Gregorian chant: sign and witness of faith in its relationship with the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar

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Introduction

When we greet each other, we shake hands. This gesture has no material purpose; it is a material sign that has an immaterial meaning. Since human beings are composed of a body and a soul, made of matter and spirit, our life in society is always determined by two types of forms: some serve to preserve our physical existence, while others are simply bearers of signs for immaterial values and concepts, through which our consciousness is expressed and which make communication on an intellectual level possible. Just as the human soul can only be known through its physicality, spiritual and intellectual values can only be transmitted through concrete, tangible, material signs.

The forms in the first category, which serve to preserve physical life, could be described as 'functional', while those in the second category, which convey signs for immaterial values, the *signa sensibilia*, could be called 'meaningful'.[2]

Human beings are a unity of body and soul: therefore, unlike the world of purely natural forms, functional forms are recognisable as human forms insofar as they possess, to a certain degree, a capacity for intellectual expression – this includes everything related to basic needs: eating, drinking, clothing and shelter. Signifying forms, on the other hand, can only convey immaterial values if they are stripped of their original functionality. Once it is no longer used for its normal purpose, an expressive functional form can be elevated to the rank of a signifying form. There is a difference between genuflecting as a sign of reverence and bending the knee to pick up a handkerchief. Similarly, one does not fasten one's jacket with a ceremonial brooch.

Functional forms must necessarily possess other properties as well. These forms are the result of centuries-old traditions and cannot therefore be adopted overnight.

A highly developed society has many meaningful forms, often complex ones. If it wants to maintain its cultural level, it must take great care in educating children to teach them how to

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[1] Lecture given at the 2nd C.I.E.L. colloquium, October 1996.

[2] Dom Hans van der Laan, o.s.b.: *Het vormenspel der liturgie*, Leiden 1985.

manipulate these forms and, above all, to grasp their immaterial meaning, which will be all the easier if the visible form used is of high quality. Another remarkable feature of meaningful forms is that they not only enable intellectual or spiritual goods to be transmitted to others, but also help those who use them in practice to deepen their awareness of their non-material purpose. Finally, a rudiment of the original functional form may be sufficient to be a sign in itself: a simple handshake instead of an embrace, an obelisk instead of a complete house. The *sine qua non* condition is that the original functionality must have disappeared. When we make a toast, we raise our glass and merely wet our lips; we do not quench our thirst.

1. Liturgy

In liturgy, only meaningful forms are used. These are not the meaningful forms known to society and used for communication between people; they are material forms – in a sense, supra-meaningful – which carry signs for the communication of the human spirit with the absolutely immaterial Being, with the Spirit that is in all times and outside of time, with God, whom we honour in the liturgy.[3]

Liturgical forms differ from social forms in that they encompass the multiplicity and totality of social forms, whether functional – with all that the human intellect can express – or meaningful. A church is truly a house where one can feel safe. However, one takes refuge there not out of physical necessity, but as a sign that one is admitted into the heavenly hierarchy. Similarly, liturgical food is real food and drink, liturgical vestments are real clothing, and Gregorian chant is real music.

Furthermore, the properties of liturgical forms must correspond in every respect to those of socially meaningful forms. However, these forms can only serve the liturgy to the extent that their normal use in society is excluded. When a church is used for secular gatherings, the reverence due to the house of God disappears.

Liturgical forms are also linked to tradition. The liturgy exists, and it can be celebrated. It is not on Saturday evening that the liturgy can be organised and finalised. Saint Benedict said: "*Sic stemus ad psallendum ut mens nostra concordet voce nostrae* – Let us be present at the psalmody in such a way that our inner being is in harmony with our voice".[4] The complexity of our society and

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[3] J. Boogarts: *Introduction to Gregorian Chant and Liturgy*, Bussum 1985/1994,2, p. 66 ff.

