

A MEMORANDUM

addressed to His Eminence the Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Rites on the dangers which a reform affecting the texts of the Gregorian Repertory might create.

Dom Joseph Gajard, O.S.B.

THE LITURGICAL RENEWAL WHICH HAS been gaining strength for the past few years in the Church has given rise to a widespread and legitimate desire to promote among the faithful a clearer understanding of the Liturgy and a more active participation. Hence, that whole movement which we observe everywhere we can only applaud on conditions that it be kept within reasonable limits.

We beg to remark in this connection that the Liturgy is not made up only of texts pure and simple, but also of many texts which are closely adapted to melodies. Consequently, since every modification of these sung liturgical texts entails 'ipso facto' a corresponding modification of the melodies, an important reform of these texts would fatally upset the Gregorian repertory, whatever be the kind of reform advocated.

Some, influenced by their apprehension of the Latin tongue, would favor an adaptation of the actual Gregorian melodies to some texts in the vernacular.

Others, wishing to avail themselves of the new Latin translation of the Psalms, might be satisfied with replacing the actual texts by the corresponding texts of the new Psalter modifying such melodic passages as might need revision, or even, on occasion, composing new melodies.

We request His Eminence the Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Rites the permission to point out the manifest danger of adopting either of these solutions. In spite of appearances, both are equally dangerous, since they would lead directly or indirectly to the ruin of the most traditional and most highly expressive form of the sung prayer in the Roman Church.

In fact, merely from an artistic point of view, the adaptation of Gregorian melodies to French texts would be disastrous. All technicians, however slightly acquainted with the laws of Gregorian composition know that both in its melody

and in its rhythm the Gregorian art is essentially Latin, born of Latin accentuation, in formal opposition with the genius of our modern languages, even the romance languages, and that every adaptation is on supposition fundamentally bad. From a merely artistic point of view, it would be downright mutilation, the end of a fine art which has produced masterpieces by the thousand, and we think that all true musicians would rise up against such vandalism.

The other solution which is being advanced, namely, replacing the actual texts of our liturgical chants by the corresponding texts of the new Psalter would upon close examination be as harmful as the first in spite of its seductive appearances, for, it would entail a complete rehandling of the Gregorian Repertory, a great part of which would inevitably be brought to ruin.

It is a fact that one cannot touch a masterpiece without doing it great harm and without bringing about a partial or total loss of its deepest values and 'raison d'être'. More especially is this true when the masterpiece is the product of two elements intimately associated and depending one on the other, in our case, text and music. One cannot touch the one without doing great injury to the other. It is not even enough to say in general, as we did above, that Gregorian melodies are essentially Latin. What we must realize is that they were composed on a well determined Latin text, and suggested not only by the meaning of truly concrete words, but also by the position of their accent, the number of their syllables, at times by the weight of their consonants and the complexion of their vowels, not forgetting above all that the arrangement of these words brings on by their very succession a diversity of caesuras, the scale of which extended almost to infinity. In other terms, one cannot replace these words nor modify their order without disturbing at the same time the progress of the melody which has sprung forth from them almost spontaneously.

No doubt there are in the Gregorian Chant typical melodies, 'timbres', which by definition are sufficiently flexible to adapt themselves to various texts, on condition however that the adaptation be made by technicians well versed in their trade. But these 'timbres' are far from exhausting the Gregorian repertory. Side by side with them, there are innumerable original melodies composed on a given text, which are among the most beautiful and expressive. As most of them would have to be done over again, sometimes with important alterations if they were to be adapted to the new Psalter, this portion of the repertory would be practically expunged.

And how could we replace them? Who could take it upon himself to rewrite such an extensive repertory, especially since the models on which we so painstakingly succeed in adapting the new Proper of the Saints would from now on ceased to be used. Moreover, we need only to look at the facts objectively. If we study the aggregate of new compositions set up for the Vatican Edition or written since its publication, we discover that except for a few beautiful but extremely rare master strokes, mediocre compositions abound. As to those melodies which strive to free themselves from the Gregorian ideal, they fall immediately into affectation and most of the time into ridicule, so much so that the very people who at first appreciated them soon tire of them and reject them. This is proved by experience. As Msgr. Romita has said very well: "What modern composer, even if he knows thoroughly all the technical secrets of the Gregorian composers, can be said to possess the inspiration of their profound medieval piety? Knowing the style and the manner of a composer is not the same thing as possessing genuine inspiration." (Bollettino Ceciliano, 1948, No. 5, P. 81)

