Liturgical music – Sacred or secular?[1]

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In preparing this presentation, I thought long and hard about how to translate the French word "profane" into English. In English, rather than talking about "sacred or profane" music, we would say *sacred or secular, sacred* meaning "considered particularly suitable for a deity" while *secular* means "concerning exclusively or essentially the affairs of this life, in particular the pursuit of wealth or pleasure". In this particular context, I would prefer to use the word *secular* in English, which is equivalent to *worldly* – relating to the affairs of this world – because normally, in English, *profane* is more equivalent to "blasphemous", which is perhaps too strong. Nevertheless, I am keeping this latter meaning in reserve, as we shall see that it may well fit with what we want to say[2] .

Let us first examine some of the vernacular texts that have invaded our liturgies for about a century, and even more so in recent years. I think you will all agree that the vast majority of charismatic or "Pentecostal" hymns – such as *My Mother's Prayer* or *Jesus and I talk them* o'er – are more suited to private devotions than to the liturgy, which is, by definition, a public prayer. It seems difficult to classify as "liturgy" phrases such as: "The surf of the sea, the blows of the storm change the shape of the shore," or "The vultures will sing, the jackals will praise God" – two examples taken from *New Hymns for the* Lectionary. Are these songs really intended to replace the Tract, the Gradual or the Alleluia? As for "It only takes a spark to start a fire," "On the road of life, I run with Jesus," or "With one kick, Jesus, get me into the goals of life," such songs are undoubtedly suitable for a campfire vigil but hardly for the sanctuary. And there are others that are so unspeakably and deliberately vulgar that I prefer to refrain from quoting them. I am thinking in particular of one of them which, with its ambiguous expressions, is so scandalous that it can certainly be described as blasphemous.

I prefer to evoke things that are truly sacred and try to discover what makes them so. So I am going to talk, as you have no doubt all guessed, about our common Christian heritage: plainchant, which takes us back to our true roots. In the *Creed*, we recite: "He rose again on the third day *according to the Scriptures*."

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[1] Proceedings VIII. Versailles. 8 to 10 November 2002.

[2] English definitions are taken from the *Oxford Concise Dictionary*.

Allow me to remind you of a short passage from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 8, verse 26. It is the story of Philip and the eunuch.

The Angel of the Lord spoke to Philip and said, "Go and set out at noon on the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza; it is deserted." So he set out and went there. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a high official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home in his chariot, reading the prophet Isaiah. The Spirit said to Philip, "Go and join this chariot." ' Philip ran up and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked him, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' 'How can I,' he replied, 'unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The passage of Scripture he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter; like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation, justice was denied him. Who can tell of his descendants? For his life is taken from the earth."

The eunuch said to Philip, "I beg you, who is the prophet talking about? Himself or someone else?" Philip then spoke up and, starting from this passage of Scripture, told him the Good News about Jesus.

(36) As they travelled along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Here is water. What prevents me from being baptised?"

Here, the Douai version and *the Authorised Version* add a verse:

(37) And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may be baptised." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

(38) And he commanded the chariot to stand still. And they both went down into the water, Philip with the eunuch, and he baptised him.

(39) But when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord took Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more. And he went on his way rejoicing.

What exactly is happening in this story? An intelligent, cultured, competent and, no doubt, extremely wealthy man reads aloud, with some surprise, the book of the prophet Isaiah. The apostle Philip approaches, climbs up to sit beside him in the chariot and, taking Isaiah's prophecy about the Suffering Servant as his starting point, sets out to open the Ethiopian's eyes to the mystery of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour, and to the necessity of baptism. Here we have all the elements of a spontaneous liturgical drama: the encounter, the dialogue with questions and answers, and the

divine revelation. Yet what unfolds before our eyes is the teaching Church at work in the early days of its mission: starting from a passage in the Old Testament, Philip, the teacher, explains that the prophecy has now been fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

In the early Church, this teaching about the person of Jesus, firmly grounded in the Scriptures and especially in the prophecies of the Old Testament, was the responsibility of the Apostles and Evangelists. Other members of the Christian community also participated in this teaching, but their role was different. Specifically, in Christian liturgy—which had its roots in Judaism and had surpassed it—certain men were responsible for reading or singing passages from the books of the Old Testament aloud: this task officially fell to readers or cantors, these two functions being almost identical in origin. However, these roles gradually became separate: the *reader* simply chanted in a recitative tone, with variations in accent for intonation, punctuation and cadence. The *cantor*, on the other hand, magnified the sacred text, 'clothing' it, so to speak, with truth and beauty, using all the means of his art to bring out the meaning of the text and its Christological implications. His role was therefore of inestimable importance because, thanks to his musical art, he was able to communicate not only the truth itself but also the luminous quality of religious truth. The liturgical music that Saint Augustine heard in Milan in the 4th century was one of the factors that led him to convert. He exclaimed: "And what tears your hymns and canticles brought me! The sweet-sounding voices of your Church made me vibrate with excitement. Those voices flowed into my ears, and the truth distilled itself in my heart."