[4] Saint Benedict of Nursia: *Regula Benedicti*, Caput XIX: "De Disciplina psallendi" - Translation: Mother Elizabeth de Solms, Desclée De Brouwer, 1965.

the long tradition of our Christian culture, built on Jewish, Greek and Roman foundations, means that, by definition, our world of liturgical forms is complex. If we want to preserve the richness of our liturgy, it is essential to provide solid instruction to those involved as well as to the entire community. This instruction must not be merely formal and limited to explaining the signs, as was generally practised in the past; it must be an introduction to the spiritual meaning that the sign – the form – expresses and realises. It is often the case that many priests have been inadequately trained and are unfamiliar with Tradition. Worse still, they do not understand the principles of the liturgy. All too often, the faithful are forced to endure verbal interventions during the liturgy such as: "Now let us rise for the Gospel"; "Let us open the book at page..."; and, for the sign of peace: "Give each other a hand as a sign of peace and reconciliation." This gesture is, moreover, a social form that has no liturgical significance. Indications and instructions of this kind should not be given during the liturgy.

Still in this area, the training of choir directors and organists leaves much to be desired. The standard of melodies and texts, as well as their performance, has declined considerably. They could not even be performed as they are in a concert hall. In religious celebrations, where the quality of the material forms should be optimal, it seems that today a great deal is tolerated. A false and restricted interpretation of the principle of *participatio activa* has meant that singing and polyphony have been banned in many parishes.[5] The monument that is the *Thesaurus musicae sacrae* is not only a remarkable art form; above all, it is a testimony to our faith. Here again, it can be said that the performance of truly beautiful *sacred music* encourages reflection in both those who perform it and those who hear it; it deepens our awareness of our faith and helps us understand the necessity – but also the privilege – of giving God all the honour that is due to him.

2. Gregorian chant

Liturgical texts must be distinguished from the usual use of language in society. To achieve this, one can simply resort to Latin or, less simply, use a particular liturgical form of the mother tongue.[6] In the Roman Catholic tradition, liturgical texts are also characterised by a particular element of expressive form: music. Christian liturgy has always been accompanied by singing.

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[5] Cf. Boogarts: "Les Formes de pièces polyphoniques des propres au début de la polyphonie et d'aujourd'hui" (The Forms of Polyphonic Pieces from the Beginnings of Polyphony to the Present Day), in: *Musica sacrae ministerium*, journal of the Consociatio internationalis musicae sacrae, Anno XXIX-XXX, nos. 1 & 2, Rome 1995, p. 58.

[6] Chr. Moorman: *Liturgical Latin*, Washington 1957.

Until recently, readings were sung (*Cantus Ecclesia orans*). Gregorian chant is a form of music that arose from the expressive shaping of texts.

There is much more to be said about the expressive power of Gregorian chant in general. In any case, one characteristic should be noted: its natural, free rhythm. Although this rhythm is undoubtedly based on mathematical forms, often metrical, it always remains analogous to the rhythm of living nature. This is one of the essential characteristics of Gregorian chant.[7] The tradition is ancient. Its origins date back even further than the birth of Western European culture. As long as it is removed from ordinary use in society, this form of music is eminently suited to liturgical chant.

In its early days and until the ninth century, this chant was not fixed in writing. It matured within the framework of an oral, auditory tradition. This allowed for small modifications to be made in practice, which ultimately gave it a polished and refined form, unique in Western civilisation. This perfection allows Gregorian chant to express the great unspeakable mysteries: music expresses what words cannot say. In one of his *Enarrationes*, St Augustine says: "The song of exaltation is a song that shows that the heart expresses something that words cannot say. To whom is this song more fitting than to the inexpressible God? He is certainly inexpressible, since he cannot be grasped in words. *Si eum fari non potes et tacere non debes, quid restat nisi ut jubiles?* – If you cannot express it in words, and if you must not remain silent, what remains for you but to exult? – and let the heart rejoice in silent joy, and let the great superhuman joy not be held back by the limits imposed by syllables? Express all this before him with songs of jubilation!"[8]

