

Abbot Joseph Pothier's Response to Charles Marie Widor (January 1906)

Sir: During a visit to the Cardinal Secretary of State, His Eminence spoke to me about a letter you have addressed to him and which has caused him particular satisfaction. The Cardinal took this opportunity to instruct me to extend to you the necessary explanations in regard to your difficulties and fears. The latter are only too easily understood, and I know that other scholars and other artists have expressed on the same question and on the same facts similar astonishment and the same disquietude.

The Sacred Congregation of Rites, the guardian of principles, could not approve a reproduction of the Vatican edition which is not exact and faithful. Is the so-called rhythmic edition published by Desclée in sufficient conformity with the typical edition? Yes, as far as the notes are concerned, and in making abstraction of the signs which have been added thereto. It was thought for a moment that the conformity as regards the notes safeguarded the essential and that the concordat might be accorded. This was done, with the restriction 'de caetero,' that is to say, for that which is not rhythmic signs.

However, on closer examination, and after receiving protests from various sources, it was recognized that the accessory usurped the place of the essential, that these rhythmic signs could easily be confused with the traditional notes with which they are now and then interwoven, and that consequently they constitute a grave alteration of the notations, inasmuch as these supplementary signs have nothing traditional about them, and that they have not even an exact relation with the famous Romanus signs of St. Gall, a reproduction of which they claim to be. Even if they were faithfully reproduced these latter rhythmic signs belonging to a particular school have no legal right to force themselves on the universal practice, as it is intended by the typical and official edition.

This was the judgment of the Pontifical Commission from the beginning. It is a question of safeguarding the responsibility of the Sacred Congregation of Rites; the rights of Catholic tradition, which cannot be that of a particular school, ancient or modern, the exigencies of art, which requires greater liberty, and, lastly, the claims of science itself, which offers a larger and more elevated horizon. It can therefore not have caused any surprise that the concordat which had been accorded through a misunderstanding has almost immediately been withdrawn in spite of the restriction 'de caetero' regarding rhythmic signs. This significant restriction was perhaps sufficient to protect the Sacred Congregation of Rites, but was not sufficient to prevent the abuse which might have been made of a concordat over its signature. For this reason the publishers have been requested to consider the concordat as null and void. Out of consideration and for special reasons the withdrawal of the concordat did not carry with it the obligation on the part of the publishers to withdraw from circulation the copies already issued. But it is understood that the concordat must not be printed in the future editions.

Such are the facts. Besides, it must be remembered that a declaration of conformity with the typical edition cannot be considered as an approbation; above all, not an approbation of supplementary signs which are clearly excluded from the favor of the concordat. On the other hand, the *Motu Proprio* accords full liberty to theoretical discussion. It is evident that particular theories, when exemplified graphically, must not interfere with the normal and traditional notation in such a manner as to alter it.

These few explanations, written under instructions, although on my own responsibility as to form and detail, will make clear to you the present situation which, delicate in certain respects, has been strangely falsified and altered through recent discussions in Italian and German papers—we all know under whose inspiration. I have seldom paid attention to polemics and rarely desired to take part in them. Nevertheless you are authorized to make of these explanations the use you think opportune.—F. Joseph Pothier, Abbot of St. Wranville.

Another translation of Pothier's 1906 Letter to Widor:

THE SACRED CONGREGATION OF RITES, the guardian of principles, cannot and will not approve any reproduction of the “Vaticana” which is not exact and faithful. Does the edition, termed rhythmic, published by Desclee conform sufficiently to the typical edition? Yes, as far as the notes are concerned, putting on one side the special signs that are joined thereto. At first it was thought that this conformity of notes preserved what was essential and that the “Concordat” of the Sacred Congregation might be bestowed. But at the time that the “Concordat” was given a restriction was imposed by the addition of the words “de caetero,” which was meant to exclude the rhythmic signs. However, in looking more closely into the matter, and after receiving remonstrances from divers quarters, it was recognised that in this new edition the accessory was lording it over the principal, and that these rhythmic signs, easily confused with the traditional notes, with which they are often incorporated, would bring about a grave alteration of the melody. Moreover, these supplementary signs have nothing traditional about them, nor have they any exact relation with the well-known romanian signs of the S. Gall MSS., of which they profess to be the reproduction. Even were these signs (of St. Gall) faithfully represented, inasmuch as they belonged to a particular school, they would have no right to impose their own special ideas on the univcal practice in a typical and official edition. The Pontifical Commission from the outset had come to this resolution. In this matter there are several things to safeguard: the responsibility of the Sacred Congregation; the right of the Catholic tradition, which cannot be that of any special school, either ancient or modern; the fair demands of art, which desires more liberty; and the claims, no less established, of science, which furnishes us with views wider and higher.

It cannot, then, be a matter of surprise that the “Concordat” of the Sacred Congregation, bestowed in the first place through a real misunderstanding, has been almost immediately withdrawn in spite of the reservation of the words “de caetero” regarding the rhythmic signs. This significant reservation might be enough to protect the Sacred Congregation, but it could not altogether prevent the abuse which might be made of the “Concordat” that had been bestowed. For this reason the editors of this edition have been informed and warned that they must regard this “Concordat” as not granted. Out of consideration, and in view of the special circumstances of the case, the editors have not been obliged to withdraw the copies already on sale. But it has been well understood and laid down that the future issues must not contain the “Concordat.” Such are the facts. We must, moreover, bear in mind that any declaration of conformity with the typical edition must not be construed into an approbation, least of all an approbation of the supplementary signs clearly excluded from the favour of the “Concordat.” On the other hand, the Motu Profirio leaves the field free for theoretical discussions. But it is clear that people who are anxious to reproduce graphically their particular theories ought not to practise on the normal and traditional notation so as to alter it.

These few explanations written at command, although the phrases and style are my own, will enable you better to grasp the situation, which is awkward enough on certain sides. But it has been strangely misrepresented and distorted in the recent controversies of Italian and especially of German papers, whose inspiration it is not difficult to trace. I have paid little attention to controversies, and I have no wish to enter upon them; still, you can make any use you may think fit of these necessary explanations.

See also the Roman decrees dated as follows:

14 February 1906 — 18 February 1910 — 25 January 1911 — 11 April 1911 — 3 September 1958

In essence, the Solesmes rhythmic signs are “tolerated” as long as “the force and meaning of the notes as found in the Vatican chant books are preserved.” In many instances, the Solesmes editions do alter the official Vatican rhythm.