

Notes From the Choir Loft, March 10th, 2019

Mass (where the Popes have said that chant and polyphony must reign). What's our practice here at OLMC? We use hymns in our processionals and recessionals, and on rare occasions Gregorian chant; and we use Gregorian chant and polyphony in the middle of Mass and on rare occasions a hymn. *MUSICAE SACRAE, ENCYCLICAL OF POPE PIUS XII ON SACRED MUSIC* 1955. Ln 14-16. http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_25121955_musicae-sacrae.html

The problem is the OVER interpretation of the rules on sacred music. Are some rules hard and fast? YES. Are some open for fairly wide interpretation? YES! This is WHY the church is guardian of sacred scripture/liturgy/liturgical music; too often people are convinced they know what will make church music pure and good again when really it's a nostalgic yearning for the past; I would say that this is why we, the faithful, are desperate for a decree on sacred music again, especially in the confusion of the modern world. The decrees on sacred music in the past have been well received but not well obeyed; some small pockets of Catholic Christendom have implemented them well, and as a result they thrive in the faith. What we need is a strict approach on hard rules and a balanced approach on variable rules. I tell many music directors that I communicate with, wherever this program (the one used at OLMC) is implemented — i.e., Chant gets first priority, then polyphony, hymns third, and any other incidental

music then last — these places are bursting at the seams with parishioners. Too often people have been poisoned by bad music; this is why we have the music history conference held on occasions and when I can find the time to teach it. The conference does not seek to make you more knowledgeable on church music history; instead it imparts a sense of what sacred music should sound like by presenting a big picture view of church music going back to the 800s. Another one will be scheduled later in May or possibly even June.

In my experience as a music director/singer, I've found vast and varying opinions about what constitutes "Catholic music." Many a time I've had people come up to me after Masses (not lately but somewhat often in the past) and say, "Why do you have that hymn as a recessional? It's not a 'Catholic' hymn; it's a 'protestant' hymn." And I have to ask them, "What characteristics about that hymn make it 'protestant'?" and one of the answers is, "It's used in the protestant churches"; another one would be, "It was written by a protestant." And my answer back might be, "Catholic hymns written before the revolution of Luther are used in the protestant churches. Does that instantly then qualify them as 'protestant'?" or, "How does the author's rejection of the One True Faith make his compositions automatically unworthy?" To me this seems akin to, "The condition of the soul of the priest has something to do with the graces received" (which is horrific error).

The first thing that we must do is get rid of these ridiculous arguments for the sake of an argument. There are hymns; some are sung exclusively in the Catholic Church and some are sung exclusively in Protestant churches. There are literally hundreds and hundreds that are sung in both Catholic and Protestant churches, so how do we classify these hymns? Well, you can classify them in other ways than by their denomination (which is a VERY poor way of classifying hymns). One

of the best ways to classify a hymn is to look at three things. 1st, is the melody within reasonable melodic compositional rules? In other words, is it beautiful, does it lift up the soul, does it avoid dramatic jumps and overly sappy emotional movements? 2nd, are the words within the parameters of church teachings, are there hints of previous errors, does it contain heresy? And 3rd, what is its history? In other words, has it stood the test of time? That last rule is not a hard and fast one; we do not reject the modern simply because it's modern. That's utter foolishness. We reject the modern for its errors and if a new hymn has strong elements of the first two rules, then a new hymn is as acceptable as an old hymn.

Little is known about sacred music in today's world; there are people from all parts of the music education spectrum who think they know what makes sacred music or shall we say liturgical music. I've found that the more a person is educated, the more risk there is of not following the rules set down by the Popes in teachings and encyclicals. There are ultra purists who think that we need to go back to the rules of hymns at Mass from before the Council of Trent. At that time hymns were only used for the Divine Office. However, hymns have been established as a practice at Mass for nearly three centuries and when used correctly there IS foundation to keep them there (Processionals/Recessionals). And there are people who think that we need more hymns in the middle of