

## URBAN VIII AND THE REVISION OF THE LATIN HYMNAL

The election of Urban VIII as pope in the year 1623 was the cause of fairly universal rejoicing in Catholic Europe. A former *nuncio* to Paris, he had been made a cardinal at the relatively young age of thirty-eight, and was known for his great knowledge and for his love of art and literature. The new pope was the fifth son of Antonio Barberini and Camilla Barbadori and was given the name Maffeo Vincenzo on April 5, 1568, at his christening in the baptistery of the Cathedral of Florence. Educated by the Jesuits in the city of his birth, Maffeo earned a doctorate in law at Pisa and became a respected and skilled jurist. A truly learned and cultured man, Pope Urban VIII was an unusually appropriate selection as pope, and his accomplishments during a reign of almost twenty-one years were quite considerable in many areas. Yet, upon his death on July 29, 1644, there was widespread rejoicing in the streets of Rome. A man of lavish artistic tastes, he had spent recklessly on beautifying Rome, and he had been guilty of the worst forms of nepotism in enriching his brothers and nephews. The Roman people were characteristically unforgiving for his extravagance in these and other matters. Three and a half centuries later, however, Urban VIII is remembered more as the pope who consecrated the new St. Peter's and, above all, as the pope who condemned Galileo for his espousal of Copernicus and the theory of a heliocentric universe. His handling of Galileo most certainly has earned Urban VIII universal scorn, all the more tragic, however, because he had been a personal friend and protector of Galileo for many years.

Yet, Urban's most lasting legacy had nothing to do with his nepotism, or his extravagance, or his condemnation of Galileo. That legacy was the damage done to the Latin hymns of Catholicism, which were revised and rewritten, not only under Urban's orders, but also with his active participation. As noted, the pope was a man of learning and an appreciator of the artistic life. He utilized his long association with the great baroque master, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, not only for many of the most notable aspects of the interior of Saint Peter's Basilica, but also for the restoration and enrichment of many other important Roman churches. The Barberini pope also had a keen interest in music and kept a watchful eye on the music of the Roman Church. It was Urban VIII who made Gregorio Allegri, composer of the famous *Miserere* for double choir, a member of the papal choir in 1629. But, however varied his artistic interests, he was first and foremost a poet, having begun to compose Italian, Latin and Greek poetry at a rather early age. The first Latin poems of Maffeo Vincenzo Barberini appeared in 1606 at Perugia, and collections of his works were published in Paris in 1618 and 1620. After his elevation to the papacy, his Latin poems appeared in many editions from the year 1624 to the year 1643, the most notable of these publications appearing in a 1631 Roman edition published by the Jesuits of the Roman College with decorative artwork being provided by none other than the illustrious Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Numerous translations of Barberini's poetry also appeared, including translations into Greek, French, Spanish and Dutch. At best, history might judge the Barberini pope to be an adequate and skillful poet who wrote in a style typical of the period, a period which was characterized by an artistic exuberance generally noted in Roman baroque art. Urban VIII, in short, was a cultured and artistically inclined person and a poet of considerable talent, someone who might seem least likely to despoil a great literary heritage.

The repertory of hymns which fell victim to Urban's ill-advised revision contained some material which had been in more or less continuous use for almost a thousand years. Because of concerns that hymn texts might convey unorthodox or even heretical texts, the early Church chose to favor biblical canticles and psalms for its liturgy,

and the history of the Roman Mass was one characterized by an absence of hymnody until the Second Vatican Council in the twentieth century. Hymnody, however, found a role in the various hours of daily prayer collectively known as the divine office. These hours of prayer generally consisted of vigils or matins during the night, lauds in the morning, vespers in the evening, and compline prior to retiring at day's end, plus the "lesser prayer hours" of prime, terce, sext and none recited at the first (6:00 a.m.), third (9:00 a.m.), sixth (12:00 noon), and ninth (3:00 p.m.) of the day. The development of hymns and their introduction into these liturgies closely paralleled the development of the calendar and liturgical year. Therefore, important observances in the church year were assigned hymns appropriate to the specific liturgical theme of the day or season. The earlier hymns date from the sixth and seventh centuries and a few, such as those of St. Ambrose,<sup>1</sup> from the latter part of the fourth century. By the twelfth century, the medieval Latin hymnal was fairly complete. Evidence would seem to suggest that, at least for a substantial period of time, hymns were used only in monastic communities and were not part of the office celebrated by the so-called secular clergy. By the thirteenth century, however, the use of hymns in the divine office was wide-spread and generally observed.

