

The Role of the Choir in the Celebration of the Liturgy

Notes on the experience at Westminster Cathedral

*In the earthly liturgy we share in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims...
With all the warriors of the heavenly army we sing a hymn of glory to the Lord.*

Catechism of the Catholic Church 1090

The treasure of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with great care. Choirs must be diligently promoted, especially in cathedral churches, but bishops and other pastors of souls must be at pains to ensure that, whenever the sacred action is to be celebrated with song, the whole body of the faithful may be able to contribute that [actual]¹ participation which is rightly theirs...

Sacrosanctum Concilium 114

Where an exaggerated and ... completely unrealistic concept of congregation prevails, only the priest and congregation can be acknowledged as the legitimate singers of liturgical hymns. The primitive actionism and prosaic pedagogical rationalism of such a position have generally been seen through today and are therefore only rarely maintained. That a schola and choir can also contribute to the whole is seldom challenged, not even where one falsely interprets the conciliar phrase 'active participation' in the sense of an external actionism.

Pope Benedict XVI, formerly Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger²

¹ The Latin phrase 'actuosa participatio' is perhaps better translated as 'actual participation'. The term 'actuosa' incorporates both the contemplative (internal) and active (aspects) of participation. The term 'activa' could have been used, but this term normally excludes the contemplative aspect.

² Pope Benedict XVI, formerly Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord* (Germany, 1995) p. 177

The place and importance of sacred music has often been reflected upon throughout the twentieth century, from the *Motu proprio*³ of Pope Saint Pius X, through the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, featuring in letters by the late Pope John Paul II as well as in sermons and writings by the current Pope Benedict XVI. This, of course, is in the context of several great movements seeking purification of music in the liturgy, both before and during the twentieth century. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*⁴ provides the directive to foster and promote both the Church's treasury of sacred music and the choirs that sing it. Despite this, looking at the choral establishments in Cathedral churches around the world, one might wonder to what extent 'pastors of souls'⁵ have responded to this challenge. Perhaps a degree of confusion surrounds the question of how to preserve and foster the treasury of sacred music whilst ensuring 'actual' congregational participation. Of course, the call to actual participation is a reiteration of an essential aspect of the church's liturgy, which is itself 'service in the name of, and on behalf of the people.'⁶

The Liturgy – an encounter with divinity

At Westminster Cathedral the treasury of sacred music is preserved and fostered through the professional choir of men and boys which sings daily Vespers and Solemn Mass – we understand we are the only Cathedral choir in the world to do so. The choir is an ever-present, essential element of the Cathedral liturgy that we believe enables an interior, as well as exterior and actual, participation from the congregation. I am going to describe the way in which the choir achieves this at Westminster but, in order to explain the role of our Cathedral choir, it is, no doubt, valuable to place this in the context of church teaching. In fact, observations made by the then Cardinal Ratzinger about the nature of the liturgy, the meaning of actual participation, and the part to be played by the choir,

³ Pope Pius X, *Tra le Sollecitudini: Instruction on Sacred Music* (1903)

⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (1963)

⁵ A phrase used repeatedly throughout *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1069

help to elucidate the intentions of the authors of the various church documents, taking into account the development of the Roman Rite.

The Pope points out that the aim of Liturgy is to assist the Word of God to effect greater understanding of the mysteries of our faith.⁷ Participation in this liturgy therefore entails joining in the much greater cosmic liturgy; if it did not, the earthly liturgy would reach finality, amounting to a pointless role-play.

*The cosmos is praying with us. It, too, is waiting for redemption. It is precisely this cosmic dimension that is essential to Christian liturgy. It is never performed solely in the self-made world of man. It is always a cosmic liturgy.*⁸

He explains that when the *logos* (word) of God is necessarily communicated by the imperfect medium of human language, the essential message of the *mysterium* must remain unutterable and uninterpretable. Two media that can help bridge this gap between humanity and divinity are silence and music. Music, in particular, can illuminate the essential elements of the text to aid understanding. Sacred music therefore makes the *logos* accessible to the congregation while at the same time leading them onwards to “lift up their hearts.”⁹

So, using sacred liturgical art-music as a medium for the word of God, a fuller expression of the truths encapsulated in the text can be communicated, assisting:

- the fullest possible understanding
- real interior participation
- actual participation in the sacred liturgy.

