

RECENT POPES ON CHURCH MUSIC

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IT is now something over fifty years since the appearance of that major landmark in liturgical history that was the *Motu proprio* of Pope St Pius X, *Tra le sollecitudini*, published on November 22, 1903. The original text was in Italian, though it was accompanied by a Latin text also. It is worth examining briefly the nature of a *Motu proprio*, by way of comparison with some subsequent legislation. A *Motu proprio* is a papal rescript, including these words ('of his own accord'), signifying that the Pope has decided personally on its provisions, neither depending upon the request or advice of others, nor setting out to deal with a particular case. (A special legal characteristic of a *Motu proprio* is that it does not depend for its validity upon the validity of the reasons alleged for its issue, as is the case with ordinary rescripts where the phrase is not used: the *Motu proprio* is valid whatever may happen to the reasons.) The most well-known *Motu proprio* is this one on Church Music, so that the term suggests to most people this particular document.

Twenty-five years after its appearance Pius XI issued an Apostolic Constitution, that is, a papal statute in the form of a letter to all Christians, known from its opening words as *Divini cultus* and dated December 20, 1928.

An encyclical is a papal letter in more solemn form, addressed to the whole hierarchy of the Church. The present Holy Father issued on November 20, 1947, the famous encyclical *Mediator Dei* on liturgical worship, where there are certain passages dealing particularly with the subject of Church Music.

Finally, on December 25, 1955, Pope Pius XII issued the encyclical *Musicae sacrae disciplina*, specifically dealing with Church Music, the English translation of which, published in June 1958, it is our happy task to welcome in this article.¹ Thus, although the *Motu proprio* of Pius X is the basis of all subsequent statements, and declared itself to be 'quasi codice giuridico della musica sacra', as it were a code of laws regulating sacred music,

1 *Sacred Music*. Challoner Publications, for the Society of St Gregory; 2s.

yet it is only with Pius XII's *Musicae sacrae disciplina* that the matter is treated with the full solemnity of an encyclical.

Yet the encyclical of Pius XII sets out mainly to 'confirm and impose once again' the directions of Pius X (n. 3 in the English text), and states that its recommendations 'follow the same lines' as those made by Pius X and Pius XI. And perhaps the most remarkable fact about these four documents under discussion (Pius X's *Motu proprio* 1903, Pius XI's *Divini cultus* 1928, the paragraphs of Pius XII's *Mediator Dei* 1947, and Pius XII's *Musicae sacrae disciplina* 1955) is the continuity and substantial identity of their provisions, and the relatively minor importance of their differences. Yet there is a gradual change in the angle of approach and the objects of attack.

It would be useful first to list the points which appear in all of them (though the brief treatment in *Mediator Dei* does not include each one). These seem to be the following:

- (a) The primacy of Plainsong.
- (b) The approval of classical polyphony (and both Pius X and Pius XI mention Palestrina by name).
- (c) The admission of modern music, provided it fulfils the sacred function of Church music and avoids a profane manner.
- (d) The primacy of the organ.
- (e) The exclusive use of Latin in the music of the Mass.
- (f) The establishment of diocesan commissions and attention to the training of ecclesiastical students.

The regulations of Pius X, which the other documents expressly intend to echo, are in fact today so much part and parcel of our normal liturgical outlook that it is difficult to realize that they were something of a major reform fifty years ago. The points in the above list (except perhaps the diocesan commissions) are all part of our everyday experience. No one, whether he likes Plainsong or not, will fail to recognize its privileged position; classical polyphony is universally recognized as a specially fitting medium, especially in the great churches of Rome or at Westminster; none will deny the right of new music to be performed in church; the organ is a universally accepted part of worship; at present the exclusive use of Latin at Mass is fully accepted (however unwillingly by some); and there is no seminarist who has not undergone many choir practices. These things are part of

the lives of most of us today, and they have been consistently proclaimed from the Vatican from 1903 to 1955.

At the same time, the *Motu proprio* of 1903 was the expression of trends that were already in motion at the time, while it also gave a new impetus and encouragement to these efforts. The work of the monks of Solesmes was already well in hand: Dom Pothier's *Mélodies Grégoriennes* had appeared in 1880 and had led the way to the great work of restoring the Gregorian melodies and to the elaboration of a working theory of their execution. Whether the resulting text represents the melodies in their original form is a question under discussion today, and similarly whether their method of execution reconstructs the manner of singing in the early centuries is also matter of debate at present; but the fact remains that at the time of the *Motu proprio* a working text was being produced, and a theory was being evolved of its practical interpretation in singing, which is reverent, dignified, beautiful and musicianly, and which has become so widespread that performance in the manner of Solesmes has become associated in the minds of the faithful with the idea of Plainsong itself. It should also be noted that from 1903 to 1955 the Popes have urged that Plainsong should be sung not only by the choir but also by the people, and there is no doubt that in this country the publication of *Plainsong for Schools* in 1930 greatly influenced the fulfilment among the faithful of that desire.

