

THE CALL TO CHANT ; SACRED MUSIC IS HARDER TO SING, BUT IT TOUCHES THE SOUL, PURISTS SAY

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On a recent Monday at the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, about 35 nuns gather in a dimly lit chapel to chant, as they do every day at noon.

Making their way through Psalm 118, the nuns sit or stand; some face different directions, while others bow steeply. Throughout, their voices remain in unison.

Pope Benedict XVI would approve. After a concert of 16th- and 17th-century music a few weeks ago, the pope said he would prefer to hear Gregorian chant and other traditional types of music play more of a role during Mass.

That's good news for the cloistered nuns at the Bethlehem abbey, which is known around the world for its devotion to Gregorian chant and is one of the few places where it is sung with such frequency and intensity. The nuns sing seven times a day; some interrupt their sleep to chant at 2 in the morning.

But the pope's comments also raise certain questions: What is sacred music supposed to sound like? And what's wrong with new music in church?

It's a debate that has raged since 1963, when Vatican II reforms brought contemporary music to Catholic churches. Just as the Latin Mass almost immediately disappeared amid attempts to modernize, chants gave way to guitars and snappy folk tunes.

The new music helped fill pews, but it left church conservatives and formally trained musicians reeling. How could the church that brought about Gregorian chant, polyphony and musical notation -- all profound influences on Western music -- be the same one leading sing-alongs of "Love Is Colored Like a Rainbow" and songs from hit musicals? What, bemoaned the purists, had the folkies wrought?

Going to church, critics say, should not sound like shopping at the mall or driving your car. They charge that "liturgical pop" is spiritually bereft and demands nothing from the churchgoer. It's friendly, pleasant and easy, they say.

They mean that in a bad way.

Understanding God is hard work, the argument goes, and similarly, music in church should challenge us. A sermon that says only what people want to hear would lack moral authority. The same goes for music.

"There's a sense of mystery and religious atmosphere that seems to be lost in the new days," says Scott Turkington, the choirmaster at St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church in Stamford. "The fact is that the older music is better. Ask any serious musician, and he'll agree with that."

The chants sung at Regina Laudis are more than 1,000 years old. But Sister Elizabeth Evans says "old" doesn't mean irrelevant.

Sister Elizabeth, 46, was a corporate securities attorney and law professor before she came to the abbey in 1997. Each of the nuns is assigned certain responsibilities; hers are music and dairy. Sitting in a small room behind a wooden screen (which symbolically separates the nun's world from the visitor's, though there's enough space to shake hands), Sister Elizabeth remembers stumbling onto the sound of chant when she was 14. To her, it was anything but off-putting. She played it for her friends, who were equally taken.

"And I mean, these were 14-year-old gum-chewing delinquents like myself," she says.

To the untrained ear, the unaccompanied chant named after Pope Gregory the Great can sound emotionally muted, droning at times and otherworldly. That it's sung in Latin doesn't help. But to Sister Elizabeth, it sounds more recognizably human than any other music, down to earth and in tune to the rhythms of life.

It's based on the Scriptures, after all, which are filled with human foibles. She says chant is like blues legend Muddy Waters -- a comparison that conjures the improbable image of nuns chanting "Baby Please Don't Go." She explains that both have a certain earthiness and deal with the nitty-gritty of life.

What they chant depends on the time of the day (the morning lauds, for instance, often celebrate beginnings and creations; at noon, they chant the sext, which deals a lot with chasing down noonday demons). Subjects also change along with the seasons. Lately, they've sung about taking in harvests, filling storage houses and other day-to-day concerns.

So if chant is like Muddy Waters, what's contemporary Christian music?

"Donny and Marie," Sister Elizabeth says, laughing. A few times, she holds her hands in prayer and makes an angelic face to gently mock the "niceness" of contemporary music. It's got a steady 1-2-3 beat, she says, swaying her arm in rhythm. But life isn't steady, or blandly inoffensive, for that matter. It has tumult and strife. So does chant, with a beat that goes back and forth and never settles. Rhythmically, she says, chant's closest cousin may be jazz.

"The contemporary music, it does ... something, but for me, it doesn't cut as deep," she says. "There's something in chant that calls to you even if you don't understand the words."

But the folk Mass and other contemporary Christian music has its champions. It's easier to sing and less imposing than Latin chants. Why begrudge any music that draws people in? Why not have polka Masses and jazz Masses -- which have cropped up at churches in recent years -- if that's what inspires parishioners? And didn't we already have this debate when Pope John XXII banned polyphony in the 14th century, back when new-fangled harmony threatened our morals?

Taking a Eurocentric approach to music can be a thorny issue for a church that wants to cut across cultural boundaries. Roc O'Connor, one of the St. Louis Jesuits -- a musical group that led the folk Mass movement in the 1970s -- says he recently visited a poor church in Brazil where the parishioners sang local songs.

"I thought, 'How can these people make sense of Gregorian chant or polyphony?'" says O'Connor, whose group still raises the hackles of musical purists. "The cultural and economic issues that are tied to it all make the issue more complex. Not everyone can afford an orchestra or singers who can handle it."

O'Connor says he'd hate to lose the "rediscovery of community" that came from songs that everyone could understand and sing along with.

The folk Mass continues on in Enfield.

"As far as participation goes, it seems to be more accessible to younger members who haven't quite developed their singing skills," says Denis Duclos, who has led the Holy Family Folk Group at Enfield's Holy Family Church since 1969.

They still have a few original members, whom Duclos calls the "holy remnants." But some things have changed. For one, the songs written today are more

musically complex than the early days of the folk Mass. Enough so, he says, to make "Kumbaya" sound like children's music.

Ah, "Kumbaya." Just mention it to Sister Elissa Rinere at the Norwich diocese, and you'll hear a cackle on the other end of the phone line.

"'Kumbaya' -- those words! I don't even know what that means," she says. With its simplistic melody and lyrics, the song has pegged the folk Mass as a relic. It doesn't have to be that way, she says. "There's so much more sophisticated music that is suitable to play on the guitar."

She doesn't see the pope's remarks as a denunciation of contemporary music.

"I think that what the pope is calling for is not a return to the Gregorian chant exclusively but for a better balance so that the heritage isn't lost," says Sister Elissa, herself a former folkie.

As for bringing chant back to services, she says, good luck with that.

"I'm familiar with chant, and it is a beautiful part of Catholic heritage," she says. But, she adds, "I know how hard it is for a group to sing the Gregorian chant."

Difficult, maybe, but not impossible, says William Mahrt, a Stanford University music professor.

"It may not be immediately sing-along-able; it may take some practice," he says. A parish should be able to pick up most chants over the course of three or four Sundays. Music is like anything else, he says; you get out of it what you put into it.

Nobody's expecting chant to fill churches en masse. But many say the pendulum had been swinging toward more traditional music even before the pope weighed in on the subject.

"I think it's kind of a generational thing," says Kurt Poterack, editor of the journal Sacred Music. "You had one generation in the 1960s that had the general mode of questioning authority. Now you have, not quite the children, but the grandchildren. They tend to be people in their 20s who are saying, 'Hey, this is kind of beautiful stuff.'"

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