In Gregorian chant, joy is not only expressed in the melodies of *Alleluia*. Many pieces use only a limited number of notes or contain rich melismas. But, apart from that, one feels a direct connection with the centuries-old song of praise of the Catholic Church, even in the simple chants, antiphons and psalms; one feels welcomed into the community of the faithful and the saints who have gone before us in the celebration of the Eucharist, the mystery of our faith. Unlike the hymns that can be heard in some Protestant churches, "the proper chant of the Catholic Church is Gregorian chant – *Cantus proprius sanctae romanae Ecclesiae*."

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[7] See: J. Boogarts: "Saecularisatie in Europa. Van ritme naar metrum" (Secularisation in Europe. From rhythm to metre), in: H.P.M. Litjens and G.M Steinstulte: *Divini cultus splendor - Liber festivus in honorem Joseph Leenardds*, Rome 1980, p. 107 ff.

[8] St Augustine: *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 32, II, S. 1,8

3. Gregorian chant and the Holy Eucharist

Many pieces of Gregorian chant express the real presence of Christ under the species of bread and wine. The best known are the chants of Corpus Christi, although they do not belong to the original repertoire: they are essentially adaptations, new texts set to old melodies or parts of melodies. Most of them were written by St Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274).

The feast of the Eucharist was first celebrated in 1246 in the diocese of Liège. Following a vision of Saint Juliana of Cornillon (1193-1258), an Augustinian nun, Bishop Robert of Thourotte instituted it in response to heresies, in reparation for the neglect of Eucharistic adoration and in memory of its institution at the Last Supper. In 1264, Pope Urban IV prescribed this feast for the entire Latin Church, and Pope John XXII confirmed it in 1317.[9]

This feast is celebrated on a Thursday, in remembrance of Holy Thursday. It is a feast of thanksgiving that immediately follows the most important season of the liturgical year: Eastertide. Many of these texts and melodies have enjoyed great popularity, as they have been used regularly over the centuries and have come to occupy a permanent place in the offices and hours of Eucharistic prayer. These are paraliturgical celebrations centred on the Blessed Sacrament exposed in the monstrance. Many of you still have vivid memories of these texts and melodies: the *Magnificat* antiphon from First Vespers: *O quam suavis est*; the *Benedictus* antiphon from Lauds: *Ego sum panis vivus*; *the Magnificat* antiphon from Second Vespers: *O sacrum convivium*; and also some parts of the hymns and the sequence *O salutaris hostia*, taken from the Lauds hymn: *Verbum supernum*; the *Ecce panis angelorum*, taken from the sequence of the Mass *Lauda Sion*; the *Tantum ergo* taken from the procession hymn *Pange lingua*, which is also the hymn for Second Vespers. It is a text by St Thomas that refers us to an older hymn by Venantius Fortunatus (6thcentury): *Pange lingua gloriosi lauream certaminis*. And then there is *Panis angelicus*, the last two stanzas of the processional hymn and also of *the Sacris sollemniis* of Matins. Many composers have written polyphonic music for these texts, thus contributing to a deeper awareness of the Blessed Sacrament. Suffice it to mention, by way of example, the *Ego sum panis vivus* by Giovanni Pierluigi Palestrina (1525-1594), the superb and restrained *Tantum ergo* in A flat major by Anton Bruckner (1824-1896), and the almost heavenly motet *O sacrum convivium* by Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992).

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[9] Cf. L. Brinkhof, o.f.m.; in particular: *Liturgisch Woordenboek*, Roermond 1965-1968, pp. 1195 and 2494.

Before 1965, in most parish churches, prayers were held almost every day before the exposed Blessed Sacrament. It was a permanent memorial of Corpus Christi, and therefore of the real presence of Christ in the holy species.

In the Netherlands, these prayers have now disappeared; as for the feast day of the Blessed Sacrament, it has long since become a day like any other.

