

# SARTO, THE 'CONSERVATIVE REFORMER' - 100 YEARS OF THE *MOTU PROPRIO* OF POPE ST. PIUS X

Two days after the centennial of the papal election of the 4th of August 1903 which elevated Giuseppe Sarto to the Chair of Peter as Pope Pius X, Pope John Paul II reminded the participants in his weekly general audience at Castelgandolfo that the future Pope was born in 1835 at Riese, a small town in the pre-Alpine area of the Veneto region, which had remained deeply Christian amidst the secularising influences of the early XIXth century. Sarto spent more than three score years of his life within his native area. He was ordained priest in 1858 after studies at the Seminary of Padua where his superiors recognised his "passion for music." His first assignment was as assistant to an old invalid pastor at Tombolo. There he organised a Gregorian chant schola, and taught Mass chants to the faithful. Though Sarto was not a learned scholar, a doctor of canon law or theology, he was always a very good student who profited much from an excellent basic education in philosophy and theology.

In 1867 Sarto was named archpriest at Salzano, 1875 canon of the Cathedral at Treviso, vicar general of the diocese and spiritual director of the Seminary. Three years later he was elected Vicar Capitular at the death of Bishop Zanetti, and in 1882 as Vicar General of Treviso, Mons. Sarto personally participated in the Gregorian Congress at Arezzo, which passed resolutions affirming the problematic nature of the then papally privileged Regensburg Medicean edition of the chant, and calling for a revival of the traditional liturgical melodies along the lines which Dom Joseph Pothier, O.S.B. had sketched out in 1880.

Named Bishop of Mantua (which at that time was beset with many problems), Sarto began in 1884 to teach dogma courses in the Seminary, giving each student a personal copy of the *Summa Theologiae*. He also personally conducted chant rehearsals for the students, so that the Mass chants would be sung correctly. And in his ten years as bishop of Mantua, Sarto twice visited every parish in the diocese, where he himself regularly preached, heard confessions, distributed Holy Communion, confirmed, taught catechism classes and spoke with every one who wanted to see him. In 1893 Pope Leo XIII named Sarto Patriarch of Venice and Cardinal, and ten years later Sarto was elected Pope, ultimately receiving 55 of 60 votes. Pope John Paul II was not exaggerating when he told his listeners at the audience that as Pope, Pius X "played an important role in the history of the Church and of humanity at the beginning of the XXth century." The Holy Father recalled Sarto's canonisation on 29 May in the Marian Year 1954, citing the words of Pius XII on that occasion: Pius X was an "invincible champion of the Church and a providential saint of our times" whose work "resembled the struggle of a giant defending a priceless treasure – the inner unity of the Church in the deepest of her foundations: the faith." (AAS 46 [1954] 308.)

As pastor, Bishop and Cardinal, indeed also as Supreme Pontiff, Sarto's lifestyle always remained extremely modest, the style of a simple country pastor who arose daily at four o'clock and retired at eleven p.m. for a few hours' rest. In 1875, when the Bishop of Treviso appointed him a canon of the Cathedral and spiritual director of the diocesan Seminary, Sarto introduced himself to the students as "a poor country pastor." Everyone who knew Sarto as bishop – including non-Catholics – praised his untiring devotion to duty in his episcopal office, his energetic approach to work and his organisational talent, combined with great friendliness and graciousness. Even as Patriarch of Venice, Sarto was and remained the born parish priest and pastor of souls.

It is thus understandable that in view of the strongly diplomatic and political character of the preceding pontificate, many Cardinals in the conclave of 1903 sought a pope with roots in more exclusively religious and pastoral practise, hence also a pope who

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came from outside the ranks of the Curia Romana. Very similar reasons led to the election fifty years later of another Patriarch of Venice as successor to Pius XII: Angelo Roncalli as John XXIII.

This personal orientation changed little when Cardinal Sarto donned the white cassock of the Sovereign Pontiff. His papal motto clearly indicated his chief goal: the deepening of religious life amongst priests and people. The new Pope's forty-five years of experience as a "poor country pastor" is the precondition for "restoring all things in Christ" through

- his reform of seminary education, Biblical studies, and the revision of the Vulgate Bible; and
- the decisive impetus he gave to the activity of the laity, particularly regarding social questions and the renewal of Christian culture in the modern world.

