of melody which render them completely worthy of accompanying and beautifying the Church's sacred rites.



Pope Pius XII, *Musica Sacra* (1955)

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 pre-eminence is that, as sacred song united to the words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy. . . . Therefore sacred music is to be considered the more holy in proportion as it is more closely connected with the liturgical action, whether it adds delight to prayer, fosters unity of minds, or confers greater solemnity upon the sacred rites. But the Church approves of all forms of true art having the needed qualities, and admits them into divine worship. . . .

The treasure of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with great care. Choirs must be diligently promoted, especially in cathedral churches; but bishops and other pastors of souls must be at pains to ensure that, whenever the sacred action is to be celebrated with song, the whole body of the faithful may be able to con-

tribute that active participation which is rightly theirs. . . .

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. But other kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, are by no means excluded from liturgical celebrations [by chant's pride of place], so long as they accord with the spirit of the liturgical action. . . .

Composers, filled with the Christian spirit, should feel that their vocation is to cultivate sacred music and increase its store of treasures. Let them produce compositions which have the qualities proper to genuine sacred music, not confining themselves to works which can be sung only by large choirs, but providing also for the needs of small choirs and for the active participation of the entire assembly of the faithful.

Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963)



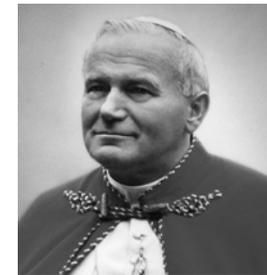
13. Liturgical services are celebrations of the Church, that is, of the holy people, united under and directed by the bishop or priest. The priest and his ministers, because of the sacred order they have received, hold a special place in these celebrations, as do also—by reason of the ministry they perform—the servers, readers, commentators and those in the choir. . . .

15. The faithful fulfill their liturgical role by making that full, conscious and active participation which is demanded by the nature of the liturgy itself and which is, by reason of baptism, the right and duty of the Christian people. This participation (a) should be above all internal, in the sense that by it the faithful join their mind to what they pronounce or hear, and cooperate with heavenly grace; (b) must be, on the other hand, external also, that is, such as to show the internal participation by gestures and bodily attitudes, by the acclamations, responses and singing. The

faithful should also be taught to unite themselves interiorly to what the ministers or choir sing, so that by listening to them they may raise their minds to God. . . .

19. Because of the liturgical ministry it performs, the choir—or the *capella musica*, or *schola cantorum*—deserves particular mention. Its role has become something of yet greater importance and weight by reason of the norms of the Council concerning the liturgical renewal. Its duty is, in effect, to ensure the proper performance of the parts which belong to it, according to the different kinds of music sung, and to encourage the active participation of the faithful in the singing. Therefore: (a) There should be choirs, or *capellae*, or *scholae cantorum*, especially in cathedrals and other major churches, in seminaries and religious houses of studies, and they should be carefully encouraged. (b) It would also be desirable for similar choirs to be set up in smaller churches.

Sacred Congregation of Rites,
Musica Sacram (1967)



The sharing of all the baptized in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ is the key to understanding the Council's call for "full, conscious and active participation [*participatio actualis*]" in the liturgy. Full participation certainly means that every member of the community has a part to play in the liturgy; and in this respect a great deal has been achieved in parishes and communities across your land. But full participation does not mean that everyone does everything, since this would lead to a clericalizing of the laity and a laicizing of the priesthood; and this was not what the Council had in mind. The liturgy, like the Church, is intended to be hierarchical and polyphonic, respecting the different roles as-

signed by Christ and allowing all the different voices to blend in one great hymn of praise.

Active participation certainly means that, in gesture, word, song and service, all the members of the community take part in an act of worship, which is anything but inert or passive. Yet active participation does not preclude the active passivity of silence, stillness and listening: indeed, it demands it. Worshippers are not passive, for instance, when listening to the readings or the homily, or following the prayers of the celebrant, and the chants and music of the liturgy. These are experiences of silence and stillness, but they are in their own way profoundly active. 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.

John Paul II, *Address to Bishops of Northwestern U.S.A.* (1998)



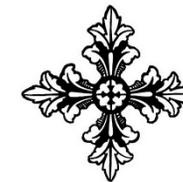
At times, the choir performs its ministry by singing alone. The choir may draw on the treasury of sacred music, singing compositions by composers of various periods and in various musical styles, as well as music that expresses the faith of the various cultures that enrich the Church. Appropriate times where the choir might commonly sing alone include a prelude before Mass, the Entrance chant, the Preparation of the Gifts, during the Communion procession or after the reception of Communion, and the recessional. ... The music of the choir must always be appropriate to the Liturgy, either by being a proper liturgical text or by expressing themes appropriate to the Liturgy.

USCCB, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (2007)

This testimony of St. Augustine can help us to understand the fact that the constitution *Sacro-sanctum Concilium*, in line with the tradition of the Church, teaches that “sacred song, united to the words, forms a necessary and integral part of the solemn liturgy” (112). Why “necessary and integral”? Certainly not for purely aesthetic reasons, in a superficial sense, but because it cooperates, precisely through its beauty, in nourishing and expressing the faith, and so to the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful, which are the ends of sacred music (cf. *ibid.*). For this reason I wish to thank you for the precious service that you render: the music that you perform is not an accessory or only an external ornament of the liturgy, but *it is liturgy itself*. You help the whole assembly to praise God, to make his Word enter into the depths of the heart: with song you pray and help others pray, and you participate in the song and prayer of the liturgy that embraces the whole of creation in glorifying the Creator....

[W]e need not have recourse to illustrious persons to think of how many people have been touched in their depths of their soul listening to sacred music; and of how many more have felt themselves, like Claudel, newly drawn to God by the beauty of liturgical music. And, here dear friends, you have an important role: work to improve the quality of liturgical song without being afraid to recover and value the great musical tradition of the Church, which has in Gregorian Chant and polyphony two of its highest expressions, as Vatican II itself states (*SC* 116). And I would like to stress that the active participation of the whole people of God in the liturgy does *not* consist only in speaking, but also in listening, in welcoming the Word with the senses and the spirit; and this holds also for sacred music. You, who have the gift of song, can make the heart of many people sing in liturgical celebrations.

Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to “Scholae Cantorum” Pilgrims* (2012)



THE CHURCH SPEAKS

about

The Role of the Choir



*Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!
Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody!
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!*
(Psa 98:4-6)

(There is often a misconception that trained choirs no longer have a role in the post-conciliar liturgy, because all music should be sung by all the people. The teaching of the Catholic Church is more nuanced, as the quotations in this pamphlet show.)