The Office of Corpus Christi belongs to the type of rhymed offices. From a musical point of view, the latter is characterised by successive antiphons and responses that correspond to successive tones of liturgical music: thus, the first antiphon is in the first tone: *Dorian authentic*; the second in the second tone: *Dorian plagal*; the third in *Phrygian authentic*, etc.[10] *The* old *Ordo* prior to 1960 introduced a few changes, disrupting this orderly sequence of response tones.[11] In the new *Ordo* after Vatican II, the original pattern is no longer recognisable.

A number of the chants in the Mass proper are also adaptations. Just as the gradual of the Office of the Dead reminds us of the Resurrection by repeating the melody of Easter Sunday, *the Alleluia*: *Caro mea vere est cibus* reminds us of the text of the psalm: *Laetabitur justus in Domino et sperabit in Eo*. In the new *Ordo*, it has been taken up as the *Alleluia* verse for the common of martyrs. The old communion antiphon: *Quotiescumque manducabitis panem* evokes the thought of the Holy Spirit, the solemnity of Pentecost with its communion antiphon: *Factus est repente*. The communion antiphon *Quotiescumque* no longer appears in the new *Ordo*; it has been replaced by the antiphon *Qui manducat carnem meam* from the^{ninth}Sunday after Pentecost according to *the* old *Ordo*.

The melody of the *Lauda Sion* sequence derives from another 11th-century sequence that was sung for the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross: *Laudes crucis attollamus*. It is a melody that developed from *the Alleluia*: *Dulce lignum* but is also used for *the Alleluia: Caro mea*. The text deals with the dogma of the Holy Eucharist: *Dogma datur christianis*, – the centre of the Christian faith: here, bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. Under the two species, which are only signs and not substances (*non rebus*, not functional material forms), lies the sublime reality, the real presence of Christ. Perhaps this explanation will encourage you to reread this text. For the introit, gradual and offertory, we have taken up old original compositions that had

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[10] *Einführung in die gregorianischen Melodien*, Leipzig 1921, Part III, p. 351.

[11] Dom Joseph Pothier, o.s.b.: *Revue du chant grégorien*, XVIII, p. 173.

their place at other times of the liturgical year. The votive Mass of the Most Holy Sacrament has the same proper, with the exception of the sequence.

Although the Holy Eucharist is present throughout the liturgy – and how could it be otherwise, since the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is at its heart? – Corpus Christi is entirely centred on it: this feast was intended as an unequivocal sign in the face of the emerging heresies of the time that denied the dogma of transubstantiation and were propagated in particular by Berengar of Tours (c. 1000-1088), a pupil of Fulbert of Chartres who, around 1050, denied the real presence of Christ under the species of bread and wine. A few centuries after the institution of Corpus Christi, Protestantism arose, among other things, from this denial of the real presence. In one of his sermons on Corpus Christi, Luther said: "On no other feast day are God and his Christ more blasphemed... than on this day, and especially during the procession."

Even today, this dogma is more or less openly contested. Here is an example that gives a good idea of the current situation: some time ago, the regional *schola* of Arnhem was asked to sing a Gregorian *Requiem* in one of the city's churches. In the sacristy, two cups containing hosts were placed on a credence table, uncovered. A priest who had come from outside asked if these hosts were consecrated, to which the sacristan replied: "Yes, in one of the two ciboria, but I don't know which one." In this church, a particular form of liturgy has been developed which, in many respects, can no longer be recognised as a Catholic celebration. Is all this due to the introduction of the vernacular? Let us recall the discussion that took place about the definition of the Eucharist contained in *the Instructio generalis* to the new missal of 1970 (which was to be corrected a year later).

Most of the texts in *the Cantus gregorianus* are taken from the Bible. As for the post-conciliar texts in the vernacular, they would require a separate study, which would go far beyond the scope of this presentation. We will content ourselves here with citing one exception, taken from the German-speaking world: one of the first "common chants" by Friedrich von Spee (1591-1635): "*O Christ hie merk* - O Christian, lend your ear"; the second and third verses clearly and expressly mention the real presence of Christ, refuting in a few words the erroneous conceptions of this dogma:

2. "In the monstrance is Christ himself, not the substance of bread; your eye sees only the species and appearance of bread."

