

**Class 10, Final Draft:**  
**Uncovering the Church's Teachings on Sacred Music**

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## Uncovering the Church's Teachings on Sacred Music

Music has the power to increase productivity, inspire magnanimity, and instill a prayerful spirit. In the context of religion, music plays a critical role in liturgies for worship and community formation. In the last century, controversy over music in the Church has increased, most especially poignant in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. The Catholic Church seeks to preserve and expand the treasury of music appropriate for use in the Mass, with common forms being hymns, polyphony, and Gregorian Chant. Although doctrinally sound hymns are permissible, in the Catholic Church today, Gregorian chant should be given pride of place in the Mass for the reasons of upholding liturgical tradition, encouraging universalism, and fostering active participation.

The importance of music for Catholics dates back to the times of the Apostles. In Acts 16:25, "... Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God..."<sup>1</sup> Paul, who was a pivotal figure in the growth of the Church, used song as a form of prayer. Although the passage does not provide evidence of the celebration of the Mass, singing still held an important position for early Christians, like Paul and Silas. Furthermore, in the letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul stated, "...be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart..."<sup>2</sup> Again, the evidence suggests that early Christians used song to praise the Lord, the creator of Heaven and Earth. Music, therefore, has a rich historical tradition in the life of the Church, dating back to St. Paul.

Thousands of years-old evidence of the Apostles singing is attested not only in the Bible, but also by the pagan historian Pliny. Pliny wrote a letter to the emperor detailing the activities of

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 16:25 (RSV, Catholic Edition).

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 5:19 (RSV, Catholic Edition).

the Christians. Pliny reported, "...they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god..."<sup>3</sup> Also in the letter, Pliny describes the Christians "to meet on a fixed day" and "to partake of food—but ordinary and innocent food." Although Pliny describes the food at the meal as ordinary, the Christians certainly did not hold this belief, since Jesus had given His apostles the Eucharist. The evidence of the Eucharist and meeting on fixed days suggests the early Christians were celebrating Mass. Pliny wrote the letter around the year 112 A.D., indicating that singing, as a component of Mass, has been part of Catholicism since the second century.

Music in the Catholic Church has been a liturgical practice for thousands of years. The Psalms, written by King David, were a primary source of prayers chanted by the Jews.<sup>4</sup> Building off the Jewish roots of Catholicism, the Apostles continued to use music as a form of prayer.<sup>5</sup> Near the end of the sixth century, Saint Pope Gregory the Great was a reformer of and advocate for Sacred Music, hence, Gregorian chant was born. Gregorian chant created a tangible example of the workings of the chanting that Catholics had already been singing. Catholics ought to be proud of the unique and significant invention of Gregorian chant, which was a pivotal milestone in the history of music.<sup>6</sup>

Similar to Pope Saint Gregory, Pope Saint Pius X noticed a decline in the regard for Sacred Music in the Catholic Church in the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1903, Pope Saint Pius X wrote the papal document, *Tra Le Sollecitudini* (TLS), which translates to "On Sacred Music." Pope Pius X established norms for the reform of liturgical music, including the

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<sup>3</sup> Georgetown University, "Pliny, Letters 10.96-97."

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Ratzinger and Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020) 154.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 157.

<sup>6</sup> Pius X, *Tra Le Sollecitudini* [On Sacred Music] (TLS), sec. 3, (Papal Encyclicals Online, 1903).

primacy of Gregorian chant.<sup>7</sup> He believed Gregorian chant was the model of all Sacred Music.<sup>8</sup> Pope Pius X urged the faithful to realize the greatness of Gregorian chant, which the church “has jealously guarded.”<sup>9</sup> Pope Pius X believed that music is considered inappropriate for Mass if it has no similarities to Gregorian chant.<sup>10</sup> The level of similarity signifies the degree of fit.<sup>11</sup> According to Pope Pius X, Gregorian chant is the best form of music in the Church, despite the availability of other options.