⁷ Consider also this quote from Romano Guardini: “In 1513 Michelangelo Buonarroti completed the frescoes that still grace the Sistine Chapel four and three-quarter centuries later. In the magnificent creation scene, the life-giving finger of God stretches out and almost – but not quite – touches the outstretched finger of the reclining Adam. Liturgy fills the gap between those two fingers.” Guardini, ‘The Playfulness of the Liturgy’, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (London, 1930)

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco, 2000) p. 70

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *A New Song for the Lord* (Germany, 1995) p. 169

Bound on earth, bound in heaven – liturgy and music at Westminster Cathedral

From the foundation of Westminster Cathedral in 1903, liturgy and music have been deliberately fostered and maintained in practice to the highest possible standards. Indeed, rather than viewing these as separate entities, the music is an integral part of the liturgy. But beyond an acceptance of the mutually beneficial relationship between the two lie examples of how the music of the choir is able to express more fully the meaning, sentiments and intent of sacred texts.

Take, for example, the *Kyrie* during the Penitential Rite at Mass. Encapsulated in the phrase ‘Lord, have mercy’ is an acceptance that we are all suppliant sinners in need of divine mercy, confident that our prayers will be heard. The implication and meaning of the words of the *Kyrie* is profound and not readily grasped by those present if spoken. These intricacies are all the more difficult to comprehend whilst trying to remember a sung response, endeavouring to sing accurately and read from an order of service. Furthermore, a simple recitation of the text, whether spoken or sung, allows little or no scope for interior contemplation of the mystery and is effective only on the level of ‘external activism’¹⁰. Any attempt to connect with the celestial liturgy is abandoned. And so, the tradition of singing a polyphonic *Kyrie* expounds the sentiments of the text whilst allowing the time necessary for full absorption of its implications by the faithful.

Whilst the Ordinary texts remain the same, the musical settings can be very different from one another, evoking nuances appropriate to various liturgical occasions and bringing relevant meaning to the familiar texts. One could contrast, for example, the *Missa pro defunctis* by Victoria with *Missa Dum complerentur* by Palestrina. The former sets a solemn, intimate tone whilst the latter exhibits a freshness and openness appropriate to the feast of Pentecost. In accord with the special status afforded Gregorian chant and renaissance polyphony by the Church, these two musical forms make up the largest part of our choral repertoire. This music reflects the same relevance to the text today as it did when it was composed and to this treasury we add appropriate music from

¹⁰ See the header quote from the then Cardinal Ratzinger on page one.

the baroque, classical and romantic eras, whilst continuing to commission new works from the best composers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

We make a deliberate effort to ensure that the choir is seen to be integral to the liturgy. Great emphasis is placed on the entrance procession at Mass: the choir and ministers together process from the sacristy whilst the choir sings the plainsong Introit of the day. There are two important elements here: firstly, the members of the choir are seen to come through the congregation to the sanctuary and choir stalls beyond, where they carry out their liturgical function. Secondly, through the singing in procession of the Introit proper to the day, the word itself is illuminated by music and action.

The choir sings from a retro-choir at the east end of the Cathedral, raised and behind the High Altar. It is from this position that it is able to support the sacred actions of the Priest. The music connecting *logos* and *mysterium* comes literally from on high, a reminder perhaps of the celestial liturgy. Coming from behind the sacred action in the sanctuary, the music provides illumination and assists communication between human and divine, since humans approach the divine through beauty.¹¹

Another important point is that the Cathedral choir does not merely sing to cover action or fill gaps in the liturgy; it highlights the most important parts of the Mass, joining the cosmic liturgy and singing the Ordinary texts “in the presence of the angels”. But beyond these essential parts we also sing the plainsong Propers of the Mass, again, giving musical expression to the Word of God. These texts given at the Gradual, Gospel Acclamation, Offertory and Communion support the overall structure of the Mass whilst emphasising topical strands within the liturgy. One could say that a choir whose only function is to provide incidental music at the Offertory and Communion is not singing the Mass at all.

