

Sebastiano Cardinal Martinelli (1848-1918), Prefect of the Congregation of Rites

CARDINAL MARTINELLI'S LETTER – dated 18 February 1910

*... which says the rhythm of the Editio Vaticana must be adhered to by Roman Catholics.*

*Letter of Cardinal Martinelli, Prefect of the Congregation of Rites, to Rt. Rev. Msgr. F. X. Haberl Domestic Prelate and President of the Association of St. Cecilia in Germany, Ratisbon, Bavaria.*

His Holiness has learned that, particularly in Germany, and among the Germans of the United States, a view concerning the Vatican edition of the liturgical chant is being spread which is absolutely false in itself and very prejudicial to the uniform restoration of said chant in the whole Church. It is insinuated that the Holy Father in publishing the aforesaid edition did not intend to embody in it a special form of rhythm, but to leave to the individual music directors the right to apply to the series of notes, taken materially, any rhythm they deem most appropriate.

How erroneous this opinion is may be deduced from a simple examination of the Vatican edition in which the melodies are evidently arranged according to the system of the so-called free rhythm, for which also the principal rules of execution are laid down and inculcated in the preface to the Roman Gradual in order that all may abide by them and that the chant of the Church be executed uniformly in every respect. Moreover, it is well known that the Pontifical Commission, charged with compiling the liturgical Gregorian books, had expressly intended from the beginning and with the open approval of the Holy See to mark the single melodies of the Vatican edition in that particular rhythm. Finally the approbation which the Sacred Congregation of Rites bestowed upon the Roman Gradual by order of the Holy Father extends not only to all the particular rules by which the Vatican edition has been made up, but includes also the rhythmical form of the melodies, which, consequently, is inseparable from the edition itself. Therefore, in the present Gregorian reform it has always been and still is absolutely foreign to the mind of the Holy Father and of the Sacred Congregation of Rites to leave to the discretion of individuals such an important and essential element as the rhythm of the melodies of the Church.

By reason of the great authority which your Reverence enjoys as President General of the worthy Association of St. Cecilia, you are requested to make the present communication known to all the members of the aforesaid Association, exhorting at the same time the patrons of Church Music to desist from all attempts, which in the present state of archeological, literary and historical studies, cannot have a serious and gratifying result. They only serve to confuse the minds of the less experienced and to alienate their hearts from the Gregorian reform, as it was intended by the Holy Father and which, also with regard to the rhythm, has not only been accepted and more and more elucidated through new and useful researches by the most renowned Gregorian theorists, but is now actually rendered with complete and consoling success by innumerable schools in all parts of the world.

It was my duty to communicate this to you by special commission of His Holiness.

With sentiments of sincere esteem and devotedness,  
Rome, Feb. 18, 1910.

CARDINAL FR. SEBASTIAN MARTINELLI.