

# theuniverse

*The following article appeared in The Universe on 2nd March 2008*

*[NB This is the original full length version of the article which includes specific recommendations for schools, which was not included in the published version.]*

## **The future for plainsong**

It is well known that Pope Benedict XVI is intensely interested in good liturgy. This can be seen from his many writings as Cardinal Ratzinger, to informal addresses both as Cardinal and Pope, and more recently, his publication of both an Exhortation and Motu Proprio on the subject in 2007.

The Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, published on 13th March 2007 has, at least temporarily, been somewhat eclipsed by the Motu Proprio, *Summorum Pontificum*, (7th July 2007) which allows for the greater use of the pre-conciliar Rite of Mass (Tridentine) - now to be referred to as the "Extraordinary Rite". However, I suspect that, if properly understood and implemented, *Sacramentum Caritatis* will be of a more lasting significance and influence to most parishes.

The Exhortation summarised the discussions of the 11th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, held in October 2005, on "The Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church's Life and Mission". In it, Pope Benedict wrote, "I wish to endorse the proposal made by the Synod of Bishops, in harmony with the directives of the Second Vatican Council, that, with the exception of the readings, the homily and the prayer of the faithful, it is fitting that such liturgies be celebrated in Latin. Similarly, the better-known prayers of the Church's tradition should be recited in Latin and, if possible, selections of Gregorian chant should be sung.

Speaking more generally, I ask that future priests, from their time in the seminary, receive the preparation needed to understand and to celebrate Mass in Latin, and also to use Latin texts and execute Gregorian chant; nor should we forget that the faithful can be taught to recite the more common prayers in Latin, and also to sing parts of the liturgy to Gregorian chant."

In other words, the Holy Father is advocating the use of both spoken and sung Latin and, specifically, Plainsong for the whole of the Roman Rite of Mass - both Extraordinary and Ordinary.

But why Plainsong? First of all, because it is a vital and essential part of our Catholic heritage and culture. The late Dom Aldhelm Dean, a Benedictine monk of Quarr Abbey, wrote in his charming little book, *Practical Plainsong*: "For centuries Chant has been one of the most exquisite ways in which the Church has expressed her love for God." Later he writes: "It is not that we have got to like Gregorian chant, it is simply that we shall be more complete Catholics if we do."

Now, before I hear shouts of protest about the difficulty of singing some Gregorian chant, I should like to divide what is generally meant by Plainsong into several categories (my own divisions).

First, we have the settings of the "Ordinary" of the Mass, which are made up of the Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei prayers of the Mass. These vary somewhat in technical difficulty but, in the main, are easily learned by priest, choir and congregation alike. Once learned, they offer great scope for prayerful reflection whilst being sung.

Secondly, we have the Plainsong "Propers" of the Mass. These are the settings of the Introit, Gradual, Alleluia, Offertory and Communion verses pertaining to a particular day in the Church's calendar. These are more difficult to sing; but certain movements (the Introit and Communion especially) are generally shorter and easier to sing and should not be beyond the reach of a reasonable parish choir or schola – and especially appropriate at these reflective moments in the Mass.

Thirdly, we have plainsong hymns and devotional chant – antiphons to Our Lady for example – which are highly appropriate for congregational singing. I would also include within this category some of the Sequences attributed to particular Feasts (Lauda Sion for Corpus Christi as an example). Again, these should not be beyond the scope of the average parish choir and many may be sung by congregations as well. Quite a number of well known hymns are of plainsong origin – "O come, o come Emmanuel" springs to

mind; but even “O come all ye faithful” has its origins in plainsong. I am also thinking of wonderful hymns such as “Adoro te devote” and “Ave maris stella”, the beauty of which is beyond compare!

We must not forget the chanting of the psalms as well, which has formed such an important part of monastic life throughout the ages. This is less essential to parish liturgy; but the chants are easily adaptable to the responsorial psalm format whether it be in Latin or the vernacular – and a good alternative to some of the less than inspired music currently being used!

But how do we begin to restore this music into our present-day liturgy? How are we best to implement the suggestions made by Pope Benedict and the bishops? Clearly, this needs to be done in a number of ways – and I should so much like to see some visible support for this from our bishops as well! The present sad fact of the matter is that, with the desire to reform the music of the Mass following Vatican II, the majority of people under the age of 50 will not automatically recall how to sing the Salve Regina and other prayers by heart, as they were not taught these when at school unlike earlier generations.

It is in Catholic schools that I suggest the future lies and to whom I should like to raise the challenge of reintroducing Gregorian chant to their curriculum – both at Primary and Secondary school level. The teaching of Gregorian chant would incorporate so much of Catholic culture and heritage, as well as the benefit of language and instilling in the children the global nature of our glorious faith. After, I imagine, a “culture shock” reaction from pupils more used to the regular beat of pop music, I suspect that they will in time come to appreciate both the timeless and prayerful nature of chant – with the rhythmic freedom that allows both contemplation and meditation on the words. Already a handful of schools teaches plainsong with great effect. Let this handful become all Catholic schools! It really would not be difficult to do. Here are some suggestions as what to include.

Primary School – Mass XVIII or XVI – Kyrie, Sanctus & Agnus Dei (arguably the simplest settings suitable for weekday masses): Regina Caeli (for Eastertide).

Secondary School (in this order) – Mass XVIII (de Angelis): Mass XI (Orbis factor): Mass XVII (for Advent & Lent): the Marian antiphons (Salve Regina, Alma Redemptoris Mater, Ave Regina Caelorum, Ave Maria - all in Simple Tone) plus Regina Caeli if not already learned: Pater Noster: Credo I and Credo III: Ave maris stella: Adoro te devote. [Tip: make sure you give the children translations.]

Once these are learned, you might consider continuing with: - Mass IX (cum Jubilo – for Feasts of Our Lady): Mass I (Lux et Origo – for Eastertide): Mass IV (Cunctipotens Genitor Deus): sequences Victimae paschali laudes, Veni sancte spiritus; and Lauda Sion (although this is rather long and you may prefer to start at verse 21 “Ecce panis angelorum”).

What an inestimable treasure to teach our children! They will be “deepening their spiritual life by drawing from the sources of that age-old, inspired means of expressing man’s love for God, whereby we join in offering Him worship worthy of His acceptance, the Holy Mass in its perfection of liturgy and song.” (Dom Aldhelm Dean OSB again.)

As for the generation that missed out on all this when at school – we can leave it to our children to teach us....

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February 2008