

Restoring the Future: Musical Implications of Pope Benedict XVI's *Summorum Pontificum*

by Timothy McDonnell, D.M.A.
Ave Maria University

The old expression “Benedictine Reform” is achieving new currency of late. The term has been revived recently to describe the subtle, but resolute changes introduced into the liturgical life of the Catholic Church by Pope Benedict XVI, whose attention to the liturgy seems to form an integral part of his broader program to reclaim Christian identity in the West. The most notable move in this direction was the publication of the Apostolic Letter *Summorum Pontificum* on July 7, 2007. With this document, Pope Benedict XVI rehabilitated the older, pre-Vatican II form of the Roman Catholic Mass to the life of the Universal Church¹.

The present paper will argue that by the same act, Benedict has restored the potential for the Mass to be a cultural force, with particular attention to the province of sacred music. An examination of the musical prescriptions of the post-Conciliar literature will reveal the process by which many of the species of traditional Catholic sacred music were rendered obsolete in the course of liturgical reform. We will further consider the proposition that Pope Benedict's restoration of the older form of Mass not only provides an authentic habitat for the re-emergence of these abandoned forms, but also provides the conditions for the organic development of new music for the old Mass.

¹ According to the *Missale Romanum* promulgated by Pope John XXIII in 1962.

The Liturgical Movement was thought to have reached its apogee with the adoption and promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, by the II Vatican Council in late 1963. The liturgical reform signaled by this document ushered in a period of staggering change in the Mass. This dramatic shift was accompanied by a flurry of documents and instructional publications. The most relevant of these with respect to music in the liturgy was *MUSICAM SACRAM* issued in March, 1967. This pivotal document would serve as the instrument of interpretation for the principles laid down by Vatican II in the area of liturgical music. Issued with the express approval Pope Paul VI, this decree is the first attempt to answer the question: “What did the Council intend for sacred music in the liturgy?” The instruction announces its aim in the second paragraph:

“The decisions of the Council have already begun to be put into effect in the recently undertaken liturgical renewal. But the new norms concerning the arrangement of the sacred rites and the active participation of the faithful have given rise to several problems regarding sacred music and its ministerial role. These problems appear to be able to be solved by expounding more fully certain relevant principles of the Constitution on the Liturgy.”²

Although the document proceeds to work on these “several problems” in the ensuing pages, the exact musical issues that arose in the process of liturgical reform are not articulated. The instruction concerns itself with four principal questions: that of (1) the degrees of solemnity between a simple *missa lecta* and a fully sung solemn or high mass, (2) the nature and form of the repertoire chosen for the sacred liturgy, (3) a more precise description of ‘active participation’, and (4) the heritage of sacred music.

² *MUSICAM SACRAM* (MS), no. 2. The English translations of the documents cited here appear as such on the website of the Holy See, www.vatican.va.

Musicam Sacram addresses the possibility of graduated solemnity by first confirming that the traditional categories of Low and High Mass are to be retained. At the same time, the decree encourages a whole range of solemnity (by which is meant the number of sung elements in the Mass) between these two forms, according to the ability and resources of the participants³.

The document proposes a new model whereby the pastoral leadership of a particular church should choose which elements of the Mass it will sing. To aid in this, it ranks the various sung parts according to degrees of solemnity, namely:

1. First degree:

- a. The initial greeting of the celebrant with its response
- b. The prayer
- c. The Gospel acclamation
- d. The prayer over the offerings
- e. Dialogue, Preface, Sanctus
- f. Final doxology of the anaphora
- g. The Lord's Prayer, with introduction and embolism
- h. The Pax Domini
- i. Post-Communion
- j. Dismissal

2. Second Degree:

- a. Kyrie, Gloria, and Agnus Dei
- b. Creed

³ Previously, the distinction was considerably more severe, in that in the sung form of the Mass, all the constituent parts which could be sung were obliged to be sung. The Low Mass on the other hand was entirely recited, and typically, any music sung at a Low Mass was extrinsic to the rite (such as popular hymns, etc.).

c. Prayer of the Faithful

3. Third Degree:

a. Entrance and Communion chants

b. Chants between the readings

c. Offertory chant

d. Readings of Sacred Scripture⁴

The schema prescribes a clear hierarchy in the sung elements⁵. The most essential singing is done by the celebrant with the people responding (the so-called *accentus* and *concentus* chants). The next in rank is the Ordinary of the Mass beginning with the Sanctus, followed by the Kyrie, Gloria, and Agnus Dei, and in optimal conditions, the Creed. The Prayer of the Faithful (*Oratio Universalis*), which was specifically restored by the Council⁶, takes next priority. Finally, the last sung elements in the hierarchy are the Proper chants of the day. (Because these elements are last does not mean that they are of the least value; quite to the contrary, according to the degrees articulated here, these chants denote the highest degree of solemnity.)