Until about the thirteenth century, the celebration of the divine office had been an act of communal worship and had used a number of specific books such as a *Psaltarium* for the psalmody, an *Antiphonale* for the antiphons, a *Hymnarium* for the hymns, etc. Gradually there came into existence various efforts at condensing the required texts into a single volume for the benefit of clergy who needed to recite the daily office alone, and these volumes were known as *epitomata* or *breviaria*. In time, the private recitation of the office became the norm for most clergy, communal celebration being retained only among monastic and mendicant orders, such as the Benedictines and Dominicans. Assisting this liturgical evolution from communal celebration to private recitation was the invention of the printing press which made possible the distribution of individual breviaries to the clergy. Some standardization in the celebration of the divine office was achieved with the appearance in 1569 of Pius V's new *Breviarium Romanum*. In publishing the new breviary, the Roman pontiff abolished all earlier breviaries except those which could claim his personal approval or those which had been in continuous use for over two hundred years. The Roman breviary, therefore, became the standard text for the celebration or recitation of the divine office in much the same manner as the Roman missal became the standard text for the celebration of the Mass.

Urban VIII was elevated to the throne of Peter only about a half-century after the publication of Pius' breviary, but he soon decided that the hymns of the breviary needed revision, being of the opinion, which was widely held among the humanists of the time, that the old hymns were rather tasteless and inelegant and could be improved with a reworking of the Latin texts. He was not the first to have concluded that these ancient texts needed improvement, since Leo X, the first of the Medici popes, had encouraged the noted humanist, Zaccaria Ferreri, Bishop of Garda, in a previous attempt at revision. Ferreri's labors were published in 1525 and authorized for use by Clement VII, the second of the Medici popes. Fortunately, this revision was not formally adopted in Pius V's *Breviarium Romanum* of 1569. Unfortunately, the Barberini pope would succeed where Ferreri and his Medici sponsors failed. Since he was not only Urban VIII, the pope, but also Maffeo Vincenzo Barberini, the poet, Urban was actively involved in the task of rewriting and revising the Latin texts. As collaborators, he selected four classically trained Jesuits: Famiano Strada, Tarquinio Galuzzi, Girolamo Petrucci and Matthias Sarbiewski. The results of their labors were nine hundred fifty-two corrections in the ninety-eight hymns then contained in the breviary. Of the ninety-eight hymns, eighty-one were subjected to such correc-

tions, including altering the first lines of more than thirty hymns. Some of the changes occurring in the revised texts were relatively minor. For example, the original Latin text of the Easter vesper hymn, *At the Lamb's high feast*,<sup>2</sup> began with the words *Ad coenam Agni providi, et stolis albis candidi*. In Urban's revision, the hymn now began with the words *Ad regias Agni dapes, stolis amicti candidis*, the major distinction being the use of the word *dapes* (i.e., a sacrificial feast or religious banquet) in place of *coenam* (i.e., a meal, or specifically the principal meal of the day). By contrast, however, some hymns were almost totally rewritten, and many thoughts and ideas expressed in the original texts of hymns were totally lost. Compare, for example, the following Latin texts from the opening of the Christmas vesper hymn, *Jesus, redeemer of all men*:<sup>3</sup>

Revised Text	Original Text
<i>Jesu, redemptor omnium,</i>	<i>Christe Redemptor omnium,</i>
<i>Quem lucis ante originem</i>	<i>Ex Patre Patris Unice</i>
<i>Parem paternae gloriae</i>	<i>Solus ante principium,</i>
<i>Pater supremus edidit.</i>	<i>Natus in effabiler.</i>

Even if one is completely ignorant of Latin, it is immediately obvious that the opening of this ancient hymn has been almost totally rewritten. Even the title of the hymn has changed because of the revision of the opening line. Most of the so-called "corrections," however, involved rather meaningless grammatical changes in the original text. Consider, for example, the rearrangement of words in each of the following two lines from the Pentecost hymn, *Come, Holy Ghost*:<sup>4</sup>