One of the things that has always struck me about our Western liturgy is the predominance of texts from the Old Testament, but also the remarkable care with which they have been selected: whoever chose them – perhaps some of the very first cantors who set them to music – seems to have had an extraordinary sense of what was appropriate for each of the feasts. How did they know which text, which prophecy exactly to choose, and what emphasis to give to particular ideas or words? In my opinion, there must have been a kind of common fund of well-known passages, such as the one the Ethiopian was reading. Most of them must have been known to everyone: they had learned them during their catechesis as neophytes and during their instruction as catechumens. This would explain the extraordinary insight of those who composed this music into the ultimate fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. No doubt they had received excellent catechesis and training.

In fact, we find traces of this instruction and training in the liturgy. In particular, we note that in the *Graduale Romanum*, the texts of the communion hymns sung during Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday, were inspired by the Psalms taken in their numerical order. Even today, despite all the changes, we can still find traces of the original series, beginning with Psalm I on Ash Wednesday. It is true that in those days it was necessary to learn the psalter by heart! And we know that the texts of a great many hymns are inspired by the Psalms.

I was thinking about these questions when I came across a book by C. H. Dodd, former professor of theology at Cambridge and honorary fellow of *Jesus College*. Entitled *According to the Scriptures,* this slim volume brings together lectures given at Princeton Theological Seminary (New Jersey) more than half a century ago, in 1950. As far as I know, it is unlikely that Dodd, who was not a Catholic, had an in-depth knowledge of traditional Western liturgy, let alone the rich repertoire of Gregorian chant. However, I recently discovered that he owned a *Graduale Romanum* and was accustomed to consulting it during Holy Week. His speciality was studying Old Testament quotations found in the New Testament. He had put forward the hypothesis that, in apostolic times, there was indeed a common fund of texts that provided quotations for the early Christian authors, proving that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah, that he was the Son of God, and that his mission on earth was the salvation of humanity. In an attempt to discover these common quotations, PrDodd searched the New Testament for passages from the Old Testament that were quoted at least once, twice or three times by one or more New Testament authors. In his third chapter, he gives a list of fifteen such passages, which he calls *testimonies*; in each case, he gives all the necessary references, the context in which these quotations were used, and the Christian interpretation given to them by the authors. I wondered whether any of these passages could be found in some of the ancient liturgical chants. Could the cantors and apostles have drawn from the same common source?

I was surprised and delighted to discover that the very first of these *testimonies* was a text we know very well, which is used on one of the most important feasts of the Temporal: the Nativity of Our Lord. It is a verse from a Psalm that is quoted in Acts 13:33 and twice in the Epistle to the Hebrews: 1:5 and 5:5; the Acts of the Apostles explicitly states: "Thus it is written in the Psalms. " This verse (Ps 2:7) says: "You are my son, today I have begotten you. " PrDodd points out that the Epistle to the Hebrews specifies, with regard to these quotations, that these words were "spoken" or "uttered" by God, as indeed the psalmist himself specifies: *Dominus dixit ad me.* Western Christianity has quoted this passage since ancient times. As we know, it is the text of the Introit of

Midnight Mass – a noble and solemn h al chant that mysteriously bursts into our ears from the depths of winter and the darkness of night. This text does not apply directly to the child born of Mary in Bethlehem, but rather to the eternal generation of the Word in the bosom of the Father. It is God the Son who speaks, and in the words put into his mouth, he reports the words of his divine Father: *Dominus dixit ad me: "Filius meus es tu, ego hodie genui* te" – The Lord said to me: "You are my Son, today I have begotten you." Better still, the oldest musical notation of this Introit reinforces this affirmation by emphasising the pronouns and the possessive adjective: "You are my Son – *Filius* meus – Today I – ego – have begotten you." The signs used indicate that these words should be slowed down and emphasised.

This mysterious dialogue continues throughout the Mass. In the Gradual, there is a quotation from another Psalm that continues this dialogue in a very appropriate manner. This time, it is the Father who speaks, and the primitive notation shows that each word is emphasised: *In splendoribus sanctorum, ex utero ante luciferum genui te* – "In the splendour of the saints, before the dawn, I begot you from my womb" (Ps 109:3). The Alleluia repeats the same text as the Introit: "The Lord said to me, 'You are my Son...'" The Offertory chant is a call to rejoice at the coming of the Saviour: *Lætentur cæli, et exsultet terra* (Ps 95:11-13). Then, at the end of Mass, the Communion chant takes up the earlier quotation, which responds both to the Introit and to the Alleluia, and it is the Father himself who utters these words: *In splendoribus sanctorum, ex utero ante luciferum genui te.* It is a song of joy: we have moved from mode II minor to mode VI major, but the minor third, so characteristic of the melody of the Introit, and even of the Gradual, remains predominant. The text of this communion chant is not found in the *testimonies* of PrDodd, but what an inspired stroke of genius on the part of the unknown composer to have used it to prolong the divine dialogue in this way until the end of the Midnight Mass liturgy!

