

II. Pope Benedict XVI

Pope Benedict XVI

On the Joy and Sacredness of Music

On July 4, 2015, Pope emeritus Benedict XVI made the following extraordinary remarks. The original text, provided by the Vatican in Italian, German, and Polish, is available [here](#). Benedict XVI died on December 31, 2022.

Ladies and gentlemen!

In this hour I can only express my heartfelt thanks for the honor you have bestowed on me with the *Doctoratus honoris causa*. My thanks go especially to the Grand Chancellor, dear Eminence Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz, and to the authorities of the two academic institutions. I rejoice above all that in this way my connection with Poland, with Cracow, with the homeland of our great Saint John Paul II, has deepened. Because without him, my spiritual and theological path would be unthinkable. He also showed us through his living example how the joy of great sacred music and the call to participate in the sacred liturgy—how the festive joy and the simplicity of the humble celebration of the faith—can go together.

In the years after the Council, on this point an age-old conflict was manifest with renewed passion. I myself grew up in the traditional current of Salzburg. The festive masses with choir and orchestra were naturally part of our believers' experience of liturgy. It remains unforgettable, for example, how with the first sounds of Mozart's Coronation Mass, the heavens were somehow opened and the presence of the Lord was deeply experienced. But in addition, the new world of the liturgical movement was already present, especially through one of our chaplains, who later became a junior



Chancellery, President of Republic of Poland
His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI
1927–2022

and senior seminary dean in Freising. Then, in my studies in Munich, I grew into the liturgical movement through the lectures by Professor Pascher, one of the important council experts, and above all through the liturgical life in the seminar community. So the tension between the *participatio actuosa*, and the festive music which was imbued with the holy text, became noticeable, even if I myself have never felt it too strongly.

In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Vatican II Council, the section is clear: “The treasure of sacred music must be preserved and promoted with the greatest care” (114). On the other hand, the emphasis on the *participatio actuosa* of all believers as a basic liturgical

category at sacred events stands in the text. What still coexists peacefully in the Constitution then came into an often dramatic tension when submitted for adoption by the Council. Authoritative factions of the liturgical movement were of the opinion that the large choral works and even the orchestral masses would only have a place in the concert halls in the future, not in liturgy. In this, only choral singing and prayer could have a place. On the other hand, there was alarm about the cultural impoverishment of the church, which must necessarily accompany this. How can both be reconciled? How to realize the Council in its entirety—these were the questions that concerned me and many other believers, simple people and the theologically educated alike.

Perhaps it is right to ask the basic question at this point: What is that anyway—music? Where does it

come from and what is its goal? I think you can identify three sources of music.

—A first source is the experience of love. When people were taken by love, a different dimension of being arose, a new greatness and breadth of reality. And it is also driven to express itself in a new way. Poetry, song, and music in general arose entirely through the impact of this, through this opening of a new dimension of life.

—A second source of music is the experience of grief, of being touched by death, by suffering and the abysses of existence. New dimensions of reality open up to this other side, which can no longer be answered with words alone.

—Finally, the third source of music is the encounter with the divine, which is part of being human from the start. All the more reason why it is here that the completely other and great is present, which summons forth new ways of expressing oneself in man. Perhaps one can say that in reality the other two realms—love and death—elicit the divine mystery for us and, in this sense, the experience of being touched by God is the origin of music. I find it moving to see how singing is no longer sufficient in the psalms, but all the instruments are called up—the hidden music of creation, its mysterious language is aroused. With the psalter, in which the two motifs of love and death are always at work, we gaze directly at the origin of the music of the Church of God. One can probably say that the quality of the music corresponds to the purity and greatness of the encounter with the divine, as with the experience of love and grief. The purer and more truthful this experience, the purer and greater the music that grows out of it.

At this point I would like to present a thought that has more and more preoccupied me recently, all the more so as the different cultures and religions enter into relationships with each other. There is great literature, great architecture, great painting, great sculpture in various cultural and religious realms. There is also music everywhere. But music of such stature as that which arose in the realm of Christian faith—from Palestrina, Bach, and Handel, to Mozart, Beethoven, and Bruckner—is found in no other culture. Occidental music is something unique, without equal in other cultures. This must give us cause to reflect.

Of course, Western music extends far beyond the realm of church and religion. But it has its inner source in liturgy. With Bach, for whom the glory of God was ultimately the goal of all music, this is very clear. In the

encounter with the God whom we encountered in the liturgy in Jesus Christ, the great and pure answer of Western music has grown. For me it is a proof of the truth of Christianity. Where such an answer grows, the truth is encountered with the true creator of the world. That is why the great church music is a reality of theological rank and of constant importance for the faith of all of Christianity, even if it does not have to be performed everywhere and always. But on the other hand, it is also clear that it must not disappear from the liturgy and that its presence can be a very special way of participating in the Holy Celebration, in the mystery of faith.

When we think of the liturgy celebrated by St. John Paul II on all continents, we see the entire breadth of the possibility of expressing faith in liturgical events, and we also see how the great music of the Western tradition is not antagonistic to the liturgy, but rather has grown out of it and is always helping to shape it. We do not know where our culture and church music will go in the future. But one thing is clear: Where an encounter with the living God who approaches us in Christ really comes to pass, an answer arises again and again, the beauty of which comes from the truth itself.



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