Gregorian chant: a stranger in its own home

by Fulvio Rampi, choral conductor and teacher

The title that I have chosen to give to my piece is the bitter synthesis of post-conciliar ecclesiastical reasoning – it might be more correct to say "the lack of reasoning" – with regard to Gregorian chant. I have said to myself many times that it would be much easier to talk about Gregorian chant if the *Sancrosanctum Concilium*, the famous Article 116, had been expressed thus: "The Church, while always having appreciated the artistic and expressive qualities of Gregorian chant, does not recognise it as the proper music of the Roman liturgy: therefore, although it is not excluded from the liturgy, it does not hold the most important position." Anyone else would have rushed to give Gregorian chant a gold medal, appreciating its musical worth as the foundation of Western music; in short, still to this day almost everyone would agree that it is considered to be a major cultural figure of the past and an outstanding witness to the liturgy of the Church, but it is hopelessly surpassed by new liturgical demands to which it may not be able to respond in any fitting manner. In granting it the honours earned by centuries of service, the Church itself should be the one to assign it a new, suitable – though no longer the most important – place in its liturgy. That would be reasonable, simpler, and certainly more comfortable.

Post-conciliar liturgical practice, as we know, has actually largely surpassed the sad fantasy of this fake Article 116, which I have taken the liberty of inventing. The dreadful barrenness of liturgical music is surprising considering the aforementioned hypothetical conciliar statement. Yet it all takes on scandalous connotations – scandalous in the etymological sense – in the light of the *true* conciliar article: "The Church recognises Gregorian chant as the proper

music of the Roman liturgy: therefore within the liturgy, all things being equal, it holds the most important position."

The Church, in the wisdom of its Tradition, has never had any doubt about Gregorian chant: The *Sacrosanctum Concilium* merely sets the seal on an undeniable state of affairs, on a decisive commandment, and thus on a commitment to a renewed understanding that can never fail. A renewed understanding that, precisely because it is based on an immutable commandment, can no longer afford to ask the wrong questions. The question, "Gregorian, yes or no?" is wrong and does not merit an answer, as one is already definitively given by the Church. In the conciliar article which I quoted, the Church essentially reaffirms the obvious: it is worth noting that the emphasis is on the fact that Gregorian chant *belongs* to the Liturgy of the Church, therefore it is valued on a level that transcends purely artistic considerations. The Church is never defined by a work of art, an architectural style, or a musical repertoire. Gregorian chant is no exception (though it may seem that way), given that Gregorian chant is never judged from the artistic point of view, but is intimately associated with *its* real treasure: the Word of God. This alone belongs to it, since the interpretation of the Word belongs to the Church. Thus, when speaking of Gregorian chant, it is not the music which is being called into question, but a fundamental ecclesiastical element: the relationship between the Church and the Word. It is upon this concept, indispensable for the understanding of the complex phenomenon which goes by the name of *Gregorian chant*, that we will base our reflections.

From the conciliar document comes an invitation not to write off, but to *rethink* liturgical music, and above all Gregorian chant. This means finally fostering new ecclesiastical reflections based not only on a safe repository grounded in Tradition, but also on ever new findings taken from various fields of study and research (Gregorian palaeography and semiology, modality, and even patristics, liturgy, theology,

art history…) which are making unprecedented contributions, in a serious and non-ideological way, to the body and substance of the vital principle of *Nova et vetera*, which is the life breath of the Tradition of the Church. *Continuity and severance* should not refer to an object (in this case Gregorian chant), but rather to a renewed understanding, in its turn a result of new methods of juxtaposition which came to maturity especially during the span of the last century. In the light of the last Council, it has become necessary to rethink Gregorian chant – and, as such, liturgical music as a whole – in the context of a complementary and non-antithetical relationship between continuity and severance, where the one (continuity) guarantees the validity and underlying principle of the other (severance).

