

Twelve Latin Chants Every Catholic Should Know

By Arlene Oost-Zinner and Jeffrey Tucker

Many Catholics pine for the return of Gregorian chant, and for good reason. The chant of the Roman Rite represents the very voice of the Faith, a true prayer in song, one that can and should draw all generations of Catholics together in the Mass and all other liturgies of the Church.

You can find recordings of Gregorian chant in every CD store. You can hear it at the concert hall, between settings of great polyphonic motets of the high Renaissance. You can hear it also in movies, radio, and television. But one place you are not likely to hear it is at your local Catholic Church. Truly, anyone who visits expecting to hear something resembling chant is in for a shock.

We've found from the workshops we've led that most Catholics under the age of 60 are unlikely to recognize even the basic chants of the Faith. This is understandable. Very few chants, if any, appear in the hymnbooks most commonly used in our parishes. Choirs know little of the chant's solemn sensibility. Every seasoned Catholic knows the reason: This timeless music, once integral to the liturgy, has been displaced by commercial stylings and other musical whims.

The long-term solution is an obvious one: Return the chant to its proper place, its "pride of place" (to quote Vatican II) in the liturgy. This is not a futile hope. After all, chant has nearly vanished before (at the turn of the 20th century, Pius X worried about its extinction and worked to restore it), and with effort, it came back. The same can happen again.

But there's an important intervening step that we must be willing to take. Every Catholic who yearns to hear and sing chant in liturgy should start to sing this music on his or her own. That is a contribution that each of us can make to prevent this music from dying as we await the time when it will be restored to our public liturgies.

The full chant repertoire includes thousands of settings for every conceivable time and purpose, the product of two millennia of musical development. Where to begin? The best place is with Latin hymns. When chant was alive and thriving in liturgy, these were the most popular and the best-known of all the chants. With a bit of effort and time, they can be sung by anyone. With enough repetition, they can become part of one's own private experience of the Faith, bringing enormous blessings to our families and ourselves. Perhaps then they can be taught to others and given new life in our liturgies.

If we're not willing to learn them and sing them individually, and if we cannot depend on the bishops or parish music directors to support chant, can we really expect that they'll return to our local liturgies? Not likely. What follows, then, are twelve essential Latin hymns, songs that have carried the Catholic faith through many centuries. They're found in any older hymnal, and recordings are also available (see "Where You Can Find Latin Chant" on page 40).

Ave Maria

This is surely the most beloved prayer exclusive to the Catholic faith. The melody line of the "Hail Mary" (perhaps from the 13th century) is remarkable for its range, flexibility, and subtle tonal curiosities (at least to modern ears). This pure, clean chant line was used as the basis for large polyphony settings for hundreds of years. Today, however, the chant that goes with the prayer is nearly unknown to the post-conciliar generations.

Like the prayer, the song is in two parts. It begins emotionally, with a line that spans a wide range but quickly settles down to a contemplative style. The emotion picks back up again with the second section, "Sancta Maria," hitting the highest tone in the fourth syllable, a full octave from its lowest pitch. The Amen is not an afterthought but integral to the prayer.

Sung slowly and with love, with one voice or many, this piece can move listeners to tears. Sung quickly with energy, it can be exuberant and liberating. Today it sounds fresh and alive and perfectly fitting for the one for whom it is sung. And what better way to begin to learn the Latin of this prayer than by knowing the tune that goes with it?

Adoro Te Devote

"Godhead here in hiding, whom I do adore; masked by these bare shadows, shape and nothing more." The text to this hymn of thanksgiving and adoration belongs to St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), and its most famous English translation to Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889). The chant itself is of unknown origin from the first millennium. It is brighter and lighter than many chants, with a smooth and lyrical line of four easy phrases, with a swell in the third phrase that provides quiet drama while never losing its discipline.

Aquinas is said to have written this text at the request of Pope Urban IV for the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1264. This chant is often used as a prayer of thanksgiving after Mass, though it is suitable for any time of focus on the Blessed Sacrament. The Hopkins translation is beautiful; consider the last line of the third verse: "Truth himself speaks truly or there's nothing true." But it cannot compare to the lyric quality of Aquinas's Latin: "Nil hoc verbo veritatis verius."

Regina Caeli

"Joy to thee, O Queen of Heaven." Although the author of the Regina Caeli is not known, it is believed to have been written sometime between the ninth and the twelfth centuries. It is short, delicate, celebratory, and regal—drawing attention to, and capturing, what was Mary's joy in the resurrection of her Son. The Regina Caeli is traditionally sung during Eastertide, from Holy Saturday right up through the Saturday after Pentecost, and is to be sung "in choro," or standing.

