

Putting *Sacramentum Caritatis* into practice from a musical point of view

“...Choirs should be diligently promoted....” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*)

Pope Benedict’s Apostolic Exhortation concerning the Eucharist, released on 13th March 2007, “seeks to take up the richness and variety of the reflections and proposals that emerged from the Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops” that took place in October 2005. Describing the Eucharist as “the source and summit of the Church’s life and mission”, it is hard to imagine a document of greater relevance! As with many documents emanating from the Vatican, its length is daunting. However, the Exhortation’s beauty is addictive; and I would recommend it be read in its entirety, but slowly, in order fully to absorb the richness of its teaching.

As has been already widely reported, *Sacramentum Caritatis* strongly recommends the greater use of Latin in the post-Vatican II rite of Mass (Novus Ordo or what should now be referred to as the *Ordinary Rite*) and that greater use be also made of polyphonic music and plainsong (Gregorian chant).

The purpose of this article is to make practical suggestions as to how this document may best be implemented from a musical point of view.

Why Latin?

It should not be forgotten that Latin is still the official language of the Roman Catholic Church. In these days when the Tridentine or Extraordinary Rite of Mass is being celebrated with greater frequency, one is in danger of forgetting this and assuming that Latin only belongs to pre-Vatican II Catholicism. The Exhortation noted the obvious advantage of using Latin at large-scale and International Mass celebrations, not least because it “expresses more clearly the unity and universality of the Church”. Throughout it the Holy Father reaffirms the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in its document, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, that stressed that, although the vernacular may be used, “pride of place” should be given to Gregorian chant and that the faithful should “still be able to say and sing those parts of the Mass that pertain to them” in Latin.

From a singing point of view Latin is also a great gift – a language that lends itself to singing far more readily than English. Latin only uses five “open” vowels (as in Italian) with none of the diphthongs that make English so difficult to sing. Once a choir has learned how to sing the vowels correctly, a homogeneous sound is much more easily achievable by singing in Latin.

Education

Of course, the continuation of our Latin tradition depends a great deal upon educating the young; and it is to our shame that many young people have no or little knowledge of this important part of their Catholic heritage – which is what it is. Surely, it should not be too much to expect Catholic school children to learn by heart the Marian seasonal antiphons (both said and sung in Simple Tone) and to be able to recite *Ave Maria*, *Gloria Patri* and the *Pater Noster* in Latin, as well as main parts of the Mass: *Kyrie* (albeit Greek!), *Gloria*, *Credo*, *Sanctus*, *Benedictus* and *Agnus Dei*. I only know of one Catholic school in the UK that insists in its curriculum that, by the time they leave, all pupils have a good knowledge of these and also several of the plainsong Mass settings (*de Angelis*, *Orbis factor* and *Cum júbilo* and others). Would that there were more such schools!

Contrary to popular belief, children like plainsong! [I read recently of a parish in central England that is doing marvels with a children’s choir singing plainsong.] Of course, it has to be well sung and not at a dreary pace and in learning it, they should also be taught the meaning of the words.

***Actuosa participatio* (Active Participation)**

Since Vatican II, there has been some confusion as to what is meant by “Active Participation” in the Mass. Many have interpreted this as simply meaning that congregations (however reluctant) should be encouraged to sing; and the lack of stillness and reflective time within the reformed rite of Mass has often been the cause of much understandable criticism by Tridentinists. It is timely that *Sacramentum Caritatis* should reflect on this at some length. “It should be made clear that the word participation does not refer to mere external activity.” Further, the Council “...encouraged the faithful to take part in the Eucharistic liturgy not as strangers or silent spectators, but as participants in the sacred action, conscious of what they are doing, actively and devoutly”.

It is therefore important that a sung Mass should both contain music for a congregation to sing (should people so wish) and music for reflection and meditation.