Up to this point, the instruction has indicated *which constituent parts* of the Mass should be sung and in which order. Hereafter, the question of the musical nature of the music to be chosen is treated. To begin this discussion, the document advances a more precise definition of ‘active participation’, saying that it

⁴ MS, nos. 29-31.

⁵ The instruction states that each succeeding degree contains the previous, so that to execute the elements of the second degree, one is obliged to perform the elements of the first; in order to execute the elements of the third degree, one is obliged to perform the elements of both the first and the second degrees.

⁶ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC), no. 53.

“(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.”⁷

Musicam Sacram continually encourages the external active participation of the people at virtually every musical moment of the liturgy. This would include those parts of the Common not belonging to the sacred ministers, the Ordinary, and most remarkably, the Proper. The language used to describe this is somewhat complicated by its qualifications. For example:

“(c) Some of the people's song, however, especially if the faithful have not yet been sufficiently instructed, or if musical settings for several voices are used, can be handed over to the choir alone, provided that the people are not excluded from those parts that concern them. But the usage of entrusting to the choir alone the entire singing of the whole Proper and of the whole Ordinary, to the complete exclusion of the people's participation in the singing, is to be deprecated.”⁸

Another example:

“In selecting the kind of sacred music to be used, whether it be for the choir or for the people, the capacities of those who are to sing the music must be taken into account.
No kind of sacred music is prohibited from liturgical actions by the Church as long as

⁷ MS, no. 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 16.

it corresponds to the spirit of the liturgical celebration itself and the nature of its individual parts, and does not hinder the active participation of the people.”⁹

These passages signal a sea change. Whereas previous instructions and legislation seemed to invite the faithful to a higher level of participation, by singing the traditional forms, in particular the Gregorian chant¹⁰, *Musicam Sacram* seems to place the *fact* of participation in preferment to the *quality* of that participation. The simple fact of participation had not previously enjoyed such prominence. For the first time in the history of the Church, the native repertoire of the Roman Mass finds itself as one of so many choices, the negotiation of which is determined not by the pursuit of what is in itself most suited to the rite, but by the fact that the whole congregation can sing it. With popular *utility* as the chief criterion, *Musicam Sacram* eagerly advances the cause of fitting the temple for *Gebrauchsmusik*.

One could surmise at this point that at least one of the “several problems” announced at the beginning of *Musicam Sacram* is that much of the received repertoire for the liturgy was art music, and as such, it did not facilitate the vocal participation of the assembly. Indeed, *Musicam Sacram* paragraph 16 (c) clearly overturns the centuries-old practice whereby the Ordinary of the Mass was rendered in ‘figural music’ (i.e. polyphony) and the Proper was performed according to the florid Gregorian melodies contained in the Roman Gradual¹¹.

⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 9.

¹⁰ *cf. Tra le Sollecitudine*, no. 3 (Pius X, November 22, 1903), *Divini Cultus*, no. IX (Pius IX, December 20, 1928), *Musicae Sacrae*, no. 44-46 (Pius XII, December 25, 1955), *De Musica Sacra et Sacra Liturgia* (Sacred Congregation for Rites, September 3, 1958).

¹¹ The English translation says that the practice is to be “deprecated”. The Latin original, however, renders it more sternly: “*Probandus autem non est ...*,” that is to say, the practice “must not be esteemed as good however.”

Confronted with the monumental achievements of art music in the liturgy, this cannot but amount to a radical inversion of values.

Following this tack, the document includes a description of how the principles of active participation should be applied to the Ordinary of the Mass¹². A concession is made here to “musical settings” of the Mass Ordinary. Indeed, they may be retained, but on the curious condition that the assembly of the people be not entirely excluded from the singing. Forming a practical picture of how this is supposed to work is not easily done. What does this passage really mean? Most people acquainted with traditional Catholic liturgical music for the Mass Ordinary will recognize the practical impossibility of applying this rubric to the repertory of polyphonic works. The document proceeds to assert this principle even more emphatically by preferring that the Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei be performed with the participation of the people. The obstacle that these stipulations present to the traditional repertoire is plain.

The Proper of the Mass, which includes the chants for the Entrance, the Offertory, and the Communion, as well as the two Lesson chants were likewise commended to congregational participation in *Musicam Sacram*:

“The custom legitimately in use in certain places and widely confirmed by indults, of substituting other songs for the songs given in the Graduale for the Entrance,

¹² “The songs which are called the “Ordinary of the Mass,” if they are sung by musical settings written for several voices may be performed by the choir according to the customary norms, either a capella, or with instrumental accompaniment, as long as the people are not completely excluded from taking part in the singing ... the following points are to be noted: it is preferable that the Creed, since it is a formula of profession of faith, should be sung by all, or in such a way as to permit a fitting participation by the faithful; it is preferable that the Sanctus, as the concluding acclamation of the Preface, should normally be sung by the whole congregation together with the priest; the Agnus Dei may be repeated as often as necessary, especially in concelebrations, where it accompanies the Fraction; it is desirable that the people should participate in this song, as least by the final invocation.” *MS*, no. 34.

