

# Superior's Letter July 2014

Dear Fellow Members of the Guild:

In our last number of the Intercession Paper, we were able to report on the Annual Requiem held at the Church of the Resurrection in New York, my own church and the Guild's National Shrine. A large crowd attended the Mass, heard Father Godderz's highly edifying sermon and the magnificent large orchestra and Resurrection's Choir, under the baton of Maestro Enlow, offer Antonio Salieri's Requiem. As I sat at the sedilia as the Celebrant, it occurred to me, and not without some satisfaction, that this must have been a very close replica indeed of the Last Supper itself! A woman once presented herself at the door of S. Clement's, Philadelphia, when I was Rector there, obviously with a very persistent bee buzzing in her bonnet. "I don't understand," said she. "First there were these twelve men having a simple meal with their Teacher and then (gesturing around her), all this!" I could only reply, "Madam, change is the essence of life. It was found that we could do better." She left somewhat bemused.

But I must say I believe very strongly that we have no obligation either to apologise for the magnificent offering of High Mass (and indeed all services) or indeed to impoverish the immense cultural, musical, historical and theological riches of the Western Catholic Tradition simply because they may not be fashionable at the moment. The suggestion that Catholic doctrine is constantly up for a majority vote (an idea much beloved of The New York Times, among other secular publications), or that in some sense, Our Lord is always "running for re-election" in some popularity poll, is a very dangerous one. The error here, is of course, that it is Man who must adapt himself to God, not the other way round. The second error is that whatever is most popular, is clearly most valuable. Indeed, the latter contention is almost always false as it reduces all things to the lowest common denominator, and where humanity is concerned, that is a frightful prospect.

If we think for a moment of a church, it could be one of the very early churches in the Byzantine style at Ravenna, Hagia Sophia at Constantinople, St Peter's Basilica or the Lateran in the very bosom of the city, a magnificent English mediaeval Cathedral such as Ely or Lincoln, a classical temple such as St Paul's Cathedral or the Pantheon in Rome or St-Sulpice in Paris, a Gothic revival masterpiece like Viollet-le-Duc's recreation of the mediaeval Notre Dame de Paris or either of our New York Cathedrals (St Patrick's or St John the Divine), a shrine church like Walsingham, or Compostela, or Lourdes, or Montserrat or Loreto, a truly wonderful confection like Vierzenheiligen or Ottobeuren, a tiny country parish church or a very humble city church, such as my own: no matter what church we envision, it should elevate our minds and souls. It should bring us to our knees at once when we enter, showing us that there is neither any more valuable activity for man to enter upon, nor any more attractive, than communion with God Himself. An ugly church will do no such thing, indeed it may do the opposite, and repel the worshipper seeking God, who finds only Ugliness Itself, which is a sign that Evil has been at work, and may still be present.

Or, dear Reader, think of music. The church's own music, from its earliest days, is plainsong, which was the music of the church gathered together, sung with its own voice. Every time we hear or sing the Missa de Angelis, the plainsong Requiem, or the Missa cum júbilo, for example, we are immediately connected to our earliest forbears in the Faith. It was for this reason that the Twenty-first Oecumenical Council underlined this fact so forcefully in 1964 in the Constitution on the Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium).

But we need not restrict ourselves to this music alone, for if this were the only music written to express communion with the divine, it would suggest that God does not continue to inspire the musician, and by extension, Man himself. Renaissance polyphony, whether it be an early practitioner like Machaut, a Spaniard like the great Victoria or Morales, one of the gifted Flemings like Obrecht, des Prez, Manchicourt or Crecquillon or the Master himself, Palestrina, has uniquely embodied the continuation of plainsong by taking it as a foundation and embroidering on the same theme. It is as if the earliest church had tried to tell of God in music and had gone as far as it could go, and suddenly the composer, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, could suddenly enlarge upon this same theme in the endless variations of polyphony. The marriage of these two traditions is often obvious in such compositions as Palestrina's Missa Te deum laudamus or des Prez's Missa Ave Regina Coelorum. By the time we come to the Baroque, it is now fashionable to downplay the importance of that style in church music. And yet, what organ composer is most played? Bach. And which choral composer is, arguably, most sung? Handel (especially at Christmas and Easter!). The French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian baroque composers were all geniuses in bringing liturgical and sacred music under a new lens. Who has not thrilled to Allegri's Miserere? Gabrieli's music calls forth the wonders of St Mark's Basilica in Venice at its zenith, perhaps on Ash Wednesday just after the Carnival, with masques

strewn throughout the square as pigeons pick amongst them. Couperin, Lully and Rameau are names which stir French music still, and Monteverdi remains a giant for any time. In the next century, the church music of Papa Haydn is, quite simply, unparalleled. It is magnificent, profound, endlessly fascinating and prolific in scope. Western music, and indeed, the Western soul, would be infinitely impoverished without the Nelson Mass, for example. His kinsman, Michael Haydn, who would be hugely well known had he not so famous a relation, wrote hundreds of pieces for church from his hugely popular Requiem to the delightful Asperges and Victimae Paschali both in use in my church. It is not possible even to consider passing out of the 18th century without mentioning the greatest musician of them all: Mozart. Here we see the prodigal gifts of talent God gives. A rather ordinary youth, not always well behaved, who did not always well steward his gifts, this subject of Maria Theresa wrote music the angels aspire to sing. There is no point in discussing his talents, as he is without equal. Even the 19th century, generally agreed to be a time of "science" and "progress" contributed its own to music, particularly in France by Charles Gounod and the great organist-composers (Lefébure-Wély, Franck, Vieme, Widor), but also elsewhere with Rheinberger, Dvorak, Beethoven, Bruckner and Cherubini. One of the greatest composers in world history, Tchaikovsky, wrote a Liturgy of St John Chrysostom. The 20th century in France and Britain particularly were a time of great compositional fertility and provided us with Elgar, Langlais, Poulenc, Britten, Stanford, and Delius.