¹¹ “We have to find an aesthetic which makes beauty speak today. Beauty is not the icing on the liturgical cake, it is the essence.” Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP, from a lecture given at Westminster Cathedral, 27 April, 2005.

In this respect the Cathedral choir could not have a more different role from that of a concert choir. Although it is seen taking its position it is not entirely visible during the Mass and so is not a distraction to the faithful. The conductor is hidden behind a marble screen which stands between him and the High Altar crucifix. But most importantly, the music it sings, although of great artistic merit, is offered in the service of the liturgy, enabling the understanding that breeds actual participation in the congregation.

*...the omnipotent Lord finds a way through this singing into the heart that he might pour the mysteries of prophecy or the grace of remorse into this attentively listening organ. Hence in the song of praise we gain access to where Jesus can reveal himself, ... a way to the heart emerges in us at the end of which we reach Jesus.*¹²

However, in order that we assist the faithful in their participation, and the liturgy becomes a successful vehicle for the Word, the celebrant must share these aims and, where possible, sing the Mass texts so as to create a unity within the celebration itself. Of course, many celebrations claiming to be ‘Sung Masses’ are not. Even involving the congregation, let alone the choir, in singing extraneous texts does not equate to anything more than a superficial participation, adding nothing to the Mass itself. Focussing on the Mass texts as the prime concern for musical treatment confirms the essential nature of music in the liturgy. Is this why so many hymn books remain closed when congregations are asked to sing whilst, on the other hand, one tends to experience a more collective and unified response when the Priest or the choir enters into a musical dialogue with the congregation?

That the choir is part of a unified presentation of the liturgy is not only in evidence during Mass itself; at Westminster Cathedral the choir is an integral part of the wider life of worship. The daily cycle of sung celebrations of the Divine Office and Mass has always

¹² Pope Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Ezechielem I*. Quoted by Pope Benedict XVI in *A New Song for the Lord* (Germany, 1995) p. 137.

been part of our tradition, and so the Solemn High Mass on Sunday morning is experienced in the context of the preceding week of ferias, memorias and feasts.

Instilling understanding – providing context for the choir

However, the problem remains that the widespread practice of choral services, which historically was a major part of the Roman liturgical tradition, has almost entirely disappeared, both in the United Kingdom and throughout the world. In England this is, in part, an effect of Reformation disestablishment but also, as in other parts of the world, reflects the changing fashion towards choirs drawn from contemporary culture. I am not alone in believing that the Church needs to rediscover this tradition, both in the repertoire of sacred music and the role and level of excellence of its choirs. We see the artistic musical life of liturgy as being incarnational, but whilst people are becoming better and better at understanding the call to bring something to the liturgy by their outward and visible participation, having the grace to take something from it is, for some, a challenge.¹³ While we are in very real danger of losing the church's immensely valuable choral tradition, very little is being done to educate people in it, to explain how to draw on it and, most importantly, how it can help bring them to actual participation. Furthermore, from a cultural perspective, the ability to sit in silence is less and less in evidence. On top of this, there is a belief held in many parts of the Church that taking part in the liturgy must mean doing, saying or singing something – which is obviously true to an extent, but not to the exclusion of choral music.