The classical polyphony was also undergoing a revival and restoration at the time, and it has been said that especially in this sphere the appointment of Sir Richard Terry to Westminster in 1901 (even before the Cathedral was complete) anticipated in many respects the legislation of the *Motu proprio* itself. It is also of interest to realize that it was already in 1898 that Mgr Lorenzo Perosi, who brought such renown to the Sistine Choir, had moved to Rome from Venice where Cardinal Sarto was at the time Archbishop, and was there to welcome him when he became Pius X.

Another problem was exercising the minds of church musicians at the turn of the century, and that was the accompaniment of Plainsong on the organ. The printed accompaniments of the nineteenth century to plainsong melodies show a full note-for-note accompaniment, as for a hymn-tune; but with the emergence of the monastic singing of the chant the soft modal background to the chant, which in some form is universal today, had to be

evolved. And Pius X in 1903 had to give a warning (n. 16) that the organ must 'merely sustain and never oppress' the voices. Although Pius XII in 1955 tells us that the organ was used to accompany the chant from the eighth or ninth century (n. 11), yet at the beginning of the twentieth century two characters were awaiting marriage who had never met before: good Plainsong and the organ, which had only grown to mechanical maturity during the period of the eclipse of Plainsong.

These were some of the things that were being thought about at the time of the *Motu proprio*, and it should be remembered that St Pius X himself had a lifelong practical interest in church music: as a student at the Seminary at Padua he had conducted the choir in 1857-58, and it is recorded by his Secretary of State that as Pope he would sight-read music that was sent to him. It is not therefore surprising that his instruction on Sacred Music was issued to the whole Church within four months of his accession: the reforms he proposed must have been in his mind for many years before.

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Although the directions of Pius X are so familiar to the faithful of today, it is worth summarizing them here, in order to be able to observe the few points of development in the subsequent papal declarations.

The *Motu proprio* opens with the general principle that the function of sacred music is to clothe the liturgical text, and continues to indicate three types of music that perform this function: (1) *Gregorian*, which Pius X proposed as the supreme model, adding that the closer any music approaches to this ideal, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes; (2) *Polyphony*, which, he says, agrees with Gregorian in liturgical quality and rightly stands next to it; and (3) *Modern music*, which is to be admitted when its 'excellence, sobriety and gravity' make it worthy of liturgical functions. There follows a reprobation of the 'theatrical style, which was in the greatest vogue especially in Italy, during the last century'. Indeed the attack on the 'theatrical style' in church is a main preoccupation in 1903.

Following upon this is the insistence upon the exclusive use of Latin in liturgical music and the condemnation of the practice of

having any parts of the Mass in the vernacular. A reference is next made to the arrangement, then still current, of having certain verses not sung but rendered by the organ. The liturgical text must be complete, and without alterations or inversions. The priest's part must be in Gregorian, and unaccompanied.

The 'liturgical' choir, vested, is desirable, since the singers 'have a real liturgical office', and thus women's voices are to be excluded.

Unaccompanied singing is 'the music proper to the Church', but the use of the organ is allowed, not, however, that of other instruments except with the special permission of the bishop. The piano, however, and 'noisy instruments' such as drums, etc., are expressly excluded, though brass bands may be permitted in special cases by the bishop.

Liturgical music must not prolong services to an undue length. The last paragraphs deal with education in sacred music.

The *Motu proprio* was Pius X's opening of his liturgical reforms, suggested in the introduction, where he mentions the idea of the Christian people uniting in the common prayer of the Church. But this Instruction, he says, deals only with a particular aspect of the problem, namely with the music.

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Pius XI's *Divini cultus* of 1928 sets out primarily to be a reminder of the instructions of Pius X. It is twenty-five years since their publication, and too often either nothing has been done, or people have relapsed into their bad ways. There is a renewed insistence on the importance of musical training, especially for the clergy, and a recommendation of proper liturgical carrying out of ceremonies in cathedrals and in collegiate and conventual churches. Pius XI is a little less tolerant of organ accompaniment: it is more perfect, he says, to have unaccompanied voices. But he adds that the organ is indeed the Church's instrument, and for the first time we have admonishments to organ-builders as well as to organists. The 'voicer' has a duty to exclude any element of profanity in his work.

The matter of the restoration of Plainsong is once more urged, especially for the people, who must no longer be 'distant and dumb spectators'.

Pius XII's *Mediator Dei* of 1947 is of course concerned with a much wider horizon of liturgical thought, but the short section (203-206) on music reaffirms the special dignity of Plainsong, 'confirming the decrees' of Pius X and Pius XI, in particular quoting the latter with regard to Plainsong sung by the people. There is, as it chances, no mention of polyphony, but the attitude to modern music is that of his predecessors. Lastly there is further encouragement towards congregational singing.

