THE PRAYER-ELEMENT IN CHURCH MUSIC*

By Rev. Charles Dreisoerner, S.M.

I.

The Purpose of Church Music Is Prayer

Dr. Peter Wagner used to say that priests began to chant prayers for two reasons: (1) so that they could be heard in a large space, and (2) because there is a certain emotional effect in a prayer that is sung—as pagan priests and witches well know. Such is the historians explanation. From our own experience we can devine another allied reason.

When we feel particularly fervent in prayer, we are likely to make deeper bows and slower genuflections, and to say vocal prayers with a certain accent of reverence and conviction. The exterior is an expression of the interior. Conversely, when in the sleepy hours after noon we feel no devotion in our souls, we can often induce a state of relative fervor by making deeper bows and slower genuflections and by saying vocal prayers with an accent of reverence and conviction. The exterior is the stimulus of the interior. Now the exterior actions of the liturgy are in that way both an expression and a stimulus: an expression of inward prayer or a stimulus to it. Liturgical music aims to increase this action and therefore to make us more wholehearted in adoration and thanks, more earnest in petition and repentence.

This Pius X clearly stated in the first section of his Motu Proprio on Church Music. The proper end of music in the liturgy, he said in substance, is to make the liturgical texts more effective and therefore to excite the faithful to devotion and dispose them to get the fruits of grace proper to the function.

In his St. Sylvester Day sermon in 1929, Cardinal Faulhaber of Munich laid down Four Commandments of Church Art. The fourth was: "Thou shalt become an act of worship." Art should not serve a style or modernism, he explained, or the eccentricities of some artist or his vanity and the glory of his name. It should rather glorify God's name and like a harp sing: "Lord, I love the beauty of thy house; my soul doth magnify the Lord." (Ps. 25) It should be a fiery tongue of the Holy Spirit proclaiming God's word and Law, the reward in heaven, and the love and majesty of Christ. The arts of music and song especially have to become a worship of God. The Cardinal recalled as a model the music of the dedication of the Temple as told in Paraliponemon—how Levites and singers and 120 priests began with trumpets and voice and cymbals and organ and with divers kinds of musical instruments to praise the Lord and say: "Give glory to the Lord for He is good, for His mercy endureth forever." And in answer to their prayer, the house of God was filled with a cloud. . .

What the Cardinal meant was: Church music is a means to an end, and the end is the personal prayer of each one and the collective prayer of the whole group. The purpose of church Music is better prayer.

II.

This Prayer-Element Should Be Insisted On

Some persons never realize that when their song is a petition, they should ask for something; that when their song is a word of instruction or exhortation, they should ponder it themselves. They are astonished to read of large-scale applications of such methods, for example in some activities of the Grail, a Catholic Girl Movement in Holland. (I quote from the April 1934 issue of Far East). "There is definite achievement in the educational use made of the two great attractions of the moment, play-acting and dancing. It is not simply that the leaders produce religious plays. The whole technique is new and suited to their vast membership. They do not turn themselves into a theatrical company, nor do they run a series of performances. Once or twice a year they take some great stadium and produce a pageant whose whole purpose it is to expound some point of Christ's teaching and so draw performers and audience to love God better. . . . This year in Rotterdam, the Lydwina play was given twice, each time attended by 12,000 people. Here 7000 girls acted, and it would be difficult to exaggerate the profound effect made by this great open-air performance. From start to finish the vast crowd watched entranced the story of a soul's progress in the love of God through suffering, first rejected, then accepted with thanksgiving. In these performances there is no room for individual vanity. There are no stars in the Grail plays. They achieve their end by mass movement. Every action

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is done and every idea conveyed by groups who speak as one, with marvelous distinctness of utterance.

Even more remarkable is the use made in these pageants of that Cinderella of the arts. dancing. We are so accustomed to think of it in terms of the modern ballroom that we are shocked at the thought of its application to holy things. But the Grail is right, with David. Its members "dance" the Stabat Mater and the dance becomes the holiest, most reverent meditation. They "dance" the Rorate Coeli, and it seems that the Heavens must open to such a plea. There are no theatrical posturings. **The girls are taught that the hymns are not to be acted but explained in motion;** and to be explained they must **first be understood** by their expounders. The girls themselves say that the Mass is a different thing to them since they have learned to express the Sanctus in movement as well as in plain-song. No wonder the Grail hear, after their plays, of conversions effected by their means. They are saturated through and through with Catholic thought, and acted by people **who mean the words they utter. . . .**"

Some persons never realize that they should in some way mean the words they sing. Even those who do realize it, are always subject to the deadening influence of habit. While it is fortunate that we do not have to relearn each day how to walk and speak, it is unfortunate that our tongues can get the habit of saying off a long prayer without our paying the least attention to God. Now, since we often sing the same words over and over week after week, we have to accentuate their prayer-aspect to prevent habit from making them purely mechanical.