Offertory and Communion, can be retained according to the judgment of the competent territorial authority ...

It is desirable that the assembly of the faithful should participate in the songs of the Proper as much as possible, especially through simple responses and other suitable settings.”¹³

The principle of substitution of the Proper, whereby a suitable hymn or song is done in place of the appointed text is a novelty of *Musicam Sacram*. Hymns had been admitted frequently in the Mass prior to the Council, but their use did not displace the recitation of the Proper text at least by the celebrant. The new paradigm allows great latitude in the substitution, requiring only suitability to the feast or part of the liturgy. While the Proper has long been described as that part of the Mass that changes daily, it is important to recognize that at no point, even in the most adverse circumstances, was changeability equated with dispensability. It is probably safe to say that omissions on the basis of these principles have been more the rule than the exception since 1967.

The case of the Lesson chants is likewise remarkable. The *Gradual* – in particular its verse – is by far the most musically demanding chant of the five Propers customarily assigned to each Mass in the *Graduale Romanum*. As such it is distinctly ill-suited to congregational participation. The desire to have the people sing during this part of the Mass was, no doubt, one of the “several problems” that motivated this instruction¹⁴. *Musicam Sacram* makes mention, without formal description, of the responsorial psalm as an

¹³ *Ibid.*, no. 32-33.

¹⁴ “The song after the lessons, be it in the form of Gradual or responsorial psalm, has a special importance among the songs of the Proper. By its very nature, it forms part of the Liturgy, of the Word. It should be performed with all seated and listening to it—and, what is more, participating in it as far as possible.” *Ibid.*, no. 33.

alternative to the Gradual. As was the case with the Ordinary of the Mass, the new vision of liturgical music would require new compositions to supply responsorial psalmody for the masses. Without examining the degree to which the modern form of the responsorial psalm bears resemblance to any historical exemplar, let it suffice to say that no one has seen such an example since the first millennium. A *de novo* fabrication of the form was therefore inevitable.

Another of the problems that surely occupied those who drafted *Musicam Sacram* was the II Vatican Council's high esteem for the inherited treasury of sacred music¹⁵, and its desire to preserve and cultivate that heritage. As we have seen, the project of congregational participation envisioned by the present instruction resulted in the marginalization of many of those forms from the past. Nevertheless, the document proposed a plan for preservation, beginning with a discussion of the role of Latin in the new liturgy¹⁶. The document dutifully acknowledged the Council's insistence on the retention of Latin in the Roman rite. Gregorian chant, the document says, should be given "pride of place" in celebrations in Latin¹⁷. This refinement seems to significantly curtail the blanket privileges accorded to Gregorian chant by the Council.

The document also addresses itself to composers and to the task of creating music for the liturgy of the future, proposing a process of organic growth and continuity in the creation of new music for the liturgy.

"Musicians will enter on this new work with the desire to continue that tradition which has furnished the Church, in her divine worship, with a truly abundant heritage.

Let them examine the works of the past, their types and characteristics, but let them

¹⁵ SC, no. 114, 116.

¹⁶ MS, nos. 41, 49.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 50a.

also pay careful attention to the new laws and requirements of the liturgy, so that "new forms may in some way grow organically from forms that already exist," and the new work will form a new part in the musical heritage of the Church, not unworthy of its past."¹⁸

This reflection on the organic operation of tradition is laudable. The supposition that goes unstated and unsubstantiated here – and remains so – is that the newly coined ritual forms are a natural and organic development on which to base new compositions. The new norms demand new forms, and although many of the historical archetypes of the new rituals pre-date the records of written music, no advice is forthcoming on where to seek analogous musical models.

In answering the question of what should be done with the volumes of inherited music, the document gives the clearest indication yet that not all that has been handed down will survive into the “renewed liturgy.”

“As regards the heritage that has been handed down those parts which correspond to the needs of the renewed liturgy should first be brought to light. Competent experts in this field must then carefully consider whether other parts can be adapted to the same needs. As for those pieces which do not correspond to the nature of the liturgy or cannot be harmonized with the pastoral celebration of the liturgy—they may be profitably transferred to popular devotions, especially to celebrations of the word of God.”¹⁹

This passage ensures that certain parts of the traditional treasury will prove useful, or at least acceptable in the new liturgical order. Other parts may be profitably rehabilitated. But those

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 59. (cf. SC no. 23)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 53.

parts which are obdurately unsuited for the new worship must be removed from the liturgical life of the Church, relegated as such to exercises of piety. This passage also intimates that something of the nature of Catholic *cultus* has been altered or abandoned. Still, the question of those “several problems” seems to center on the inconveniences for popular use of the received tradition.