Here, we sense the basic intention behind the prescriptions for religious education, catechesis and preaching; the motivation for decrees on early and even daily Holy Communion, and the sponsorship of Eucharistic Congresses; the goal sought by preparatory work upon the reform of the Code of Canon Law, the modernisation of the papal Curia, the recasting of the Breviary and the Roman Missal, the restoration of Gregorian chant to achieve more effectively the purpose of the liturgical movement: living participation of the entire Christian people in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy.

Pope Pius X had an intuitive grasp of the supernatural which, together with his practical organisational talent, led him to a rediscovery of the liturgy, in particular the Eucharist as the deepest source of religious strength. Indeed, Sarto gave a lasting stimulus to the spiritual life of the faithful, and in so doing he laid the firm foundations of the modern "liturgical movement." As St. Peter's successor he was noteworthy for his apostolic spirit, his strength of character, the precision of his decisions and his unwavering pursuit of a clear and explicit programme. Pius X profoundly reformed the Church's interior life whilst favouring its missionary expansion. The most vivid examples of this "conservative reform" are the decrees on frequent Communion, and the reform of *Musica sacra*. In our present context, and for lack of space, we shall concentrate our attention upon the latter.

## II.

The pastoral preoccupations which plainly were a determining factor in the liturgical activity of Pius X, are the most convenient portal through which we may approach the basic problem linked to the celebration of the liturgy, to the dignity and fervour of the *canticum novum* which the Church – that great contemplative! – unceasingly sings to the Lord since that first Pentecost, and by which she can truly say: *laudamus Te, benedicimus Te, adoramus Te, glorificamus Te*.

Whenever musical culture in general, and *musica sacra* in particular, breaks new ground, the Church must take a stand, as she did in Avignon at the time of the Ars Nova, for example, in the *Docta sanctorum Patrum* of Pope John XXII (1324). The most systematic and comprehensive expression of the Church's age-old solicitude for the music of her worship, came at the beginning of the XXth century in the *Motu proprio* of Pope St. Pius X. This document evaluated the issues and antitheses of the XIXth century with strong emphasis upon the principle of artistic freedom as applied to composers and executants of church music. In contrast to most earlier papal pronouncements which aimed chiefly at the prohibition of secular trends, the 1903 *Motu proprio* also issued positive commands for the vital cultivation of *Musica sacra*. Thus Gregorian chant, said the Pope, occupies the first place in church music because without proscribing the characteristics peculiar to each country and race, *Cantus gregorianus* possesses in the highest degree the qualities of the worship of which it is an integral part: holiness, goodness of form or artistic value, and universality. And the judgment of Vatican II (SC 116)

makes clear that even today, one of the chief motive forces of the *Motu proprio* is this: to recall the Christian people to participation, by singing —particularly in Gregorian chant — in the prayer of the *Ecclesia orans*, the praying Church. This is one of the four reasons advanced by Pius X in the preamble of the document to justify its need and its timeliness. And the spirit of St. Pius X animates the entire Chapter VI of the Liturgy Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC).

The first of the two paragraphs which lay down general principles in the *Motu proprio*, is of an exceptional density from both the doctrinal and the pastoral points of view. It resembles a great cluster of large, close-set and ample, ripened and matured in God's warm sun, bending low under its own weight . . .

The best commentary on this passage can be found in the words of Sarto himself, for he reminded his priests "how external cult contributes to stimulate piety and devotion; and amongst the actions of cult a most powerful part is played by the chant, which according to St. Bernard 'in the Church it makes glad the minds of men, gives delight to the jaded, stimulates the sluggish, brings sinners to contrition; for no matter how hard may be the hearts of worldlings, they are drawn together to a love of devotion once they have heard the sweetness of the Psalms.' But if we are to perceive these salutary effects, it is necessary that the chant must be as the Church prescribes. Otherwise, just as the profane ornaments of the drawing-room are unbecoming the majesty of the temple, so too, and in a much greater degree, is triviality in chant or in music. Failure to observe this admonition might well provoke the chastisement inflicted on Aaron, Nadab and Abiu who, for using profane fire for the sacrifice, were consumed by a fire sent from heaven: "And fire coming from the Lord destroyed them, and they died before the Lord.' . . . let us not make ourselves guilty of this great sacrilege! "

The Pontiff's own clarification of the three qualities of sacred music which is so intimately united with the Divine Liturgy and the sacred text, is eloquent: "The Church has constantly condemned everything frivolous, vulgar, trivial and ridiculous in sacred music — everything profane and theatrical both in the form of the compositions and in the manner in which they are executed by the musicians: *Sancta sancte*, holy things in a holy manner!

