

## Choirmasters & Organists: Vatican II Council

Flor Peeters, 1965 • *English Transl. by Emmanuel Leemans*

It is a fact that the directives of the Second Vatican Council regarding the liturgical constitution have caused a commotion among church musicians and especially among organists and choirmasters. The irresponsible craving for reformation and the speed with which some would-be modern liturgists would like to change everything completely has been the occasion for this. Let us try to bring the issue of sacred music into broad daylight. The directives with regard to church music issued in the *Motu Proprio* of Pius X on the feast of Saint Cecilia, November 22, 1903 have not lost any of their significance and are still in effect. The text of the encyclical *Divini cultus sanctitatem* of Pius XI, December 20, 1928 has retained its importance in the parts related to sacred music.

The Council, in speaking of the new liturgy, confirms clearly its great estimation for all forms of church music: Gregorian chant, as well as classical and modern polyphony, and the playing of the organ are retained. A new task is hereby imposed upon us: greater participation of the faithful, especially while living the “Opus Sacrum,” the sacrifice of the Mass. The following is the text of the Constitution on the sacred liturgy concerning the use of the vernacular and the participation of the faithful:

Article 36. (i) Particular law remaining in force, the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites.

(ii) But since the use of the mother tongue, whether in the Mass, the administration of the sacraments, or other parts of the liturgy, frequently may be of great advantage to the people, the limits of its employment may be extended. This will apply in the first place to the readings and directives, and to some of the prayers and chants, according to the regulations on this matter to be laid down separately in subsequent chapters.

Article 54. In Masses which are celebrated with the people, a suitable place may be allotted to their mother tongue. This is to apply in the first place to the readings and “the common prayer,” but also, as local conditions may warrant, to those parts which pertain to the people, according to the norm laid down in Article 36 of this Constitution.

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Nevertheless steps should be taken so that the faithful may also be able to say or to sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them.

Consequently the sacred texts have to be translated in the language of the people, and the content and expression of the translation must have an artistic value equal to that of the original Latin text. First-class composers will have to dedicate their best efforts to put these words to music. It is a very difficult task to compose simple music which can be understood and performed by the people, and yet be of high artistic quality and possess a sacred character. In any case it is not the task of people who “mean well” and know nothing about the trade. Good intentions and progressive zeal are not enough to make a composer. Moreover the people have to be educated to sing these compositions in a dignified manner. This renewal is not possible overnight. Therefore it is absolutely necessary that this adaptation be brought about in a moderate and constructive way, with patience, reflection and dedication.

In many countries there has always been a great lack of interest in music education on the part of those responsible for the general education in the school system. It is a lost cause to try to have the people sing in a dignified manner during the divine services when an elementary basis of serious music instruction is lacking during their educational development. First of all, the subject of music should be integrated and required on an equal basis with other subjects in general education. We know all too well the argument that the program is already overloaded. The program in that case pays no heed to the development of good taste and the cultivation of a judgement regarding the aesthetics of music or of art in general. Without any doubt this should be one of the most important humanistic subjects: to see the beauty in life, to understand it and to maintain it.

The new trend in liturgical music must be seen as a complement to the centuries-old cultural heritage and not as an overthrowing of the greatest treasures of Christian church music. Therefore Gregorian chant, *and* polyphony, *and* liturgical organ playing—the latter is also an integral part of the liturgy—are not only “to be preserved” for the sacred services: it is rather the *explicit wish of the Council* that they are also maintained and practiced with love and care. Consequently the playing of the organ retains its valuable task and its liturgical function. Recently, in a commencement address at the Lemmens Institute in Mechlin, Belgium, no one less than Cardinal Suenens stressed the high vocation of the church organist and the great influence of organ playing on the faithful (July 1965).