3. "It is not bread that is there, neither beside it nor near it, in the host. What is there is you yourself, Lord Jesus Christ."[12]

It is somewhat surprising that this chant was not included in the *Book of Common Hymns* (E.G.B.) of the German-speaking dioceses. One wonders why.

Let us return to the theme of our presentation, Gregorian chant. The Gregorian repertoire includes not only the great chants of the proper and the offertory, but also the texts – sung in a very simple, almost recited manner – of the Roman rite liturgy, such as psalmody and prayers. Almost the entire liturgy itself is in the style of Gregorian chant; in this respect, there are few texts that are exceptions. In his book *Le vocabulaire latin des principaux thèmes liturgiques* ([13]), Albert Blaise has dealt excellently with the various subjects. In addition to vocabulary, this book has three parts: the first, *Lex orandi*; the second, *Lex credendi*; and the third, *Lex vivendi*. The theme of the Holy Eucharist is dealt with in the middle of the second part, *Lex credendi*, since it is essentially at the heart of the book. Blaise has divided his chapter on the Eucharist into eight paragraphs:

1. The sacrifices of the old law
2. The memorial, the 're-presentation' of the Last Supper
3. Names and verbs designating the Holy Sacrifice and its celebration
4. Sacrifice of offering
5. Request for acceptance, approval, propitiation
6. Gifts received and effects of the sacrifice
7. Participation in the holy sacrifice, reception of the holy sacrifice
8. The body and blood of Christ, the real presence.[14]

There are several hundred hymns relating to the Holy Eucharist; they are too numerous to list them all here. We will mention just a few examples.

- *Alleluia: Cognoverunt discipuli Dominum Jesum in fractione panis*. This is the first *Alleluia* of the third Sunday of Easter. The text is taken from the Gospel according to Saint Luke (24:35), from the story of the disciples of Emmaus. The melody is not the original one, but is derived from another *Alleluia* – probably from the 7thor8thcentury: *Domine Deus salutis meae*. Thus, when we sing

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[12] *Die Jesuitenkirche Sankt Mariae im Himmelfahrt in Köln - Dokumentation und Beiträge zum Abschluss ihrer Wiederherstellung 1980*, Düsseldorf 1982.

[13] Albert Blaise: *Le Vocabulaire latin des principaux thèmes liturgiques*, Turnhout 1966.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 379 ff.

Cognoverunt, we think of: "The Lord is the God of my salvation." This also applies to the text: *Alleluia. Si testimonium hominum accepimus, testimonium Dei majus est.* The melody is also identical to that of the two previous texts. In *the* old *Ordo*, *the Alleluia: Si testimonium* was sung on[1]July, on the feast of the Most Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ. It was not until 1849 that Pius IX prescribed it for the whole Western Church, but it no longer appears in the new gradual (1974).

- The *Portas cæli* offertory for Easter Wednesday. The text is taken from *Psalm 78* (23-25). It is the well-known prefiguration of the Holy Eucharist: "He opened the gates of heaven; he rained down manna upon them for food and gave them bread from heaven. Men ate the bread of angels; he sent them food in abundance." In its original form, this offertory included several verses that were no longer used almost a thousand years ago; particular importance was given to the last phrase: *Panem angelorum*, which served as a response to each verse.

- The communion *Hoc corpus* was formerly the communion for Passion Sunday. In the new *Ordo*, it is sung on Holy Thursday. The text, taken from 1 Cor 11:24-25, refers directly to the words of consecration at Mass.