Why all this discussion about music? It is because I am afraid. I have heard far too many stories of funeral services (and this is across all communions and traditions – and indeed extends to weddings too) where the music has distinguished the funeral as pedestrian, quotidian, dreary, boring or even, sadly, simply ugly and unattractive. (It has become almost the first feature of conversation with the family of the lately dead what his or her "favourite songs" were, for "performance" at the funeral.) So often music can reach out to our souls in a way in which words cannot. In the depths of depression, mourning or loss, one can sit and read a hundred poems and perhaps derive no consolation. But one short piece of music, thoughtfully chosen, reverently presented and lovingly performed, can do wonders. Suddenly *cor ad cor loquitur*, and something happens: the soul is lifted, it is refreshed, we feel we can go on, we feel that God will make sense of our loss. In the autumn of 2012, I was forced to say good-bye to a very cherished friend. Over many weeks, I tried to put it behind me, and failed; I realised I was not really able to press on relying solely on myself and I was having no answer from God. Suddenly, weeks later, sitting in my own home, I put on a CD, really just to have background noise. I realised in a moment, that the greatest singer the world has ever known was singing in the guise of her 19th century character that she had lived for art and for love, and yet, of course, so had this most magnificent of singers, Maria Callas. It occurred to me that one does live for art and love, in their broadest senses. Yes, both can be destroyed by being manhandled or by being denied the respect they deserve, yet their effect never dies. It is both art and love, in their fullest spectrums, that make this world bearable, because art can point us to love and to God, and love for each other binds us together, and God is Love Itself.

It has become fashionable to say that one would not be where one is today without music, or one could not go on without it. I am afraid I would have to be far more blunt: looking back on many years of my life, I simply could not have survived were it not for God's gift of music, both within and without the Church.

So it is that the Church, in the dying and mediocre embers of XXI century Western culture, has before it a responsibility which is not new to it, but which it has not known so critically for many a century. As with the Benedictine monasteries in the Dark Ages, as with the faithful French church in the Revolution, and as with the European church during and after the Great War, when survival and reconstruction often seemed impossible, it is the Church which will have to be the repository of Western culture, not only architecture and music, but also painting, sculpture, and of course language. For another day is the discussion of how having a sacred, hieratic language (whether Old Church Slavonic, Latin or elevated Tudor English), contributes to the powerful sense of the sacred. This is a passionate belief of mine personally, but it is also that of my own little church, so insignificant in the great city, and other churches like us, not only those of the Catholic Revival in Anglicanism but also the Traditionalist Revival in the Roman Church now underway and the burgeoning development of the traditional Orthodox churches in Russia and Eastern Europe. Not terribly long ago, a faithful parishioner and I were the last to leave a weekday Requiem Mass I had said, in the old Rite, in black vestments, and with the Leonine prayers after. Others had hurried away, but he remained. He was deeply moved, and asked me simply, "Father, how will all this continue in a world like this?" The only answer is to say that we are alive and devoted and dedicated, and as long as we are, we shall continue, and we trust that God Himself will raise up others to follow us. In the future, all may not be exactly as it now is, but part of the Resurrection truth is that just as Life always triumphs over Death, so Beauty always triumphs over the Ugly, because God will triumph over Satan. Even though the Cross was a horrible, shameful and hideously Ugly instrument of torture and death, it stood in a beautiful garden, near the tomb of a wealthy man where Jesus

would be laid to rest, and from which He would rise, having destroyed Death itself. Beauty emerged from Ugliness, Good from Evil, Joy from Sadness, and Life from Death.

Having had a lengthy discussion at last year's meeting where to go in 2014, we postponed deciding. As a ram in a thicket, our newest council member Father Warren invited us to his wonderful church. As a result, we shall be going to the Church of the Advent, 30 Brimmer Street at Mount Vernon, in Boston, Massachusetts, for the Guild's Annual Council Meeting on Friday, 7 November, and the Annual Requiem for the Guild's dead, particularly those who have died during the previous year, on Saturday, 8 November 2014. We hope that all of you who are members of the Guild either in New England or within striking distance on the East Coast will try to be present, as well as any others, not members, who would like to support the spiritual work of mercy in prayer for the dead, and who may even wish to join the Guild. You may feel free to ask us for our prayers at Mass that day for your own beloved dead.

There is no question at the Church of the Advent that the music will be gorgeous. There is no question that this noble church will exert its magic to excite your devotion. There is no question that all of us praying there, together, for the Holy Souls will have done something valuable, however many or few we be. There is no question that the Holy Sacrifice offered that day will do all that we can imagine and more, both for the Holy Souls and for ourselves. There is no question that those who attend will be edified and have their souls fed. There is no question that the community of the Guild will again meet and enjoy time with each other. So what is the question? It is this. Shall you be with us?

Yours in the Holy Souls,  
(The Rev'd Canon) Barry E. B. Swain,  
Superior-General