The following are some practical suggestions as to how and when the organist has the occasion to play the organ in connection with the Sacrifice of the Mass:

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1) As an introduction to the *Asperges me* or *Vidi aquam*. The organist can time the music so as to be finished before the singing starts. All good and suitable organ literature may be used here, from the Old Masters to the contemporary. Good improvisation, however, can illustrate in an ideal manner not only the theme of the following song, but also the feast day and its function in the church year. The playing of a prelude before the Mass and a fugue by the same composer afterwards also give a definite feeling of unity.

2) During the Offertory, after the consecration, and during the distribution of Holy Communion to the faithful, the organ has the task, as a unifying element, to edify the congregation through suitable literature or improvisation. If the organist does not possess enough ability to improvise on the preceding or following Gregorian melodies, he will do better to play compositions in the spirit of the occasion, for which a rich repertory is available.

3) After the *Ite Missa est* the organist has the opportunity to demonstrate the possibilities of his instrument to conclude the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in a suitable manner; this in connection with and according to the importance of the feast of the day.

By this we see that the possibilities to use the organ functionally during the Mass remain as before. Evidently arrangements have to be made with the celebrant to provide for mutual understanding. We must regard the trend in the liturgy as an evolution where new guidelines are added to existing ones, and not as a revolution which would overthrow a tradition of many centuries. For that matter the text of the liturgical constitution is in this respect very clear.

Pope Paul VI said recently, on June 30, 1965 in an address at Castelgondolfo: "We cannot approve of the attitude of those who use the problems raised and discussed by the Council to create in themselves and in others an attitude of unrest and a desire for radical reformation, as if the Council gives every private opinion a chance to destroy the heritage of the Church, acquired during Her many centuries of history and experience." And His Holiness asks, "Would these people want the Church to return to Her childhood?"

Last year in August during the annual Liturgical Workshop at Boys Town, Nebraska, the noted Lutheran theologian, liturgist, and musicologist Walter Buszin held an important lecture in which he stressed the fact that it was the duty of Catholic church musicians to make sure that, with this renewing trend, nothing of the rich and invaluable inheritance of Gregorian chant, polyphony and organ playing should be lost. This lecture was published in *Caecilia*, number 4, volume 91, winter 1965.

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Therefore it is our obligation not to be suspicious of the new directions regarding participation of the congregation in the vernacular during the divine services. We must devote our best efforts to the growth of this new element to a high level, side by side with the existing tradition of many centuries of rich cultural accomplishments. This does not exclude the fact that we have to continue our enthusiasm and love for what has always been the highest expression in religious art, and therefore we must also keep up with undiminished diligence the practice of choral singing, polyphony, and organ music. In churches with a large organ, the organ has to retain its function: to introduce the liturgical texts and songs of the church year before the Mass, to illustrate them during the service and conclude them with a postlude. In this way it brings to the action a unifying element which itself will become a work of art. For the alternate accompaniment of the choir and the congregational singing, special adjustment and training is required of the organist, which will however be attainable through repetition and mutual understanding.

When the choir is located near the altar or in the sanctuary, a “Positiv” *pipe* organ is desirable, especially in the larger churches. Since the Council shows more than ever its great interest in church music, it is self-evident that organists and choirmasters would extend their activities beyond the religious services. A few well-prepared sacred concerts a year would be of educational value to the faithful. By doing so, their respect would grow for the exceptionally rich musical literature we possess. They would learn to understand better the real meaning of beauty in the House of God, and possibly become more appreciative of the effort put into it, which is often too little recognized. It is the duty of the clergy to encourage and support this task fully, because this also is clearly outlined by the Council. Furthermore, through sacred concerts, the condition is created to bring about a more intensive church music program in which the community shares, and which will undoubtedly bear much fruit for the future.

Finally, let us not forget that listening especially is active participation. When we listen to the performances of Bach’s Saint Matthew Passion, we can fully participate actively in the Passion of Christ. And so, if we listen attentively to the singing and organ music during the celebration of the divine services, our participation is not less complete. The real significance of this objective and very important aspect is insufficiently understood.



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