

Sacrificium Laudis
Letter of Pope Paul VI
TO SUPERIORS GENERAL OF CLERICAL
RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES BOUND BY THE
OBLIGATION OF CHOIR DUTY.
ON LITURGY IN
CHOIR DUTY

The sacrifice of praise, the offering of lips proclaiming the Lord, psalmody and hymnody, whereby the hours, the days, and the year's cycle are rendered sacred with the glow of religious piety, the Eucharistic Sacrifice being as it were the brilliant astral center drawing all things unto itself, has ever been held in high esteem by your families so devoted to God. Justly it has been regarded that nothing should be preferred to so holy a work. What glory has thereby been given to the Creator of all things and what benefits have through it accrued to the Church, can readily be understood. By means of this particular and assiduous form of prayer down through the centuries you have afforded indisputable evidence of the importance that must needs be accorded divine worship in human society.

However, from certain letters received from among your midst and from some reports coming from other sources we have learned that in your houses and provinces—we are speaking of those only that belong to the Latin rite—variant practices have been introduced in your liturgical functions; some cling tenaciously to the Latin idiom; some are requesting that the vernacular tongue be employed in choral services; and still others, hither and thither, would want to abandon the chant, commonly known and characterized as Gregorian plainsong, in favor of hymns and melodies composed in the present day and age. Indeed supplications are not wanting that the Latin speech itself be abolished.

We must confess that requests such as these have startled us not a little and have also caused us some anguish of soul. Spontaneously the question arises whence has such an attitude of mind and the hitherto unknown aversion been produced and what are the causes of their diffusion?

You are aware and can harbor no doubt how much we love and esteem your religious communities. The remarkable piety that they have shown and the monuments of sincere religious cult and devotion, which they have reared and ennobled, often are to us a cause of admiration, and we deem it a pleasure to ourselves to accede to their wishes and enhance their happy status and condition, whenever an occasion is offered us to do so legitimately and fittingly.

But what we have said above about the present day state of affairs has come about after the Second Vatican Council has expressed its mind in such studied and solemn words (cf. Constitution on Sacred Liturgy, n. 101, 1), and in succeeding instructions clear and unmistakable norms had been laid down on this matter. In one of the instructions "*Ad exsecutionem Constitutionis de Sacra Liturgia recte ordinandam,*" issued on Sept. 26, 1964, it was decreed: Clerics are bound to retain the Latin language in the discharge of their divine office in choir (no. 85); and the other, which is entitled "*De lingua in celebrandis Officio divino et Missa 'conventuali' aut 'communitatis' apud Religiosos adhibenda*" and was published on Nov. 23, 1965, that same injunction was confirmed, while at the same time due regard was had for the spiritual welfare of the faithful and of the prevailing circumstances and conditions that affect the spread of faith in missionary regions. Until therefore it has been legitimately ordained and established otherwise, these laws remain in force and exact obedience, which above all it behooves Religious members, the dearest children of Mother Church, to show and commend by their example.

But we are here dealing with the question not merely of retaining the Latin language, which, far from being neglected, is in itself assuredly worthy of being guarded with alacrity, inasmuch as, in the Latin Church, it is a most fertile mainspring of Christian human culture as well as a truly bounteous treasury of piety; but also of maintaining unblemished the propriety, the beauty, and the native

vigor of its prayers and hymns: it is a question of a choral office expressed in an idiom of melodious resonance in the Church (S. Aug., *Conf.* 9, 6; P.L. 32, 769), which your founders, great masters and saints in heaven, the lights of your families, have bequeathed to us. We must not suffer the loss of institutions that have been built up by your forefathers and served as an ornament to you for long centuries. The peculiar character of your choral office has been really one of the chief causes why your communities themselves stood up so firmly and waxed strong in their joyous increase. Are we then not to marvel, when, owing to a suddenly risen squall of emotion, some would seem to think that its form and use should now be doomed to extinction?

At this juncture what idiom, what chant, can take the place of the formulas of Catholic piety, what you have used until now? Were this glorious heritage to be cast aside, should we not be apprehensive that a worse condition may ensue? There are reasons to fear that the choral office may be reduced to an unseasoned, impromptu form and manner of recitation in which you yourselves may be the first to feel and experience the lack of substance and good taste. The question may also be asked whether people, who are eager to participate in your sacred prayers, will continue to flock to your temples in such numbers, if their old and native language, coupled with chant replete with such gravity and grandeur, will no longer be heard resounding there.

We beg all concerned, therefore, to think over and ponder well, what they would want to give up and not permit the sources to cease flowing and dry up whence they have drawn so copiously in the past.

Undoubtedly the Latin language may create some, and perhaps not slender, difficulty to the recruits to your sacred militia. This, however, must not be regarded to be of such a nature that it could not be conquered and overcome, particularly in your case, since you, living in a milieu more secluded from the concerns and bustle of the world, can devote yourselves more fully to the study of letters. For the rest, these prayers, endowed with noble majesty and singular merits of venerable antiquity, will continue to attract to you youths, who are called to share the Lord's portion in life; on the contrary, a choir, shorn of a speech than transcends all

national limits and pulsates with a life of admirable spiritual vigor, and of the melodies that spring from the innermost sanctuary of the soul, where throbs the life and faith and charity toward fellowmen is aflame with ardor, we mean to say Gregorian chant, is likened to an extinguished candle, which no longer sheds its light nor draws the eyes and minds of men toward its flickering flames.

However the case may be, dearly beloved sons, the requests, referred to in the foregoing words, involve matters so grave in import, that we cannot at the present time grant them by derogating the norms of the Council and the aforementioned instructions. We therefore earnestly exhort you to think and weigh well this complicated question in all its forms and facets. In accord with the good will, with which we embrace you, and the high esteem, which we cherish toward you, we do not wish to permit this cause to meet with a fate that might reflect no slight detriment upon you and would be certain to bring a feeling of distemper and sorrow to the whole Church of God. Allow us, then, to defend your own cause, even against your wishes. From that very same Church, that has, for pastoral reasons for the good of the people ignorant of Latin, introduced the vernacular into the Sacred Liturgy, you have also the mandate to preserve the dignity, beauty and gravity of your choral duty, handed down to you, both as to language and chant.

Therefore submit in obedience with a sincere and tranquil mind to these ordinances, which not an immoderate love for practices of a venerable antiquity has suggested, but paternal charity toward you proposes and a truly solicitous care for divine worship has prompted.

Finally, as a pledge of heavenly favors and an expression of our paternal sentiments toward you and all those under your charge, we most gladly impart to you the apostolic blessing in the Lord.

Given at Rome, near St. Peter's, the 15th day of August, on the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the year 1966, the fourth of our pontificate.

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UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE
1312 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D. C. 20005