In 1963, the Second Vatican Council wrote a document called the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy: *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC). SC contains a section dedicated to Sacred Music which notes, “The treasure of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with great care.”<sup>12</sup> If music did not have a large impact on the Sacred Liturgy, the question of what form of music is appropriate for Mass would be minimized to a judgment call of subjective preference. Instead, the teachings of the Church on music are explicitly expressed in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. For example, the document states: “The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services.”<sup>13</sup> The phrase “pride of place” means the “most prominent or important position.” For example, water is the most important beverage; consequently, it is not reserved for special occasions. Rather, water is drunk often, even every day. Likewise, Gregorian chant

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Paul VI, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* [Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy] (SC), sec. 114, (December 4, 1963), [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html).

<sup>13</sup> Paul VI, *SC*, sec.116.

should not be put in a museum to collect dust but used often, even at every Mass. Pride can be likened to pleasure in achievements. The term “pride of place” suggests that Gregorian chant should be used often and with pleasure. The teachings of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* express the permittance of polyphony and other suitable forms of music, yet Gregorian chant is still recognized as the standard for Sacred Music.<sup>14</sup>

In support of the universalism of the Church, Gregorian chant in its purest form is sung in Latin. Latin is the original language of many of the writings of the Church.<sup>15</sup> Pope Paul VI stated, “Particular law remaining in force, the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites.”<sup>16</sup> Based upon the teaching of Pope Paul VI, Latin ought to still be prevalent in the Mass. No other language can have the same effect on the music of the Church as Latin, because of the clarity and unity in which Latin fosters despite different cultures and time spans.<sup>17</sup> Gregorian chant preserves Latin, likewise Latin preserves Gregorian chant.

A major theme of the reformation of the liturgy through the Second Vatican Council was the faithful’s active participation in the Mass. Within the Mass, the Ordinaries are the backbone prayers of the Mass that seldom change, while the Propers provide specific prayers and readings changing for the liturgical season and feast day. In *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Pope Paul VI expressed the intent for the faithful to pray the Ordinaries in Latin, either through song or recitation.<sup>18</sup> Actively participating through singing Gregorian chant is possible and encouraged by popes. For example, *Jubilate Deo* is a handbook of Gregorian chant given to all the bishops in

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Keller, “Why Latin?” *The Catholic Times*, September 30, 2025, <https://catholictimescolumbus.org/voices/why-latin/>.

<sup>16</sup> Paul VI, SC, sec.36.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Haas, “When Pilgrims Sing, the World Disappears,” *Corpus Christi Watershed*, November 4, 2025, <https://www.ccwatershed.org/2025/11/04/when-pilgrims-sing-the-world-disappears/>.

<sup>18</sup> Paul VI, SC, sec.54.

1974, which is authored by Pope Paul VI, the same pope who wrote *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.<sup>19</sup> The handbook includes the Ordinaries, Marian antiphons, and a selection of other songs and the intent was for all Catholics to be familiar with the chants of *Jubilare Deo*. Gregorian chant is not intended to be purely sung by a choir who are experts in Gregorian chant, but to be sung by the whole congregation. Gregorian chant fosters active participation by creating an atmosphere for prayer and providing a means for Catholics to engage in the Mass through song.

Gregorian chant is criticized for hindering the faithful from actively participating, however, active participation does not demand the moving of the congregation's lips to song, but rather an internal disposition towards prayer and meditation on God.<sup>20</sup> During the Mass, the internal disposition of the hearts of the faithful are more important than their external actions. Gregorian chant has a holy tone that inspires interior prayer. Subsequently, all hymns are not suitable for the Mass, because Sacred Music, either hymns or Gregorian chant, should not overwhelm the senses, drowning all rationale.<sup>21</sup> Gregorian chant imprints prayers into the hearts of Catholics, because singing is a tool to memorize texts.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, singing Gregorian Chant connects Catholics today to the Saints of the Church centuries past.<sup>23</sup> Catholics today ought not to negate the music of the past merely for the novelty of change.

