Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last week I discussed with Benjamin Phillips, our Organist and Choirmaster, the requirements for sacred music according to the church's teaching. Benjamin pointed out that it is not good enough to simply use secular music with "Christian words added." Sacred music is different. It needs to possess Sanctity, Intrinsic Beauty and Universality. So, I asked what types of music possess these qualities.

BP: St. Pope Pius X tells us that "these qualities are to be found, in the highest degree, in Gregorian Chant." This is because the aim of Gregorian Chant is to "add greater efficacy" to the Biblical texts (the antiphons) provided for us in the Roman Missal. One reason for this is because Gregorian Chant takes the words of the antiphon and shapes the melody to fit the rhythm and mood of the words, instead of fitting the words to an existing melody, like a hymn.

Fr. DL: Does that mean that we should immediately switch to singing Gregorian Chant and sing nothing else?

BP: Absolutely not! St. Pope Pius X also said that "Gregorian Chant has always been regarded as the supreme model for sacred music." He said the chant is the model, not the only option. That means that the more closely a musical composition approaches the Gregorian form, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes.

Fr. DL: What other types of music possess Sanctity, Intrinsic Beauty, and Universality, then?

BP: These qualities are also exemplified in a high degree by Classical Polyphony, the greatest examples of which are the works of G. P. da Palestrina. The word "polyphony" means "many sounds," that is, multiple independent melodies working together to produce a cohesive result. It is kind of like each voice part singing its own independent Gregorian chant. That is why Classical Polyphony is also set forward for high regard in addition to Gregorian Chant. It takes a very skilled composer to weave 4 to 8 independent voices together into a pleasing sound!

Fr. DL: We've discussed Gregorian Chant and Classical Polyphony. Those are types of music that the choir normally sings. Are there any types of music that the people in the pews are supposed to sing?

BP: Yes, the people are invited to join in the music of the Church by singing the Ordinary of the Mass and the Hymns. Why don't we discuss those types of music next week?

Fr DL: Sounds good!

Your Pastor,
Fr. Longenecker