

Treasure Trove: Sacred Music since Vatican II

by Father Eric Roush

Last week we began a series of bulletin inserts to prepare ourselves at Holy Trinity, beginning in Advent, to *sing the Mass*. If you missed last week's insert presenting in general how this came about and what changes it will not include, it's available on the parish website. As promised, this week we'll focus on what happened to Catholic music at Mass after the Second Vatican Council (aka, Vatican II) and the direction indicated by the universal Church.

Vatican II is often portrayed as a rush of creative spirit moving through the whole Church during the 1960's and 1970's. The first section of the council's document on worship summarizes it well: "[The Church seeks to] *impart an ever increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of mankind into the household of the Church. The Council therefore [saw] particularly cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy.*"¹

Many people within the Church—clergy and laity alike—were eager for the possibilities to impart this vigor to the Christian life. There was an urgency to seize the moment in history, focusing on the importance of adaptation to the needs of the age. Unfortunately, necessary guidance for discerning the suitability of these efforts was lacking. The desire to refresh the liturgy for the modern world outpaced its organic development in expressing truth and goodness through beauty that has been ongoing since the celebration of the Eucharist moved from the Upper Room to ancient Greek house churches to the basilicas of Rome and beyond.

Over the past 60 years two general views of the liturgy and the Council's teaching on it have been in tension, if not outright conflict. Theologians and liturgists have used the statement quoted above to argue for completely abandoning modes of worship occurring before the Second Vatican Council. Others have demanded an absolute return to liturgical forms before Vatican II with little or no openness to development. Among the greatest inadvertent losses has been sacred music, including the composition of sacred music in English and other vernacular languages. Catholic women



¹ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* no. 1

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and men, including great saints like Hildegard of Bingen and Thomas Aquinas, spent centuries composing music just for the worship of God. Saints in every age are called to use their gifts for the worship of God. Burying these treasures were never the intent of Vatican II.

Yet, rejoice, because we are living in a renaissance of Catholic music. Both in popular modes for singing in the car-like local legend and Moeller graduate Matt Maher—and in singing the Mass. Laity and clergy alike are working to bring a more informed reading of the Council's document on the liturgy to parish liturgical life. Among these are composers like Adam Bartlett and Dr. Mary Catherine Levri as well as teachings from Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. Pope Benedict pointed out that "what earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too, and it cannot be all of a sudden entirely forbidden or even considered harmful."² Their work to align parish celebration of the Mass with the directives of Vatican II is what we are trying to adopt singing the Mass here at Holy Trinity. The Church never encourages abandoning the beautiful things we have been given in the development of the liturgy. Rather, the Second Vatican Council envisioned that the Church would continue carrying forward, in new and creative ways, her great treasures.

The greatest treasure is the Mass, including all of its parts, especially those rooted most explicitly in Scripture, like the Entrance, Offertory, and Communion antiphons. If you've never heard of these, not to worry, the next bulletin insert will discuss them in greater detail. Suffice it to say for now that the antiphons are the parts of the Mass that were most easily overtaken by the now commonplace "four hymn sandwich"³ when singing at Mass. Fear not, all is not lost! The antiphons will be the immediate focus in Advent when we move from singing *at* Mass to *singing the Mass*.

² See Pope Benedict XVI's *Letter Accompanying the Motu Proprio "Summorum Pontificum"*.

³ Roseanne T. Sullivan, *Propers of the Mass vs. the Four Hymn Sandwich*,

<https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/music/propers-of-the-mass-vs-the-four-hymn-sandwich.html>