On the matter of hymns, the substance of the lyrics is an area of primary concern. Since hymns are – in partiality – new territory in the Mass, extra care must be given to ensure the

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<sup>19</sup> Paul VI, *Jubilare Deo (Voluntati Obsequens)* [Letter to the Bishops on the Minimum Repertoire of Plainchant] (JD), (April 14, 1974), <https://isidore.co/misc/Res%20pro%20Deo/Greg%20Chant/jubilateb.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Jeff Ostrowski, "Active Participation: *Partipatio Actuosa*," *Corpus Christi Watershed*, January 19, 2026, <https://www.ccwatershed.org/2026/01/19/active-participation-participatio-actuosa/>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 165.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Dinan, conversation concerning Music, September 2025.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Haas, "My First Year with the Latin Mass: A Music Director's Perspective," *Corpus Christi Watershed*, July 4, 2025, <https://www.ccwatershed.org/2025/07/04/my-first-year-with-the-latin-mass-a-music-directors-perspective/>.

integrity of the texts are in accord with Catholic teaching, since contradictions will certainly tarnish the understanding of the Faith. The source for the lyrics primarily should be the liturgy and the Bible.<sup>24</sup> Oftentimes, the music at a Novus Ordo Sunday Mass includes a processional, offertory, communion, and recessional hymn, dubbed as the 4-hymn sandwich. One issue posed by the 4-hymn sandwich is the common ignorance of the Propers of the Mass. In 1969, the group of bishops and experts nominated by Pope Paul VI to enforce the teachings of Vatican II, stated,

That rule has been superseded. What must be sung is the Mass, its Ordinary and Proper, not “something”, no matter how consistent, that is imposed on the Mass. Because the liturgical service is one, it has only one countenance, one motif, one voice, the voice of the Church. To continue to replace the texts of the Mass being celebrated with motets that are reverent and devout, yet out of keeping with the Mass of the day amounts to continuing an unacceptable ambiguity: it is to cheat the people. Liturgical song involves not mere melody, but words, text, thought and the sentiments that the poetry and music contain. Thus texts must be those of the Mass, not others, and singing means singing the Mass not just singing during Mass.<sup>25</sup>

These findings suggest that hymns or other forms of music, which do not align with the prayers of the Mass’s Propers are not to be sung as the primary music for the Mass. Gregorian chant is a melody sung directly to the prayers of the Mass, therefore the issue of contradiction between the lyrics and prayers is not of concern. In order to “sing the Mass” and not “sing at Mass” the lyrics must express with intentionality the Propers.

Singing Gregorian chant in the Catholic Mass supports tradition, holiness, unity, and apostolic imitation. Gregorian chant is not an outdated practice reserved for monks during the Middle Ages; it serves as the exemplar of music and unifies the Catholic Church worldwide. Monsignor Charles Pope, who holds a master’s degree in moral theology and Divinity, expressed “Historically we can see that, except for Gregorian Chant, no form of music currently considered

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<sup>24</sup> Paul VI, SC, sec.121.

<sup>25</sup> Council for the Implementation of the Sacred Liturgy Constitution, *Corpus Christi Watershed*, (Accessed March 18, 2026), [https://archive.ccwatershed.org/media/pdfs/12/01/02/14-20-28\\_0.pdf](https://archive.ccwatershed.org/media/pdfs/12/01/02/14-20-28_0.pdf).

sacred, was without its controversy.”<sup>26</sup> Not all change in Sacred Music for the holy Liturgy is negative and total resistance to the use of hymns within Mass is both imprudent and stubborn. Catholics should continually strive to elevate the Mass’ Sacred Music, whether chant or hymn, to express truth and splendor.

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<sup>26</sup> Charles Pope, “What is Sacred Music? Historically it’s a bit more complex than you may think,” *Archdiocese of Washington Blog*, December 9, 2013, <https://blog.adw.org/2013/12/what-is-sacred-music-historically-its-a-bit-more-complex-than-you-may-think/>.

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