True continuity, since Gregorian chant is ever the true music of the liturgy, requires severance, a stripping away of outgrown practices previously consolidated which, over time, have ended up veiling and obscuring the true nature and expressive force of the music. If by continuity one means the mere restoration of a pre-conciliar practice, or the defence of an understanding and conception now crystallized and impervious to any "provocation" coming from the many academic fields of music research, then severance would follow the same logic, being limited to an equal and opposite force aimed at matching reconsideration with removal. In reality, post-conciliar discussion is substantially quashed and depleted through the juxtaposition – along fatally ideological outlines – of a Gregorian chant that is in any case indisputable and a Gregorian chant that must be eliminated *tout-court*.

This misplaced question has opened the door to numerous disasters and other equally false and no less devastating questions which concern lofty concepts and sacrosanct principles such as, for example, *participatio actuosa*, wretchedly reduced to a bitter joke. It has gradually produced and established a paradoxical situation where even the normal

execution of a normal Gregorian antiphon, something that has always been desirable and commendable, is suddenly a danger to the liturgy. From being an *objective* fact of *proper* (that is, official) music, the presence of Gregorian chant in the liturgy has come to be regulated by the most random subjectivity, or rather by the benevolence (or by the aversion) of the presiding celebrant, the liturgist, the priest, or the bishop. What surprises me is the ease, ecclesiastically speaking, with which such grave misunderstandings are generally accepted and indulged. It seems to me that, in the name of the so-called "spirit of the Council," the issue has simply been disregarded. All this has come from asking the wrong question. To ask the right questions – and, one might say, the necessary ones – concerning Gregorian chant and moreover liturgical music as a whole with all of its new prospects, one must first of all take a step back, reaffirming first and foremost that which in reality has always been taken for granted. In the current situation, to reaffirm the obvious would be a major novelty, but it is the first true step – even if it is distressing and embarrassing – towards recovering countless lost ground.

Well then, we must ask ourselves what this lost ground may be; where is the motive that makes Gregorian chant a true "precious pearl?" Beyond mortifying simplifications or various kinds of preconceptions, let us get right back to basics and ask ourselves this most simple and most challenging question: what is Gregorian chant? There are varying steps to answering this question, each of which gradually defines the path to understanding its true identity.

1. The simplest answer lies in what we have said so far: Gregorian chant is the *true music of the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church*. We should remember this at all times: the foremost characteristic of Gregorian chant is ecclesiastical in nature, and as such places this repertoire (let us call it that) in a class of judgement

which transcends the mere artistic dimension and points directly to the special *rapport* between the Church and the Word of God. The Church has established a unique relationship between Gregorian chant and the Word to the point where, in this relationship, one is able to identify the Church's own thoughts on the Word, its reflections, its interpretation, its exegesis. In other words the Church is telling us that, when we sing Gregorian chant, we are expressing precisely the Church's own thoughts on the text. It is telling us this first of all. Not *just* this, but this *first of all*. There is much more, of course, but for now we are assured that we "live and breathe" the Church's interpretation of the Scripture and are guided by it. This would suffice to define Gregorian chant as a true symbol of the Roman Catholic Church.

2. A second level of response is this: Gregorian chant is – here we will be expanding on what was said before – the *audible version of the interpretation of the Word*. The interpretation of the Word makes sounds, it takes shape as a musical event, it gives *sound to the Word*. We well understand how great a responsibility is now entrusted to sound, essentially conceived as a vehicle of the senses. And now the next step: the interpretation of the Word becomes sound, therefore the Church accepts the sound, "consecrating" it as an integral part of the liturgical event, and renders it a "vehicle of the senses," or rather something that is much more than simply an "embellishment" of a text. This is a crucial step. The text that is *sung* must coincide with the text that is *explained*; the explanation of the text rests in the precise composition of sound. Gregorian chant thus becomes the explanation of the Word according to the Church's wish, expressed in sound.
3. An even more comprehensive answer to our initial question would be the following: Gregorian chant is the *liturgical contextualisation of the audible*