- The communion *Manducaverunt* was formerly the communion for Quinquagesima Sunday; it has been assigned to the sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Like the offertory *Portas caeli*, the text is taken from *Psalm 78* (29-30): "They ate and were satisfied, He gave them what they desired. Their desires were not disappointed." This is another prefiguration of the Eucharist in the Old Testament; in our liturgy, it appears as a confirmation.

- The communion *Gustate et videte* was once sung on the eighth Sunday after Pentecost. The text is taken from *Psalm 33* (v. 9). This verse is also the last sentence of the offertory *Immitet Angelus*: "Taste and see how good the Lord is." Roland de Lassus (1532-1594) composed a magnificent motet on this text as a processional chant for Corpus Christi. It is said that in 1580, in Munich, it rained so heavily on the day of this feast that the procession could not set out, but "as soon as they left the church and he (Roland) approached with his choir behind the prince and began to sing the motet *Gustate et videte*, the sun began to shine everywhere by the blessing of God. "[15] In the new *Ordo*, the *Gustate et videte* communion is sung on the 1stSunday in Ordinary Time. In the liturgy of the following six Sundays, the communion texts are all placed under the sign of the sacrament of

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15 F.X. Haberl: *Orlando di Lasso's Werke - Magnus Opus Musicum*, Volume V, p. V.

the altar: *Qui manducat carnem meam, acceptabis sacrificium justitiae, honora Dominum de tua substantia, panem de caelo, panis quem ego dedero, de fructu operum tuorum*. All these chants belong to the ancient repertoire; they can be found in the oldest manuscripts of the pre-Gothic period. The ancient Latin liturgy is, as it should be, full of texts that refer to the mystery of our faith. When the heresies of Berenger and others appeared, reactions ensued. But by that time, the heyday of Gregorian chant had passed centuries ago. The new songs for Corpus Christi are, at best, successful adaptations.

It was also during this period that the custom of elevation during consecration was established. To this end, specific prayers were composed, which the faithful could recite while contemplating the Holy Host. In most cases, these were poems in metrical form. This is how the famous hymn *Adoro te devote* came into being in the14thcentury. The melody we know today can no longer be described as Gregorian, as it only appeared in the18thcentury. However, another, older melody was written to this text: it is identical to that of Friedrich von Spee's song mentioned above, *O Christ hie merk*, which was included in the 1623 Cologne *Hymnal*.

As for the well-known poem *Ave verum corpus natum*, it is a prayer of elevation dating from the14thcentury. The music Mozart wrote for this text made it famous almost everywhere. Johann Friedrich Hilber wrote of this work: "And finally, again, *the Ave verum*, close in time to *the Requiem*, composed in 1791, the year of his death, but, like many others, simply considered as 'a beautiful piece' and not as the funeral Eucharistic prayer of a man who was already marked by death and who, if he was not always faithful in his life to the deepest mystery of his faith, was certainly faithful in the accents of his religious music. For that is what it is all about: his works speak of Mozart's faith, singing with convincing beauty and warmth of his joy in God, his ecclesial prayer, his Marian piety and his Catholic conviction.[16]

Although not all of Mozart's religious music can be described as truly liturgical, Hilber is certainly right about the inappropriate use of many pieces of liturgical music. Josquin des Prés' *Masses*, for example, were composed to give liturgical celebrations a special splendour. Today, they are heard in concert halls. This brings to mind a horde of disrespectful tourists wandering around a cathedral without giving a moment's thought to the fact that it is the house of God. Gregorian chant itself is in danger of becoming a commodity. We must therefore be cautious and vigilant, and take

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[16] Johannes Overath: *Sacred Music as the Meaning of Life - A Selection from Essays and Lectures by Johann Baptist Hilber*, Sinzi/Rhine, 1971.

care to preserve Gregorian chant, to keep it for its intended purpose, refraining from using it outside churches so that it can take pride of place in the liturgy. Only then will it be able to retain its value as a sign, only then will it be able to continue to express the Catholic faith, and above all its deepest mystery, which is its supreme good: the real presence of God in the Holy Eucharist.