Briefly, the Gregorian melodies cannot be replaced. And since, in the words of St. Pius X, they represent the ideal and supreme model of Christian prayer, it follows that their rejection would deprive our sung prayer of its most adequate form to the detriment of the Church's public services, so that the badly understood desire of revivifying the liturgy would in reality rob it of one of its most fruitful elements, the one which St. Pius X, Pius XI and Pius XII have proclaimed efficacious for "augmenting the faith and piety of the faithful." (Mediator Dei) On the other hand, we see in our day that in spite of tenacious

opposition Liturgy is in full swing as well in the humblest as in the most cultivated circles.

Besides, the pretexts put forward for this pretended reform do not stand against an examination of the facts. The modification of our Gregorian melodies following that of the psalms, far from logical as one might be tempted to believe, could only result from an absolute misunderstanding of the composition of the divine Office. For these very simple reasons:

a) The antiphons were composed, not on the text of the so-called Gallican Psalter, that of the Vulgate which is actually our Psalter, but on the so-called Roman Psalter which was in use almost everywhere before the IX century. This explains the divergences between the text of the antiphons and that of the versicle of the psalm from which it is taken. It is interesting to note that, when in the course of time and in particular under Popes Sixtus IV and St. Pius V, the Gallican Psalter replaced the Roman, this change of psalters did not by any means entail a change in the antiphons. Here then is a historical precedent which is not without value and which is justified by the facts.

b) We know for a fact that Gregorian composers did not consider themselves always bound to follow invariably the text of the psalms. Even in simple antiphons, e.g., *secus decursus aquarum* from the Common of Martyrs; *beatis vir qui in lege*, from the Common of a Confessor, etc., they often weld together several bits of verses, sometimes quite far apart, or else they transform them into an altogether new composition quite independent of the psalm and adapted to the feast of the day.

c) It often happens that they modify the text, lengthening or shortening it according to the requirements of the melodic line. They are musicians, creators, who, while they do not feel themselves bound by their text, think it anew, if we may say so, with artful facility, in order to give its parts a harmonious balance. Surely, one need not seek elsewhere for an explanation of the presence of an Alleluia at the end of certain antiphons during the time after Pentecost, when it is quite unexpected.

d) Finally, when selecting a psalm verse for use as an antiphon, the Church often enlarges, by interpreting it, the chosen text, and at the same time gives it a special and universal use. The Psalms are poems extremely free and supple in their in-

spiration, devoid of a rigorous theme, and for this very reason quite susceptible of lending themselves to the most diverse circumstances. By adapting such a verse to the feast of the day, the Church causes it to lose its primitive sense and to take on a very precise and new meaning. For example, the antiphon *exultabunt ossa humiliata*, in the Office of the Dead and at funerals has a meaning which is not that of the psalm Miserere. Likewise, the *deus in adiutorium* at the beginning of the Canonical Hours.

These are so many reasons proving clearly, it seems, the relative independence of the text of the antiphons with regard to that of the psalms from which they are taken, and their title to be maintained in their original state.

The Church has possessed as her own for many centuries her traditional sung prayer which shows forth in a unique degree the qualities of holiness, unction and universality, indispensable to all religious music. In the course of time, the sung prayer may have suffered the fate of all human things and known periods of decadence. It has never disappeared. It has survived all mutilations and cloyings, so that in order to revive it, it was enough to purify it from the dross which tarnished its beauty and to restore it to its luminous integrity. If it has its detractors, it also numbers enthusiastic admirers who are becoming more and more numerous in spite of the intrigues plotted against it. We cannot believe that after the prodigious upswing given to it by the resolute action of St. Pius X at the very time when the holy Pope has been raised to the altars with the acclamations of the Christian people, it should be sacrificed to unenlightened prejudices and condemned to a ruin which, we repeat, would cause irreparable harm to the Catholic Liturgy.

We express to His Eminence the Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Rites the most respectful and most ardent wish that he may deign to use his high authority to put an end to those groundless controversies which divide the faithful and the clergy itself, and to restore the unity of thought and action so necessary to the spread of God's kingdom in the world. With this invincible hope we beg him to deign to accept the homage of our most profound respect.

Translated by Rev. Paul Callens, S.J.

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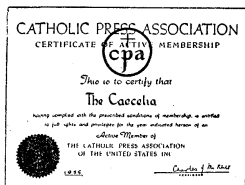
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