interpretation of the Word. This means that the Word is not only interpreted and sung, but furthermore it is contextualised; the Word thus becomes a *liturgical event*, placing itself at the heart of the ecclesiastical experience. Take note: the Word is not merely put into the liturgy, *it becomes itself the liturgy*. The "song of the liturgy" is actually the "liturgy itself in song."
Let us pause for a moment to observe the course which we have briefly followed. We started from the Word, or rather from an order given by the Church; a gift or, if you will, a talent, a talent which must not be buried but must be used, traded, in order, to bear fruit, to develop, and finally, to be returned. This restitution is an audible event that communicates with the senses and that soars on high to become liturgy. The sound itself, the artistic component, is functional; it coincides with this exegetic design. In other words, Gregorian chant transmits the thoughts of the Church on the text and above all demonstrates not only how that same text is to be understood, but how it should be celebrated. The solemn pronouncement of the final *amen* essentially recognises the truth.

4. At this point it would be best to add another observation on our path to understanding, and in response to the initial question: the liturgical nature of Gregorian chant lies in its capacity for being structured in a *precise form and style*. There is no such thing as liturgy without shape; liturgy is the exact opposite of improvisation. The form is not mere appearance; on the contrary, the form reveals the substance, of which it is the sign, the proof, the guarantee. We may even go so far as to say that, in reality, there are no Gregorian chants, but rather *Gregorian forms* belonging to each individual chant. Each form reveals, even amidst the variety of melodic and rhythmic movements, a precise structural nature: even the shape itself – another significant step on our

journey – is intimately associated with the *significance of the liturgy*. So for example, if I am referring to an Introit (the processional hymn), I automatically define the moment, form, and style of that passage. In the present case, I would not only be defining the *music* which opens the Eucharistic celebration, I would also be implying that it involves an antiphonal reciting tone (form) in a *semiornato* style (composition style). An Introit is this, it is born as such, it has this form, this style, this mould: it cannot be any different, otherwise it is not an Introit. If I refer to Gradual, Offertory, Responsory, or any other Gregorian form, I am always identifying precise structures, not Gregorian compositions or chants. Allow me, if you will, a small personal digression about the current situation. I ask myself if it is legitimate and what purpose there can be in systematically disregarding this prerequisite, given to us by the ancient monody of liturgical tradition which for centuries has regulated the relationship between musical form and liturgical significance. I am considering, for example, the chants of *Ordinarium Missae*, the Order of the Mass, and in particular *Gloria* and *Credo* which, owing to widespread and inexorable fervour on the part of the congregation, have become something else entirely, that is, responsorial forms. In order to persuade the congregation to sing, with the illusion and grave misconception of promoting active participation, simple (and often banal) refrains are indiscriminately scattered in every part of the celebration; the depressing outcome of this habit is to produce dubious responsorial forms entirely alien to the nature of music in the liturgy, always envisaged differently by the Church.

To return to our reflections, so far we have been able to observe how the text must contain set elements in a prescribed order. This is the root of liturgical music. With Gregorian chant, the Church sets this requirement

in stone for all time; however, we must be aware that the Church itself does not say that *only* Gregorian chant can be sung, but that Gregorian chant will show us a *compulsory path to follow,* for all time. We must be aware that to ignore or to disregard in practice an underlying principle is to contradict *de facto* the Church's teaching on liturgical music.

5. As if that were not already enough, at this point we must – so to speak – play our trump card. This is because I am convinced that the most important point of all is yet to be made. The real strength of Gregorian chant, in reality, is to be found elsewhere: that is – as is also true of the Holy Scriptures – in the *broader view*. A Gregorian passage, even if it possesses all the characteristics of style and form mentioned so far, even if it has undergone the complex "reworking" that I have spoken about, will mean little if it is not also part of a greater, much grander project, one which embraces the entire liturgical year and feeds on relationships, allusions and cross-references: in a word, on *formulas*. I cannot sing Gregorian chant without being aware, and taking into consideration, that each piece is a living part of the whole repertoire, and without the relationship existing between the part and the whole, the intrinsic significance of the piece itself would be much diminished. Only in this play of relationships, cross-references and allusions, some more obscure than others, can I grasp, as much in the Great Code of Scripture as in the ancient liturgical-musical traditions, the sense of an episode, an affirmation, a musical fragment, be it more concise or more extended. Gregorian chant lives off these relationships: its cultural roots, which place it in the oral tradition, are revealed by the use of an extraordinary mnemonic technique. Gregorian chant really is the *chant of memory*. Here then we have another definition in response to our original question. The entire repertoire, the