Given the necessary brevity of this presentation, I do not intend to systematically review all of Fr.Dodd's *accounts*, but I would like to mention two or three more because of their particular importance and because they provided the texts for some of the most beautiful chants. The second *testimony* of Fr.Dodd is another fairly long quotation from a Psalm: "What is man that you remember him, the son of man that you visit him? You have made him a little lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honour, so that he might rule over the works of your hands; you have put everything under his feet" (Ps 8:5-7).

To be precise, the last part of this quotation reads in Latin: *Gloria et honore coronasti eum, et constituisti eum super opera manuum tuarum.* I thought I knew this passage well: I must have recited it hundreds of times. After a quick check, I found that it did indeed appear frequently in the liturgy ( ) in the form of verses and responses, short and long responses, Introits, Graduals and Alleluia verses – seven times – and no less than fourteen times in the form of an Offertory chant. However, what was curious was that these chants did not appear in the feasts of Our Lord – except in the feast of the Transfiguration, much later – but, in most cases, in the feasts of martyrs and, sometimes, in the vigils of saints, for example that of St John the Baptist and certain apostles and evangelists. I then thought it necessary to see what PrDodd had to say about the use of this text by the early Christian authors. First, he shows how, in 1 Cor 15:27, Paul affirms that "even death will be subject to Christ because *all things* are, by divine decree, subject to the 'Son of Man' "; thus, PrDodd suggests that this particular verse from Psalm VIII does indeed refer to Christ. He then demonstrates that, for Paul, "Christ's triumph over death" was the guarantee of glory for all humanity: "The promise made in Psalm VIII, that man, in the person of the 'Son of Man' – or, in Paul's words, 'the Man from heaven' – will be crowned with glory and honour, has been fulfilled in Christ and will be fulfilled for all those who are 'in him'."

But then, who better than the apostles and martyrs can be said to have been 'in him', 'in Christ', united with him in their sufferings and in their death, and therefore worthy of being crowned with glory with him? But also, what a wonderful prospect, in the long run, for every Christian! I would like to share with you an example of how this text is used in an Offertory hymn that contains the beginning of this *testimony* by Fr.Dodd: "What is man – *Quid est homo*", and which, in the music, emphasises the words: *homo, hominis, eius, eum* – "What is man, that thou art mindful of him, the son of man, that thou wilt visit him?" These words are the climax of this song, listen to them carefully. The highest note is on the word *homo*.

There are two things in this whole study that I find particularly important and obvious. First, as we have seen, the cantors who composed these liturgical chants chose traditional and generally accepted prophetic scriptural texts; second, they set these texts to music in such a way as to highlight the way in which they were interpreted by the Church. For example, in the Christmas Eve liturgy, the communion chant emphasises the motif of this "visitation" from Above, the coming of Christ. The text of this chant, taken from the last part of another *testimony* by PrDodd, is taken from Isaiah 40:3-5:

"A voice cries out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths; every ravine shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God – *Revelabitur gloria Domini: et videbit omnis caro salutare Dei nostri*'."

The melody begins quite soberly in the lower part of the modal register. Then, suddenly, at the word *salutare,* it soars. This text is quoted in its entirety in Luke 3:4-6 and only in part by the other three evangelists.

At Easter, we celebrate the fulfilment of this salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ. After the examples we have already seen, it is not surprising to find abundant scriptural quotations in the liturgies of the entire Easter season, and in particular on Easter Day and during the Easter octave. *Hæc dies...* –"This is the day!"– the Day of days, the day when the Lord rose from the dead: "This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." Once again, this is a quotation – here from Psalm 117:24. In Western liturgy, this vibrant expression, *Hæc dies*, is found as a leitmotif, on Easter Sunday, of course, but also at every hour of every day of the entire octave that follows. There had to be a connection with one of P[r]Dodd's *testimonies*, and indeed, we are not disappointed. While verse 24 of this psalm serves as a kind of refrain, as in responsorial psalmody, the liturgy quotes many verses from this psalm, if not all of them, because they are interpreted as celebrating Christ's victory over sin and death.