Some texts are moreover hard to understand. Vernacular hymn texts have sometimes little meaning. Many chants are in a language strange to the singers, and some of these chants are not intelligible even to a student of Latin because they are only fragments or refrains of longer chants. Since most singers do not know the background of these chants, they do not understand them, and tend naturally to forget all about making their song a prayer.

And music is by itself so attractive and pleasing that it tends to become an end. A singer easily begins to make music and stop praying.

Yet, it is very important that this singer continue praying. If he is distracted at table, he can nevertheless assimilate food. If he is distracted in the confessional, he can nevertheless receive absolution. But if he allows his liturgy—his singing—to become purely formal without inward devotion and prayer, its effect on him is for the most part lost. It is important, therefore, to insist with our choirs on the prayer-element of their song.

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Practical Ways of Making Our Church Music a Prayer

From what I have said, you may imagine that I wish the impossible; actual attention to the meaning of each phrase you sing; or that I regard church music as a mere pleasing formality if it lacks this continual attention. All this is as inexact as demanding attention to every clause of the Hail Mary when you recite the Rosary.

St. Thomas Aquinas says that prayer has three effects: (1) merit; (2) obtaining the thing demanded; (3) spiritual reflection of the soul. We obtain the merit of prayer, as of any good act performed in the state of grace, so long as our first good intention persists. Hence, if a singer starts his chanting with a good intention and then has to put so much attention to the music that he cannot think of the meaning of what he sings, he gains the full merit of his action so long no wrong motives like vanity break in upon it. Distraction does not hinder merit.

The second effect of prayer, obtaining what we ask for, is also independent of distractions. The first good intention suffices.

But the third effect of prayer, the spiritual reflection of the soul, is gained only by actual attention. This actual attention means, St. Thomas explains, that we think in a general way of God Himself, or that we think of the thing we ask for, or that we think over the words of the prayer we are singing. But exclusive attention is a kind of distraction and, therefore, hinders this third effect of our prayer. Consequently, if I may so paraphrase a sentence of St. Thomas in his Commentary on the Letters to the Corinthians, "he gains more who both sings and understands, than he who sings only with his lips; for he who understands, is refreshed both in mind and heart,"—in heart by contact with God, in mind by the thoughts of the text that stimulates the soul and help maintain the spirit of fervor and prayer in which it started. This actual attention even to the words we sing, is then a very useful practice. To those who protest that "singing is twice praying" and mean that it is unnecessary to make any attempt at prayer, we must answer that

singing is indeed twice praying, but that twice zero is always zero.

If actual attention to the sense of the words sung is a useful ideal, the choirmaster should prepare the text as well as the music before his rehearsals. For most English songs, one or two careful readings will be enough. For the Ordinary of the Mass, a study of the translation in an ordinary prayerbook is the first step. Then occasionally he should read some detailed commentary on these texts—from a book like Father Gihr's "Holy Sacrifice of the Mass," or Cardinal Schuster's "Liber Sacramentorum" or Fortesque's "The Mass," or some of the smaller publications of the Liturgical Press at Collegeville, Minn. For the chants of the Proper, he should prepare from an English translation of the Missal. Besides this it is almost indispensable to consult a book like the "Liber Sacramentorum," or better for those who read German, Parsch's "Das Jahr des Heiles." With such a book the choirmaster or organist prepares the text of the Introit, the Offertory, etc., in order to have solid ground for brief translation and interesting remarks. For example when he rehearses the Communion of today's Proper (Put forth thy hand and recognize the places of the nails Alleluia, and be not faithless but believing), he would point out the beautiful allusions of this chant meant to be sung during the Communion Procession of the Faithful, who before the seventh century used to put forth their right hand crossed over the left to receive the Host and then communicate themselves: Put forth thy hand and recognize the places of the nails, and be not faithless but believing. If you want enthusiasm and understanding, prepare your text.

At the rehearsals, already with children, we should begin with the text, or as some prefer, learn the music first, then examine and learn the text, finally apply the text to the music. But under no circumstances may we neglect the text on the ground that we have barely time for the music. The music will be learned faster if the singing is made interesting by little interludes of explanation. It is easiest to start with English songs. Show the singers what the words mean, what they are saying or praying, and insist that they pray what they sing. With older singers, the Latin texts should also be explained and read, so that when they sing "Kyrie eleison" they really mean "Lord have mercy on us." This is not an impossible ideal, for the chants of the Ordinary are for the most part short and easy. High School Latin courses should aid the work, for there is no reason why a syllabus should be so inflexible as not to admit a little bend towards something of practical use. At McBride High School, for example, the third-year Religion classes have just finished a study of the Mass. Simultaneously, the third-year Latin classes studied the Latin Prayers of the Ordinary. But even when the singers know the meaning of these chants in a general way, the choirmaster will still have to come back on it and insist on using it as the basis of expression.