> whole enormous project, so meticulously thought through and constructed, is committed to memory. This is not the place for an analysis of the historic evolution of Gregorian chant, but it is helpful to remember that the oldest written evidence – dating back to the tenth and eleventh centuries – suggests a limitless repertoire in which memory determines the relationships. Each Gregorian passage is a fragment of the whole, and this fragment becomes functional in the light of an overarching exegetic project. It seems to me that Gregorian chant can be understood in terms of the well-known Pauline image of the human body, in which none of the elements lives for itself alone, but all the elements together create a living whole.

We have leapt ahead a little and glimpsed some of the giddy heights of the formulation of a sacred text. We have looked down from a height, and we have seen that which I personally love to compare to a great cathedral. What can we say about a cathedral when we are standing in front of it? Naturally, it is fundamental to understand the material from which it is constructed, and the techniques employed in the construction, just as it is fundamental to understand the characteristics of the text in Gregorian chant, from its origins to its phonetic qualities, to the pronunciation, based on syllabic value, and so on. After all, what would a cathedral be if it were deprived of its overarching mission, of its symbolic and allusive value? The material, at first crude, then refined, ultimately becomes suitable for a form itself created from perfect proportions, and supported by the concept of *order*, which is also an indispensable pre-requisite in Gregorian chant. It is that order which creates the form and provides the key to the reading of a work. At a fundamental level, why not think of Creation itself which, as narrated in the Book of Genesis, appears to us as the result of an infinitely wise creation of order?

As I have said, Gregorian chant stands before us in the form of a great cathedral at the centre of our city: that is, liturgical music. That is how it is, *objectively* how it is. The difficulty and complexity of a new initiative in liturgical music cannot justify summary judgements, projects as rash as they are mediocre, which at their very root contradict the history of ecclesiastical culture; a culture which has always been nurtured by the best products of human thought. Gregorian chant has not yet been studied sufficiently in its salient role as "the voice of the Church". The Church itself, in claiming Gregorian chant as its own, assures us that not all of its possibilities have yet been exhausted, and that from this treasure, which we identify as being the echo of the Word of God, we are called to draw out "things both new and old". If we are patient and sincerely want to engage with Gregorian chant and understand it, it will teach us the heights that the *Lectio Divina* can reach with the Word. For Gregorian chant is the *musical form of the Church's Lectio Divina*. How else, indeed, could we define the "working" of the sacred text, as we have described it thus far, if not by comparing its phases to the different levels of the *Lectio Divina*, beginning with the *ruminatio* and arriving at such heady contemplative peaks? I wonder how different our everyday reflections on liturgical music would be if they began from a free and earnest comparison with Gregorian chant. Only a novice could think that sacred music is *exclusively* Gregorian chant. But failing to realise this, or taking Gregorian chant out of the picture altogether, is equivalent to removing a cathedral from its city and diocese. And more than that, it is equivalent to taking away the *requirement* for any reflection on initiatives in liturgical music to be a fruitful one. This is because with Gregorian chant, the Church has told us once and for all that the intimate nature of sacred music lies in the transformation of the Word of God into a liturgical event. Every other perspective, however legitimate, is secondary. It is an objective achieved with Gregorian chant and a testimony that stands there before us. Gregorian chant is all this, and

it has even been able to influence forms of popular music. The immense capital of so-called popular Gregorian chant is actually the mature fruit of a long, secular journey which has its roots in the intimate ecclesiastical nature of ancient liturgical monody. As the centuries go by, it becomes possible to replace Gregorian chant, but one can never replace the fundamental thought that has determined it. Gregorian chant is certainly the artistic product of its time, and may therefore be supplanted, but this does not mean eradicating the eternal imprint of the Church. As St. Augustine would say, when it comes to God's plan, "Change the design, but not the project." Any ecclesiastical reflection on liturgical music which fails to address seriously the question of Gregorian chant amounts to counterfeit money buying counterfeit goods.