Revised Text	Original Text
<i>Qui diceris Paraclitus</i>	<i>Qui Paraclitus diceris</i>
<i>Altissimi donum Dei,</i>	<i>Donum Dei altissimi,</i>

Sometimes the rewriting by Urban and his associates appears so very unnecessary that the logic behind the change is totally incomprehensible, a good illustration being the transposition of the middle two lines ("Father of might and grace, Father of eternal glory") of the following stanza from the hymn *O splendor of God's glory*:<sup>5</sup>

Revised Text	Original Text
<i>Votis vocemus et Patrem</i>	<i>Votis vocemus et Patrem</i>
<i>Patrem potentis gratiae,</i>	<i>Patrem perennis gloriae,</i>
<i>Patrem perennis gloriae,</i>	<i>Patrem potentis gratiae,</i>
<i>Culpam releget lubricam.</i>	<i>Culpam releget lubricam.</i>

Whatever their merits, the proposed changes in the hymn texts were approved by the Congregation of Rites on March 29, 1629, and in July of the same year a newly appointed commission began the task of revising the remainder of the breviary. Authority to publish the newly revised *Breviarium Romanum* was issued by the Barberini pope on January 25, 1631, in the eighth year of his reign, the ill-advised revision of the Latin hymnal thus becoming the normative texts for the majority of the Catholic world. However, claiming the privilege of exemption granted by Pope Pius V, the Dominicans, Benedictines, Cistercians, and Carthusians refused to adopt the revisions and retained the ancient hymn texts, nor were the revisions ever accepted at St. Peter's or the Lateran in Rome itself. It was in this manner that two distinct versions of the Latin hymnal were to coexist for more than three hundred years. There is little, if anything, in Roman Catholic liturgical publications to clarify this situation, and, to understand whether a text is original or revised, one must consider the particular publication in which the text is found. For example, the hymn for Epiphany vespers as given in the *Antiphonale Monasticum*, a publication for the Benedictine Order, begins with the words *Hostis Herodes impie, Christum venire*

*quid times?* while the hymn for Epiphany vespers as given in the *Antiphonale Romanum*, a Roman publication, begins with the words *Crudelis Herodes, Deum Regem venire quid times?* These are, however, the same hymn and use the same chant melody, the distinction being that the Benedictine publication retains the original text as written by Caelius Sedulius in the fifth century,<sup>6</sup> while the Roman publication utilizes the text as revised by Urban and his associates.

It is now almost universally conceded that the seventeenth century revision of the Latin hymnal was a mistake, and that the despoiling of these ancient hymns cannot possibly be defended or justified. The so-called improvements which were made to the texts were, in fact, no improvement whatsoever. One commentator<sup>7</sup> has wisely observed that "Ambrose and Prudentius took something classical and made it Christian; the revisers and their imitators took something Christian and tried to make it classical. The result may be pedantry, and sometimes perhaps poetry; but it is not piety." Another fault of the revision was to ignore its effect on the traditional musical settings of these texts. It is doubtful that the Barberini pope considered this, since he undoubtedly worked from a point of view which presupposed a private recitation rather than communal singing of the texts. Therefore, it would be fair to assume that considerations of music and text were totally divorced in the process of revision, if, indeed, there was any consideration of the music at all.