Even before Easter, during Holy Week, we get a foretaste of the Resurrection in the Offertory: *Dextera Domini...*, words that echo verses 16 and 17 of the same Psalm: "The right hand of Yahweh is exalted, the right hand of Yahweh has done valiantly! No, I shall not die, I shall live, and I shall proclaim the works of Yahweh." Traditionally, these two verses are sung on Holy Thursday and, as we enter into the mystery of the Passion, they contain a message of hope. Then, the first Easter Alleluia, sung during the Easter Vigil, takes up the first verse of this Psalm: *Confitemini Domino, quoniam bonus: quoniam in sæculum misericordia eius* - "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his love endures forever."

On Easter Sunday, the text of the Gradual is the famous: *Hæc est dies...,* followed by verse 1. On Easter Monday, this same Gradual is followed by verse 2: "Let the house of Israel say: his love is eternal! " On Easter Tuesday, *Hæc est dies...* is followed by a verse from another psalm (Ps

106:2), which addresses directly the neophytes, the newly baptised: "Let the redeemed of Yahweh say so... " On Wednesday, verse 16 reappears: "The right hand of Yahweh..."; finally, on Thursday, we find another of PrDodd's well-known *testimonies*, verses 22 and 23: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes" – *Lapidem quem reprobaverunt ædificantes, hic factus est in caput anguli: a Domino factum est, et est mirabile in oculis nostris.*

The Graduals are, in fact, "psalmic" chants whose meticulous composition is based on a number of recognisable melodic formulas. That said, their chanting allows for a certain amount of latitude, and experienced cantors knew how to choose the words they wanted to emphasise and embellish. Here, the important words are *hic factus est caput anguli.* PrDodd cites three New Testament authors who use this verse. First, Mark (12:10-11) puts it in the mouth of Jesus himself: "Have you not read this Scripture?" he asks after telling his listeners the parable of the vineyard owner whose son was murdered by wicked labourers. "The stone which the builders rejected..." – and he quotes the two verses.

For his part, after calling on Christians to turn to Christ: "Come to him, the living stone..." Peter (1 Peter 2:7) quotes verse 22 among other scriptural references to the theme of the stone. Imagine what this image of the living stone must have meant to Peter, whom Jesus himself had called "Kephas – the rock"!

Finally, Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, is very explicit in his interpretation of this verse, which for him clearly prophesies the death and resurrection of Jesus. He quotes Peter's speech to the Jewish leaders, elders and scribes of Jerusalem after he was arrested for healing a man lame from birth:

> "Let all of you, and all the people of Israel, know this: it is by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. This is *the stone that* you *builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.* For there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:10-12)

At the beginning of this presentation, I read to you the passage from the Acts of the Apostles that ended with the conversion and baptism of the devout Ethiopian and his declaration of faith: "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. We began with baptism, and I think it is good to return

to it, especially now that we have mentioned the Easter liturgy: in the early Church, it was at Easter that catechumens received the sacrament of baptism.

In the book of the prophet Ezekiel, we find a remarkably detailed description of the Temple to come. Towards the end, the prophet observes the life-giving waters flowing from the right side of the Temple, flowing eastward, down to the sea: "Wherever the torrent flows, every living creature that swarms will live. The fish will be very abundant, for wherever this water flows, it purifies, and life develops wherever the stream flows." (Ezekiel 47:9)

The Easter liturgy has taken two verses from this chapter of Ezekiel and, in a burst of inspiration, applied them to Our Lord himself. Adapted from Ezekiel 47:1, 8-9, this text says: "I saw water flowing from the right side of the Temple, Alleluia! And all those whom this water reached were saved, and they will sing: Alleluia, Alleluia!"

The Temple represents the risen Saviour, bearing the marks of his Passion, and the water flowing from the right side of the Temple symbolises the blood and water flowing from the side pierced by the lance. Here we have, mysteriously represented, the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross and on the altar, together with the sacrament of baptism. We see the life-giving waters of baptism flowing from the side of the Lord to the catechumens. I invite you to listen to this wonderful hymn, which most of you must know well. In its simplicity, it sums up everything we have discovered about the early Church's conception of the sacred, which is deeply rooted in Scripture. It highlights the wonderfully eloquent way in which this fullness of conception is both enclosed in its sacred sacramental liturgy and expressed by it. Towards the middle of the second sentence, this hymn reaches its climax with the words: *Salvi facti sunt...: Vidi aquam egredientem de templo, a latere dextro, Alleluia: et omnes, ad quos pervenit aqua ista, salvi facti sunt, et dicent, Alleluia, Alleluia!*

You can no doubt see that these chants, gleaned from the living liturgy, belong to a completely different category from the *secular* songs*,* campfire songs, and futile ephemera that are offered to us Sunday after Sunday in place of music that is authentically *sacred,* music that clothes the prophetic words of Holy Scripture in beauty, authentic *liturgical* music that teaches, uplifts the soul, is luminous, or, to use an expression of Abbé Hugues de Pluscarden, is "an icon of the Ascension".