More than the “hymn sandwich”

Of course for many parishes the “hymn sandwich” Mass (Opening, Offertory, Communion and Recessional hymn) works reasonably well, particularly if there is no choir. It is important, however, to ensure that the hymns are appropriate – respecting and reflecting particular Feasts and liturgical seasons. It is also essential that the organ accompaniment of these hymns is well played: for example the organist should not play so loud as to drown the singing and deafen the congregation. Accompanying should also take into account the poetry of each hymn verse and allow time for the singers to breathe. The pace of the hymn is also important.

Suggestions for musical content

The following suggestions are therefore addressed principally to parishes that can aspire to a choir and which should therefore designate one of its Sunday Masses as being “sung” or more solemn than others.

- † **Entrance:** although a hymn frequently suffices, why not try singing the Plainsong Proper Introit Verse (unaccompanied or accompanied)? Although initially somewhat daunting to many choirs, the Introits are among the easier chants – and not so long – and help to set the tone for a particular Sunday. The chant melodies are also repeated fairly frequently throughout the year, so choirs will soon become familiar with them. It is also an appropriate way of helping the congregation meditate on the words (provided the congregation has a translation). This is especially effective during Advent and Lent, but may be adopted throughout the year. These may be found in the Gregorian Missal (published by Solesmes) and copies in modern notation are not that difficult to find. A simpler alternative would be to use the Introit verse from the Graduale Simplex. Suitable resources may be found in the USA from CanticaNOVA Publications (www.canticanova.com).
- † **The Mass setting:** for most Sundays, sing a plainsong Mass setting (alternate between Mass VIII *de Angelis* and Mass XI *Orbis factor* during Ordinary Time, Mass XVII for Advent and Lent and Mass I *Lux et Origo* for Eastertide. Give the congregation copies of the music in either plainsong or modern notation (easily available) so that at least they have a chance of joining in if they wish to – and as an aide to meditation. On occasional Sundays and other Feasts, try out a polyphonic setting in Latin.
- † **Psalm:** instead of a cantor, let the whole choir sing the psalm verses, preferably in harmony. [As this is part of the Liturgy of the Word, English is arguably more appropriate.]
- † **Gospel Acclamation:** always sing this, but vary the chants used regularly.
- † **Presentation of the Gifts:** the Offertory verse may be sung – even on a simple tone or monotone if necessary, as the plainsong Propers tend to be more complicated and long. Alternatively, an Offertory hymn may be sung.

- † **The Lord's Prayer:** there is really little excuse not to sing this in Latin to the familiar plainsong tone – choir and congregation alike. A number of choral alternatives are also readily available.
- † **Communion Motet:** this is an ideal opportunity for a choir to sing its own Eucharistic motet either instead of or in addition to a congregational Communion hymn.
- † **Dismissal:** always sing this, preferably in Latin! [NB your priest or deacon may need a little training.] Immediately afterwards sing the appropriate Marian antiphon, especially during May and October.
- † **Recessional:** although a hymn is traditional (and nothing wrong with that) you might consider just having an Organ Voluntary for the procession. It is arguable that after the words “The Mass is ended; God in peace. Thanks be to God” no further words are necessary.

Implementation

In order properly to implement the liturgical suggestions made by *Sacramentum Caritatis*, a concerted effort must be made by many individuals and bodies of people. Here are a few suggestions: -

- † **Within parishes:** willing individuals need to come forward prepared to form choirs and, if necessary, parishes must be prepared to employ organists and choir directors and make this part of their financial budget. Parish priests should also come to appreciate not only the beauty of fine music, but its relevance in the apostolic mission of the church.
- † **Within deaneries:** it would be excellent were there to be at least one Sung Mass per Sunday (roughly as described above) in every deanery throughout the country.
- † **Within schools:** children should “be taught to recite the more common prayers in Latin and also to sing parts of the liturgy to Gregorian chant.”
- † **Within seminaries:** the Exhortation also suggests that seminarians be properly prepared to understand and to celebrate Mass in Latin. An extension of this would also be for dioceses to include training within their Ongoing formation of priests programmes.
- † **Within dioceses:** the bishops should give a good and clear lead in this matter as well and instruct their liturgical commissions accordingly. Seminars and music workshops should be encouraged at diocesan and deanery level.

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam...

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