A lovely legend suggests that St. Gregory the Great heard its first three lines chanted by angels on a certain Easter morning in Rome while walking barefoot in a procession. He was so inspired, the story goes, that he was moved to add the fourth line, "Ora pro nobis Deum, alleluia." The Regina Caeli remains one of the most beloved of the chant repertoire, and it takes its seat alongside the Salve Regina as one of the most celebrated Marian hymns.

Ave Verum Corpus

"Hail true Body, born of the Mary." The most famous setting of this text by 14th-century Pope Innocent VI is by Mozart, especially famous in our time because it was chosen by the New York Philharmonic for a concert following September 11, 2001. Whether listeners understood the underlying message is another matter.

The Mozart setting is justly celebrated, but the chant version is equally dramatic. It has three distinct sections, the first of which is repeated and made up of only five tones. The second section, again with a repeated melody line, develops the theme a third higher, while the last section contains the most overtly emotional line of any in this repertoire: "O Jesu Dulcis! O Jesu pie! O Jesu fili Mariae." The lines are so emotional, in fact, the temptation might be to overdo them instead of letting them speak for themselves.

Pange Lingua Gloriosi

"Praise we Christ's immortal body." The text is by Aquinas, and it is based on an earlier text by Venantius Honorius Fortunatus, a sixth-century Christian poet. Aquinas's text was written for vespers or perhaps for the feast of Corpus Christi, but its use quickly entered all the liturgies of the Faith. The customary use is during the repository on Holy Thursday. It has six stanzas, the last two of which form the Tantum Ergo, a hymn prescribed for benediction of the most Blessed Sacrament. The Tantum Ergo is still sung as often as this liturgy is offered in our parishes.

The origin of the chant line, haunting and distinctive, is unknown but surely dates from the earliest centuries. It begins on the third pitch of the major scale and takes a while before finding its tonic home with the last word of the first line. The effect of this opening is to lengthen the overall tonal structure of each verse to a full six phrases, creating an expansive environment for this moving tribute to pure faith in the Blessed Sacrament. "Praestet fides supplementum," says the fifth verse, "sola fides sufficit." What our senses fail to fathom, let us grasp through faith's consent.

Parce Domine

"Spare thy people, Lord.... Be not angry." The text is from the book of Joel (2:17). The astonishingly simple chant line used during times of penance, built from only five notes, masks a brilliant and penetrating power. Repeated again and again (no made-up verses, please), it gets the message across. It should be sung slowly and with feeling, with a liberal use of silence between phrases and before repetitions. When done properly, one can only stare at the simple notes in disbelief that such emotion can be packed into such a small space. If one is seeking to put on display the spiritual import of the chant tradition, this small, affecting piece, which can be quickly mastered, is the archetype.

Asperges

"Thou shall sprinkle me, Lord, with hyssop and I shall be cleansed." The text is based, in part, on Psalm 50, the great psalm of repentance. The chant line, probably of 13th-century origin, is sung by a choir and the people during the sprinkling rite outside the season of Easter. Though complex and long enough to be sung through the entire rite, with

unusual periods of long notes combined with several notes on individual syllables, the faithful can learn it in time. Its pacing traditionally allows for a great deal of interpretation.

The reference to hyssop might at first seem odd until we realize that before Christianity, in both Jewish and Greek traditions, it was frequently used for cleansing holy spaces, in a symbolic invocation of the healing properties of the herb itself. In earlier centuries, the hyssop branches were used for this rite, which is of tenth-century origin. In church consecrations, they still are. In the new Roman Rite, the sprinkling rite takes the place of the penitential rite.

Ubi Caritas

ote Where charity and love are, there is God.” This is one of the oldest texts, according to some scholars, dating from the earliest Christian gathering of prayer and psalm singing—the agape—before the Mass was formalized. The text is too beautiful for even the debunkers of chant to discard, so it has been set again and again, even in contemporary ritual music. But there’s no improving on the original hymn—which is variously dated between the fourth and tenth centuries—with its haunting, steady refrain: “Ubi caritas et amor, deus ibi est.”

For those not used to the meter of old Latin hymnody, the placing of notes with their proper syllables might at first seem counterintuitive. But for this reason, it is an excellent chant to start with in the process of deprogramming our musical senses away from commercial meters to the sacred space and length of chant. Repetition here is the key. The chant begins to take shape and makes sense on its own terms, truly expressing the themes of love and community. The Ubi Caritas is usually sung during the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament but can be sung anytime the faithful gather in love and charity.