As people develop their liturgical expectations from an early age, early education is important, along with striving for high standards in the parishes. *Sacrosanctum*

¹³ “Less and less is God in the picture. More and more important is what is done by the human beings who meet here and do not like to subject themselves to a “pre-determined pattern.” Pope Benedict XVI, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* p. 80

*Concilium*¹⁴ mentions the desire that seminaries instil in priests an understanding of the aims of sacred music. Without this education, the Church risks either losing the choral tradition altogether or turning its people into dumbstruck auditors. Pope Benedict acknowledges this danger, pointing out that if all those not singing a part of the Mass simply await its conclusion, or merely listen to a religious concert piece, then the choir's performance is hard to justify.¹⁵

Chorus angelorum – in defence of artistic merit

*Through the choir a greater transparency to the praise of the angels and therefore a more profound, interior joining in with their singing are bestowed than a congregation's own acclamation and song would be capable of doing in many places.*¹⁶

Although the Cathedral choir is not a concert choir, its members are professional musicians. The boys live in and are trained at the Cathedral's choir school, where they receive a formative education from ages 8-13. The tenors and basses are professional singers and come from a variety of backgrounds. The reasons for this are fairly clear – in order to do justice to the extraordinary music of Palestrina, for example, singers of professional standard are required. Furthermore, such potentially transcendent music could suffer from a less than professional performance and part of its effect could be lost. A choir staffed solely from the faith community is simply not likely to be capable of rendering this music in a manner appropriate to the Cathedral, which, as the liturgical seat of the Diocese, is rightly seen as a benchmark of excellence. In practical terms, sustaining, as we do, a daily schedule of choral Vespers and Mass, would be impossible if one had to rely on volunteers. Indeed this aspect of the Cathedral's liturgical life is only

¹⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, Chapter VI (1963)

¹⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *A New Song for the Lord* p. 181

¹⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *A New Song for the Lord* p. 180

made possible by the professional nature of the choir which ensures that services will always be sung by the required number of competent singers. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, our efforts to bring the earthly liturgy to meet the divine surely demand the highest possible standards.

In spite of this goal, it is true that only a very few churches are in a position to, or would feel it appropriate, to provide for a professional choir. There are, of course, other kinds of choirs of varying membership and standard that provide excellent services in parishes throughout the world. These too are able to illuminate the Word in some of the same ways as I have described, but it is important that Cathedrals promote music at the highest artistic level so that the admirable work done by parish choirs can be nourished and supported by the Cathedral tradition. This hierarchy exists and is needed throughout all human institutions – the church is obviously no exception to this and neither is its field of artistic endeavour. Even within the Cathedral itself a support system exists. Choirs from outside are regularly invited to sing at Mass at the Cathedral and, when its schedule permits, the Cathedral choir makes visits to other churches in England and abroad. We run a choir of volunteers from throughout the diocese who meet once a month to sing Mass at the Cathedral and to heighten their experience of the repertoire. A recent development has been the establishment of a volunteer Schola Gregoriana of female voices. In these ways the Cathedral choir exists as a pre-eminent example, both within our own parish and for interested parties further afield.

Nunc et semper?

Using the Westminster Cathedral experience I have tried to show that choirs are essential to the liturgy as presented in Cathedral churches and in setting a structure for the Diocese. We feel that the pattern which exists at Westminster could be well used to help recovery of the Church's choral tradition elsewhere. However, we cannot work in a vacuum, or

without support of these aims from the highest level. At the moment, whilst pockets of excellence in church music do exist, they seem to exist in isolation. Clearer guidance from Church hierarchy would encourage and support many musical establishments and could facilitate a renewal of all that is good in the Church's musical tradition. Whilst being grateful for the statements on sacred music in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, it is worth acknowledging that we currently have to look beyond, to the writings of theologians such as Pope Benedict XVI, to elicit a degree of clarification. Especially given the direction the liturgy has taken in the years since Vatican II, a clear case can be made for the need to re-evaluate and expound upon these directives in the light of forty years of experimentation, even floundering in some quarters. In conclusion, I would like to suggest that the time has come for some explicit guidelines as to the role of the Cathedral choir. We, at Westminster Cathedral, believe that our musical tradition provides something of a golden standard and I hope that I have been able to offer a perspective on the value of our experience with you today.

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