What we have seen in the case of *Musicam Sacram* is a document that ostensibly champions the use of the treasury of Catholic sacred music, but then by a series of qualifying triggers, renders these encouragements inert. The confusion that ensued was not in the least limited to the dissolution of traditional musical values. It extended to confusion about the philosophy of Catholic worship and the identity with which it endows the Church. In the conversation that has subsequently arisen, clear positions were carved out by the interlocutors. Progressives welcomed the brave new liturgical world. Semi-progressives suggested a second attempt at reform. And the more vigilant traditionalists decried the developments as a rupture in the ecclesiastical tradition. By and large though, the great Catholic body politic absorbed the new life it was dealt with characteristic docility.

The intervention of an elderly and professorial pope after all these years of debate and occasional invective has decidedly changed this conversation. While it is not our purpose to register the various reactions to Pope Benedict’s *Summorum Pontificum*, the philosophical implications for the liturgy are important to bear in mind. We will try to limit ourselves to musical considerations.

The potential effect of this development on sacred music should not be underestimated. Indeed, the old Mass had been celebrated by pocket elements within the Church, and also by dissident groups the world over. How, precisely, can the *motu proprio* make a significant difference now? First of all, the forms and practices that had been

winnowed away by the cross-purposed instructions of *Musicam Sacram* are once again permissible in the Catholic mainstream. For example, the older form requires that the whole Proper and Ordinary be sung in the course of a solemn or high celebration of Mass, if not according to the Gregorian melodies, then according to a setting for multiple voices. Here is an example of liturgical precept demanding a response of considerably deeper cultural value than the new paradigm generally invites. This is the dynamic that fired the crucible of Western Civilization for centuries.

Benedict XVI's liturgical counter-revolution is the reawakening of a slumbering cultural force. The Mass is alive now in a way that the new liturgical order could never hope to be. Burdened with awkward *ad hoc* ritual, the new Mass was animated in a committee room along decidedly inorganic lines. Certainly, the accusation 'inorganic' has been slung at the Novus Ordo often enough, but what does it really mean? In the end, the inorganic results of the reform were not so much produced by the detailed prescriptions of the various documents, but by the introduction of extrinsic values into the arbitration of liturgical norms. Each aspect of the liturgy – the language, the architecture, the ritual action – met its *bête noire* in this sense, and for sacred music it was the test of congregational participation that brought about the marginalization of its traditional forms. The frenzied and often maniacal pursuit of congregational participation in the ritual song of the Mass became its own end – a foreign value, an alien gene grafted onto the living flesh of the liturgy.

The post-Conciliar period created empty categories: new musical forms were needed for new ritual concepts. The expectation that in this seedless vacuum a new music would auto-generate was not unfulfilled. The problem is that the new music had little in common with anything in Catholic liturgical history. It can also be of no surprise that this new music was more heavily engraved by the hand of the *Zeitgeist* than by the *sensus catholicus*. The

traditional view of the operation of artistic creativity contemplates the response of the artist to something given, a *res data*. It can be assumed that often enough in the past the ‘thing given’ was an existing work of art. Most art, if it is true art, requires a context, and music, being an art form that depends also on the passage of time, requires an occasion. The occasion that the Mass afforded to Western Culture over two millennia can only be described as matchless – no theater, no concert hall or museum can rival its pedigree. Classical antiquity imagined the muses to number nine. Modernity has implied that the muses are as numerous as their clients. Perhaps, at least in the case of sacred music, Western Civilization has really had only one.

Summorum Pontificum restores an organic authenticity to the liturgical forms. This, in turn, provides cultural bedrock that can support a renaissance in the liturgical arts, not the least in the area of sacred music. As composers acquaint themselves anew with the living music of the liturgy, the chant, the polyphonic tradition, all of those displaced forms offer access to a long-buried taproot of human culture. When these lost voices find themselves once again at home in the liturgy, so healthy a context can only propagate fresh growth.

Chesterton’s oft-quoted line seems apt here: “Tradition means giving a vote to most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead.” Letting the dead have their voice requires a virtue and condition that is decreasingly available: receptivity. The restored Mass of 1962 possesses this quality in abundance. If musicians and composers can once again dwell in the fertile environment that the extraordinary form offers, an unexpected course may await the art of music in coming years. This surprising direction can only come with a serene confidence in the Church’s identity. If those entrusted with the liturgy – priests, artists, and composers – follow the example of the Virgin in the discovery that who we are is

not so much what we make of ourselves as it is what we receive in humility, surely new fruits of the liturgical life, both spiritual and musical, will be had in plenty.