Then we would not hear a choir sing the "Genitori," at Benediction in the same subdued, reserved manner they used for the "Tantum Ergo," because the singers would realize the difference between "Tantum ergo Sacramentum veneremur cernui (Prostrate let us venerate this great Sacrament, and may our faith supply what our senses fail to tell), and "Genitori Genitoque laus et jubilatio (To the Father and to the Son be praises and jubilation, and honor and power . . .) Closing stanzas of liturgical hymns are usually prayers of praise and glory to the Trinity that should be sung with an accent of praise and joy.

Similarly, a choir that understands the last phrases of the Easter Sequence, will not pass them off in a dull, matter of fact way. "Scimus Christum surrexisse. We know that Christ has risen from the dead in truth — Do thou, O Victorious King, have mercy on us. Amen. Alleluia."

In contrast to such grandiose and glorious phrases, would be the quiet heartfelt gratitude of the dozen notes accentuating the word "bonus" in the Easter Gradual: Praise the Lord, for He is **Good;** Quoniam BONUS"—or the reverent "Salve" which the Dominicans at one of their French Monasteries accompany with a deep bow before the statue of the Blessed Virgin.

Singers improve wonderfully in expression if they know what the text means and are singing it piously; but Dom Lucien David, O.S.B., warns that they should be told not to aim at an effect on the audience, but to be natural and pray. An anonymous Swiss writer says about the same thing of classical polyphony: "A dramatic effect is often intended and should be produced, though not exaggerated. The best general rule, he concludes, is to sing understandingly and to get the spirit of the text."

We have all the while insisted that the singers should pray their song. Is it neces-

sary to add that the director and even the organist should pray along? Are there not some Tantum Ergo and other hymns which they have played so often that little attention is needed? During such pieces, praying the text is easy and useful. But organists as well as singers do often have to give exclusive attention to the mechanics of their work. The practical solution then is to start in God's presence with the intention of worshiping Him; then put to your duty all the attention needed to do it well. Pray the text whenever you can, or at least try to glean a thought here and there to revive the original disposition of prayer and devotion.

This prayer aspect will help the organist to judge what pieces are correct church music. On Ascension Day about three years ago, I assisted at a Pontifical High Mass in a Swiss Cathedral. The choir sang Palestrina's Mass of Pope Marcellus in six voices. The Gregorian Proper was led by a boy choir in a balcony over the sanctuary and taken up by a mixed choir in the rear gallery. The third Credo was sung by the whole assembly. After the Mass, my companion expressed disappointment over the Palestrina Mass. I asked him what he did during the singing. He said that he sat there and listened to the music—and found it a little monotonous. I replied that if he had prayed along the text, "We praise thee, we bless thee, we adore thee," he would have understood the supreme art of this music and why it is regarded as suitable Church Music. All of us have such a tendency to want **music** during services; the Church wants **prayer.** That is why we secretly abandon Gregorian on festivals whereas the Pope tells us that no feast loses in solemnity even if only Gregorian is sung at it. So long as we submit to our tendency and seek only the music, no amount of regulations will ever guarantee us correct church music; and on the other hand little regulation is needed to tell us what sort of music is correct if we seek to pray.

SOCIETY OF ST. GREGORY

Annual Summer School At Oxford

The Society of Saint Gregory held its Annual Summer School of Plain-song in Oxford recently. Cordial letters of encouragement and blessing on the work of the school were sent by the Archbishops of Birmingham and Liverpool, by Archbishop Goodier and by the Bishops of Southwark, Northampton, Nottingham, Brentwood and Pella.

This Annual School at Oxford constitutes in a sense the University of Plainsong. Other local schools take place during the year, but in the summer students come from all parts of England, from Scotland and from Ireland. Choirmasters, organists, parish priests, nuns and secular teachers as well as a large number of new students of the Chant assemble at Oxford.

Dom Bernard McElligott in his welcoming address urged that all the work of the week should be directed towards the more perfect worship of God in the Liturgy, especially the Liturgy of the Mass. This is the aim of the Society—to bring back fulness of communal worship in which every Catholic has a right to take part, and knows how to do so. All the work to be done by the school on technique, teaching and interpretation must have that one object in view.

The program of the school was divided into two grades, but all the students met each day for practical work and general rehearsal of the Chant under the direction of Fr. Desmond Coffey. Fr. Coffey is now well known as the successful conductor of congregational singing on a vast scale at Lourdes, Rochester, Canterbury and Rome. During the week he gave lectures on Analysis, Transcription and Conducting of the Chant. Dom Gregory Murray lectured on Rhythm and gave two very valuable lectures on Accompaniment. Dom Laurence Bévenot explained his "Universal" system of pointing the psalms and gave a discourse on their Imagery, Rhythm and Form. Mr. H. P. Allen held a course of lectures for less advanced students, and Mr. H. B. Collins conducted a very popular Class in Polyphony. An interesting lecture with slides on Sinus Tone Voice production was given by Mr. G. E. White and one of the unexpected joys of the week was an organ recital on the Hertford College organ by Dom Gregory Murray.

This school though interesting to all Catholics is above all of value to choirmasters and teachers. The experience of the best English teachers of the Chant is made