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The encyclical *Musicae sacrae disciplina* of Pius XII in 1955 includes (n. 15-17) a list of papal pronouncements on sacred music since Benedict XIV in 1749. Pius XII distinguishes (n. 28-29) 'liturgical music' (Mass and Office) and 'religious music' belonging to non-liturgical occasions and usually 'in the language of the people', and comments on the influence especially on the young of good vernacular hymns.

The special honour due to Plainsong is once more reiterated, and it is to be 'very extensively used . . . sung correctly, worthily and reverently' (n. 34). The Pope goes on (n. 35) to insist upon the 'close association' of Plainsong with its Latin words, a position which he reaffirmed at the Assisi Conference in 1956. In the encyclical (n. 36) the Holy Father refers to 'certain concessions' granted in this matter—referring no doubt to the 'German Mass' where German paraphrases may be used for the Ordinary—but explains that these concessions must not be extended without the Holy See's permission. Where, however, there is an immemorial custom of singing popular non-Latin hymns after the Latin text of the liturgy has been sung, the bishops may allow this to continue (n. 37), but the law forbidding the words of the liturgy in the vernacular still binds (cf. Pius X, n. 7).

Polyphony receives a special mention, in its now traditional second place, with a special mention of the work of those who have restored it (n. 42). Modern music is once more welcomed in the terms of Pius X, though there is now no more fear of the 'theatrical style'.

The organ receives its usual place of primacy, but now Pius XII (n. 46) makes an innovation in welcoming other instruments, in particular the strings. (It has been stated that he is a violinist himself.)

There follows a section (also a novelty) on the subject of vernacular hymns (n. 48-51): their vocabulary should be simple, their tunes easy; they may not be used during High Mass without the special permission of the Holy See, but at Low Mass they may help to prevent people from being 'dumb onlookers', and on non-liturgical occasions they are of great value. Then comes a short section on hymns in mission lands, where the local idiom should be used, though the universal Plainsong has also been introduced (n. 53-55).

With regard to choirs, the 'liturgical choir' of men and boys as directed by Pius X (n. 13) is once more encouraged, but a new feature, given in terms of a recent statement of the Congregation of Rites, allows 'a group of men and women or girls', when a surpliced choir is not available, but adds that they must be in a special place, outside the sanctuary, with the men 'altogether separated from the women and girls' (n. 57). The encyclical ends once more with directions for musical education, especially of the clergy.

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While Pius X lays down the general principles that underlie the subsequent declarations, and attacks with special severity the 'theatrical style', Pius XI in 1928 is chiefly concerned with attacking failure to implement the requirements of the earlier document. Pius XII in *Mediator Dei* is laying down the larger liturgical principles and attacking a variety of abuses, mostly deriving from false liturgical theology in recent times, and the musical section of that encyclical is little more than an echo of previous legislation. In *Musicae sacrae disciplina* of 1955 he is reaffirming the previous teaching, but also attacking profane intrusions in worship, not from the angle of 'theatrical' association, but rather from the angle of the alleged 'freedom' of certain kinds of modern art and music, which claim to be free from moral principle and the direction of human life towards God. 'Art for art's sake', 'an irrational urge to artistic creation': these things have no place in the Church's worship (n. 22). And later in the encyclical the Pope's attack is in the manner of *Mediator Dei* upon those who might abuse concessions already made by extending them without proper authority (n. 36).

The principal new features in the legislation of this encyclical are (1) the regulation of non-liturgical 'religious music' and in particular of vernacular hymns, with the permission of them at Low Mass; (2) the permission to use strings in church; and (3) the formal admission of women 'to sing at solemn Mass the liturgical texts' under certain conditions.

How these points are affecting current practice in this country since Christmas 1955 is not perhaps yet evident. One has seen an ingenious device of a surpliced choir of men in the stalls, and behind them, in a recess behind the stalls, the lady soprani and contralti, not in surplices and 'altogether separated'. How the 'mixed choirs' in the west gallery are faring one cannot say. I did myself once get the bishop's permission to accompany a four-part choir of boys with the double-bass alone, doubling with 16-ft tone the bass line, and this was very effective. I kept the letter, but shall now need it no longer. With regard to vernacular hymns the Pope recommends (n. 51) the compilation of hymnals by episcopal authority, and English Catholics may feel proud that they did this long ago.

The Society of St Gregory, whose biggest work perhaps in its early days was the sponsoring of *Plainsong for Schools* for the propagation of good Plainsong, are once more to be congratulated on publishing this encyclical in association with Challoner Publications in graceful format with a few useful notes and references.



LET THE PEOPLE SING¹

A Parish Priest's thoughts on Pastoral Liturgy

J. C. BUCKLEY

LET THEM? . . . If only they would! But let us not blame them. What have we priests done about it? Not that I think that everything is solved by lusty singing in church. Far from it! It is the whole picture of the people's part in the liturgy that we must keep constantly before our minds. Our first task is surely with the theological basis of the liturgical movement.

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