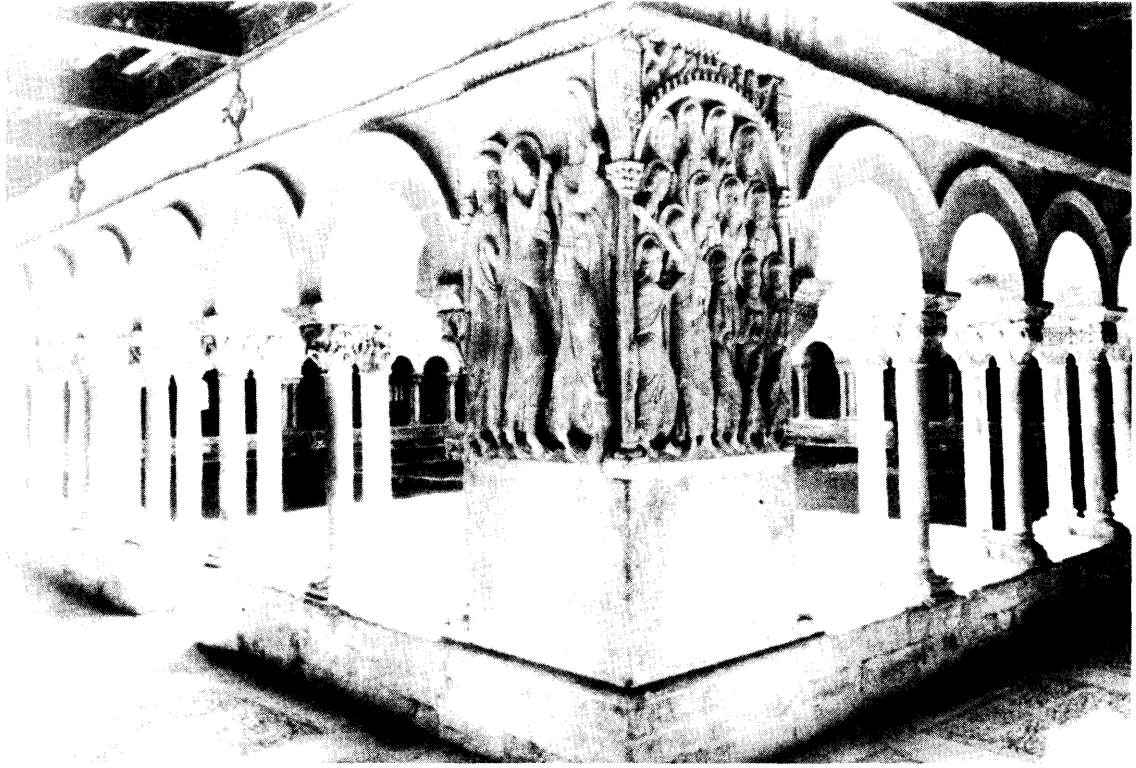
There are obvious lessons which may be learned from the story of Urban VIII and the revision of the Latin hymnal, lessons perhaps most appropriate in contemporary times which are so frequently characterized by modernization and revision of the texts used in the Church's liturgies. It would be unfair to characterize all such revisions as being unnecessary and wrong. One can certainly build a plausible argument for changing language which no longer conveys clear meaning, and one can also present a reasoned explanation for modifying texts which were originally conceived from a narrow perspective which might discourage their continued usage. But Urban's revisions cannot really be defended in any like manner. Even though he was motivated by the best of intentions, and even though he and his colleagues were eminently suited for the task which they adopted, the revision of the hymn texts was a tragic mistake. All that the Barberini pope really succeeded in doing was to impose a seventeenth century view of Latin poetical construction on subsequent generations of Roman Catholics.

It has taken the Roman Catholic Church three and a half centuries to undo the harm done to its ancient repertoire of hymns. With the publication of the *Liturgia Horarum*<sup>8</sup> as the successor to the *Breviarium Romanum*, the Vatican has once again officially sanctioned the original hymn-texts and has eliminated Urban's revisions. One must note, however, that this is a hollow victory since so few clergy utilize the Latin texts for the recitation of the divine office, preferring for the most part to use the vernacular translations now available throughout the Catholic world.

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#### NOTES

1. St. Ambrose (340-397), Bishop of Milan, often called the Father of Latin hymnody.
2. *Ad coenam Agni providi* (original title), probably written sometime between the fourth and sixth century, author unknown.
3. *Christe redemptor omnium* (original title), probably dating from the sixth century, author unknown.
4. *Veni, Creator Spiritus*, probably written in the ninth century, author unknown.
5. *Splendor paternae gloriae*, written by St. Ambrose (340-397), Bishop of Milan.
6. Both texts might be similarly translated as "Why, merciless (cruel, hostile) Herod, are you afraid of God (Christ) coming as King?"
7. Rev. Joseph Connelly in *Hymns of the Roman Liturgy*, The Newmann Press, Westminster, Maryland, 1957.
8. *Liturgia Horarum juxta Ritus Romanum*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1985.



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