The Church has at all times set a high value on the principles of true art for her music, and on this head has rendered a valuable service to civilisation and culture, for to the beneficent influence of the Church it has been due that the art of music has developed gradually during the course of centuries, and has been perfected in its various genres.

Finally, the Church has paid constant attention to the universal character of the music prescribed by her, in virtue of the traditional principle that as the law of belief is one, so also the form of prayer, and as far as possible the rule of chant, should be one."

We may conclude our reflections on the first part of the *Motu proprio* by recalling what is perhaps the keystone of the entire theology of worship and of its music: the principle that *Musica sacra* is *pars integrans*, an integral part of the solemn liturgy. In other words, sacred music is not merely a means to beautify, or to "carry out," or to "shape" and "form" the worship service. *Musica sacra* is itself worship, and it is related to worship like colour to sunset, like thought to the mind. Sacred music is not like prayer, it IS prayer. Sacred music raises the mind (hence intelligent listening as well as intelligent singing) and raises the heart (hence artistic music which will call up valid emotional response) to God (and not only to neighbour, for worship is directed to God).

There are voices heard today, echoing even from high places in the holy Church of God, which proclaim that since the Liturgy must be "democratised" (L. BEAUDOIN) in the name of *actuosa participatio populi*, as urged by the last Council, then congregational singing has a "role" to fulfill, and it is in terms of this function that *Musica sacra* must be judged. But the critical point here, is the correct understanding of "active participation of the people," and it has been clarified authoritatively in Art. 15 of the 1967 Instruction *Musicae sacram*, which says with great clarity and accuracy that *participatio actuosa* (in perfect harmony with Art. 11 and 30 of SC) must be primarily interior (*in primis interior*

Interior participation  
is the cause of  
exterior participation

*sit oportet*). But it should also be exterior, i.e. a manifestation of the primary interior participation (*attamen etiam exterior esse debet, idest quae interiorem participationem manifestet*). *Participatio interior* is therefore the cause, and not the effect of *participatio etiam exterior*. Listening to the liturgical chanting of the ministers or the *Musica sacra* of the choir is a completely legitimate form of active participation: *Edoceantur quoque fideles ut, ea auscultantes, quae ministri aut schola cantant, mentem suam ad Deum extollere, per interiorem participationem, contendant*. The need of the hour is clear!

When today, a century after the promulgation of the *Motu proprio*, we observe the reactions which follow any statement of truths like these, we can perhaps appreciate what at that time was a bold statement by Pius X, a statement as categorical as it was courageous, and certainly providential. Historians, after all, have documented the discomfiture of many friends of the previously so common theatrical and profane styles of "church music" in Italy, exhibited after the Roman decree of 8 January 1904 making the *Motu proprio* obligatory on all Catholic churches. For instance, they complained about the "abomination of desolation" in the churches of Rome, and indeed, some called Pius X a "second Savonarola." In these parlous times, when the competent Kapellmeister and the legitimate liturgist encounter similar reactions, he can console himself with the wise words of a zealous Benedictine monk and teacher, Dom Ermin Vitry, written more than half a century ago: "That the ideals of the *Motu proprio* have so often remained unheeded should be deplored as one of the great tragedies of Christendom in our time. The supreme wisdom of the law of spiritual beauty has remained unfulfilled. Such neglect has not only broken the harmonious organism of Catholic worship; it has caused us to possess no articulate vitality in the whole field of sacred music. We may regret still more the loss of the spiritual benefits which the revival of true liturgical music would have bestowed upon Christendom, and which according to the providential economy of divine grace, could not be gained in another way . . . Pius X promoted at the same time the reconstruction of the musical text of the chant greatly mutilated, along with reviving the true function of *Musica sacra* in the Church. The *Motu proprio* thus united into a single view the technical and the spiritual aspects of sacred music. So deep is this union that the reform of *Musica sacra* is an integral part also of the restoration of all things in Christ. Are we not still lamentably lagging behind the promise which this vision held for the Christian world?" *Quis respondebit?*

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