

SACRED MUSIC

Summer 2004
Volume 131, No. 2



Why Children Should Learn Chant By Arlene Oost-Zinner¹

As the director of a Latin Children's choir, I often sense ambivalence from parents about the project. They are happy to have their children leading parishes back to Catholic tradition, and many want their children to receive a music education that goes beyond the learning of popular tunes. This is all to the good. Their reticence, however, is due to something many of us might have felt at some point: fear of Latin.

Let's face it: none of us is fluent in Latin. Many Catholics, in fact, find it outmoded and intimidating. It is no longer a real part of their daily lives, despite their best intentions and pious inclinations. It inspires fear precisely because of its quiet and elusive power to summon the heavens, not to mention its ability to boost the standardized test scores of anyone who has dared enter into its grammatical abyss. Children's attitudes reflect those of their parents. The complete absence of chant in most parishes only complicates the problem.

Is Latin the only language appropriate for singing in our churches? Not so, says the General Instruction of the Roman Missal. The vernacular is acceptable. Chant and its stylistic descendent polyphony, however, are the only two forms of musical expression identified specifically as appropriate to the Roman Rite, and bishops are charged to see that their tradition is carried forth.

¹ Arlene Oost Zinner (avoz@earthlink.net) is the director of a Latin Children's choir, and the President of the St. Cecilia Schola Cantorum in Auburn, Alabama.

Happily, there is a new wave of children learning Latin in their home schooling classrooms. Compared to this lucky few, many adults may have the feeling that they are being left behind. This attitude must be shed, however, when it comes to singing the chant, and teaching it to our children. The emphasis here is not on the language as a discipline in itself, but on learning and embracing aspects of our tradition in a manner accessible only through the chant.

Much of our experience as Catholics, especially when going into a church, or participating in liturgy, is dependent on our senses. We touch holy water to remind us of our baptism, we see the red lamp over the tabernacle, reminding us that Christ is really present with us and we genuflect with our whole bodies; we kneel and bow our heads when we pray. These are all physical markers of who we are as Catholics, and they are aspects of the faith passed down to us over the centuries: part of our sacramental heritage, so to speak.

Parents need to understand that what we hear in a church, and how we respond to it, is much the same. We cannot separate chant from our heritage, nor should attempts be made to separate the language of our heritage from the music. These grew up together, the lines of music having evolved from the texts of Holy Scripture itself, in a manner consistent with what early Christians brought with them from their Jewish, Roman, and Greek traditions.

Children can learn much about the faith through their auditory sense. Just as they see various sights and symbols around the church that tell them exactly where they are, the sound of chant, which cannot be separated from Latin, points to the same.

Ask a child the following: On a spring day, what do you hear outside? Of course he will answer "birds!" Ask him if he speaks bird? Most likely he will laugh, and he may even try to convince you that he speaks warbler. The point is, the sounds of the birds tells him a lot of things: what continent he is on, what time of year it is, who he is in relation to these feathered little friends. The point, of course, is that he doesn't have to understand "birdspeak" in order to learn from it, and for it be meaningful to him.

Do you speak Russian, or French, you might ask? Of course not will be the answer, but you might go on to discuss how when we hear a person speaking in a foreign tongue, though not privy to the details of what he might be saying, we certainly understand his tone: the mood and intent of the sounds being produced.

With similar aim, we may ask: How many of us play the piano, and how many of us actually expect to become concert pianists at some point during our lifetime? How many of us studied math, or history, or took swimming lessons as children, and how many of us actually ended up being mathematicians, historians, or Olympic athletes.

Parents begin to understand, and so do the children. No learning is wasted. Singing the chant does not mean all of our children are going to have aspirations of being

professional schola directors, or cantors, or opera singers, for goodness sake. Learning the chant does not mean they are going to become poorly paid translators at the United Nations, or linguists writing grammars for nearly extinct languages on remote islands. Learning the chant, however, does tell us where we are, what liturgical season it is, what time of day it is, and most importantly, involves us in the liturgical drama being played out before us.

Singing the chant can become an integral part of a child's faith experience, an indispensable part of his learning who he is as a Catholic. He will recall lines of chant throughout his life, in good times and in bad. It will inform his character, and hopefully point him in the right direction should difficulty or temptation come his way.

Again, other forms of musical expression have come to be part of the tradition since Vatican II. No attempt is being made to deny the validity of their inclusion in worship within the appropriate context. But to deprive a child the opportunity of experiencing two thousand years of Catholic tradition in an auditory way, learning the chant, which is inseparable from Latin and the liturgy, is tantamount to asking him not to genuflect whole heartedly before the tabernacle, not to feel hope when watching rays of sun sparkle through a stained glass window, and not to feel humility when looking up at the image of Christ on the Cross.

It is up to parents to see that their children receive a Catholic education. As Catholics, it is up to all of us to see that the two thousand year old tradition is carried forth. Encourage parents to talk to their pastor and music director about getting a Latin choir started in their parish. Better yet, urge them to buy some CDs and a hymnal, or attend a workshop.² They need to start learning the chant themselves, and teach it to their children. The benefits are inestimable.

² Chant courses (Ward Method) are offered at Catholic University each summer, both for college credit and non-credit. Scholarship help is available. For more information email: summers@cua.edu