Conclusion

But realistically, what can be done? What can be done by a parish, a cathedral, a small schola cantorum or a large choir? What are our possibilities, what are our resources, what are our strengths? We will all return to our communities, where thousands of real problems will be lying in wait for us to manage them, taking up any space we might have had available for possible new reflections. And then, even if we share these observations, how can we make them happen in an ecclesiastical context which is not, save on rare occasions, disposed to consider these kinds of liturgical-musical perspectives? One often gets the distinct impression that where ideology does not dominate, indifference reigns, which to some degree is even worse. What should we do when the outlook is so bleak? Where should we start? What kind of approach should we take?

Well, there is an approach which I think could be valid in any context, independent of possibilities or specific situations,

and it concerns *having confidence in dealing with Gregorian chant*. Having confidence in Gregorian chant firstly means trusting in the fact that the Church has looked upon this thing and seen that it is good. A good thing which, as such, is to our advantage, is for our good. The first step is to summon the will to confidently enter through a doorway which has objectively been made very narrow. Yes, Gregorian chant is difficult, and it does not convey emotion easily; it does not promise immediate results at low, low cost. It does not reveal itself at once, and will not confide in just anyone. To those who would like to get to know it, it suggests a deep and meaningful encounter: a "come and see" which we could paraphrase as a "study and understand". We cannot judge it outside of our current reality: we ourselves are already outside the Church's thinking. But let us not consider it unreachable: for those who want to know it, the means are there, we need only seek them out. Little by little, it will reveal itself, and provoke feelings that have nothing to do with that vague sense of spiritualism or mysticism or rarefied air too often improperly associated with Gregorian chant. It takes time and the results are slow to arrive, owing to an effort which, in the current culture of widespread "suspicion", is made doubly difficult. That said, why not accept this impossible challenge in the Church? Having confidence in Gregorian chant means wanting to keep it in first place, higher even than in our liturgy: in our hearts. It is the heart that the Church must recognise as a gift, as a grace, as *its treasure* and not as an obstacle. And the viewpoint must change, as much more is asked of the Church than of the cultural world. I can personally testify that Gregorian chant is highly regarded in conservatoires and musical circles: it is recognised as the musical language which gave rise to Western musical culture. Gregorian chant had no trouble "asserting itself" in the musical world, a sign that even from this exquisitely artistic point of view – which we have not even considered in this reflection – true chant from the Roman liturgy never experienced inferiority complexes

and knew instinctively how to command respect. But, I repeat – and this is precisely the real problem – much more is expected of the Church today. The Church cannot hide Gregorian chant, but neither can it appreciate Gregorian chant only for that which it has represented in the past: it is called on to love this form of music. To love it today means to rediscover its true motivations in order to maintain ownership of it. It means to wonder and joyfully give thanks for such authentic beauty, to recognise it once again as the ideal form of faith and to return it, because of this, to the centre of the holy liturgy, summit and source of a life lived in Christ.

I began this reflection citing an article of the Church's teaching which, fortunately, does not exist. I would like to conclude in the same way, but with an important difference. From an imaginary document which, although it captures a real situation, we would never want to have exist in reality, I would like to suggest another one which, by contrast, does not capture the current situation but is one that we would like to read. Here it is: "Every church, cathedral, basilica or shrine is required to establish a *schola gregoriana*, be it small in numbers, of male or female voices, capable of performing in Gregorian chant the required parts of at least the major festivals and celebrations of the liturgical year. The direction of the *schola gregoriana* should be entrusted only to a person who has been awarded a title specific to the field of Gregorian chant, *which the most recent studies have restored to its original integrity and purity.*

This last phrase is not mine, but copied from the *motu proprio* of Pius X (1903). More than a century later, we can talk about a new *ablatio* which, throughout the entire twentieth century, continued to give new integrity and new purity to Gregorian chant. The good thing about this is that the church finally realised what it had done. With Pius X's *motu proprio* a new path and a new time were set in stone. Now, for those occupying the highest levels of the Church, as well as for the

rest of us, it is time for action.

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