Attende Domine

“Hear our entreaties, Lord, and show us Thy mercy.” The melody line of this tenth-century text partakes of a Gregorian sensibility, again from early centuries, but the current version in use is sometimes dated as late as 1824. It is included among the chant repertoire because of its overwhelming popularity. Its refrain includes a rapid interval shift from the tonic (“Qui”) to the fifth (“a”) and down to the second note of the scale (“pe”), a change that one must hear again and again to follow and reproduce with the total phrase: “Quia peccavimus tibi..” But it becomes intuitive in time.

The remaining verses of this hymn are only three phrases long, and each phrase should be internally connected, producing a beautiful arch with an understood swell in the middle of the phrase. It is usually sung during Lent but can be used during communion or as a prelude during any season of the liturgical year.

Veni Creator Spiritus

“Come Holy Spirit, Creator Blessed, and in our souls take up Thy rest.” The text belongs to Rabanus Maurus (776-856) and the plainchant the ninth century. Once the most famous of all chant hymns, it became the very sound of Pentecost until it fell into disuse in parish life in the 1970s and following. It is still sung for the election of popes, the consecration of bishops, the dedication of churches, the ordination of priests, and during other devotions.

The melodic line achieves something nearing a floating effect that perfectly matches the thematic material. It begins on the fifth note of the scale and travels upwards to the tonic, rises higher in the second phrase, and settles back down in the fourth phrase to a graceful ending on the low tonic of the scale. Matching words and music requires something of an investment of time, but after it is done, it will be your conviction that Pentecost should not come and go without it.

Jesu, Dulcis Memoria

“Jesus, the very thought of Thee, fills my heart with sweetness.” The words come from a long poem written by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153), and ranging anywhere from a few to as many as 53 stanzas. The chant line lends itself to repetition, with its distinctive opening of four identical tones on each syllable of “Jesu, Dulcis,” continuing with its four, well-proportioned phrases of great sweetness and simplicity. From the experience of our schola, this particular chant is among the most immediate and affecting in the entire repertoire.

Salve Regina

Of all the Latin hymns on our list, perhaps this one stands the greatest chance of being somewhat known. The last lines, in any case, might have the slight ring of familiarity—“O Clemens, O Pia, O Dulcis Virgo Maria”—if only because they so

closely echo the same lines from English. Legend has it that St. Bernard of Clairvaux was so moved by these lines that he genuflected three times. Plates of brass were laid down in the pavement of the church where his knee is said to have touched the ground.

The text itself is probably that of Aimor, bishop of Le Puy, eleventh century. At the end of Poulenc's opera, Dialogue of the Carmelites (1957), the sisters sing the Salve Regina as they march to their deaths. It was once a common recessional for the whole congregation to sing. When it happens, the effect is moving and spectacular—leaving everyone with the assurance that Mary has indeed turned her eyes of mercy toward us.

Style of Singing

To revive chant in one's life or parish, it is not enough to have the music in hand or merely to know the pitches and words. Any of these chants can be botched by importing popular stylings and inflections to them. A steady, prayerful quality is required. Chants should be sung without a rush and with plenty of time between phrases and verses. They must be sung with love but without overt displays of emotion. Vibrato should be eliminated if possible.

Chant ought to be sung with minimal accompaniment, if any at all, and a cappella if possible, by one voice or thousands. Insisting on the voice alone imparts a sense of responsibility to those singing the words and leads to greater participation. The chant speaks for itself, and even with small beginnings, it can in time begin to take "pride of place" in the process of becoming the work of the people again.

Pronunciation Guide for Latin Chants as in "father"

E as in "get" before a consonant, and otherwise with more "a" sound

I as in "sleet"

O as in "our"

U as in "spoon"

Y treated the same as "I"

AE, OE one sound

AU, EU,

OU, AI each vowel pronounced separately

Cui pronounced "koo-ey"

C before e, ae, i, y, as in "children"; otherwise pronounced like a K

CC before e, ae, i, y, pronounced as "tch" (ecce=et-che)

SC before e, ae, i, y, as in "shall" (ascendit=a-shen-deet)

G before e, ae, oe, i, y, as in "general"; otherwise, hard, as in "get"

GN xpndtw0 pronounced like "ny" (Magnificat=mah-nyee-fee-cot)

H in mihi and nihil: pronounced as K; otherwise mute

J is often written as an I

R before a consonant, slightly rolled

S	when preceded and followed by a vowel, Z;; otherwise pronounced as in “see”
TI	before vowel, “tsi” (gratia=gra-tsi-a); excep tions when it follows s, x, t
TH	pronounced as “T”
U	preceded by Q or NG and followed by a vowel, one syllable
X	before e, ae, oe, i, y, pronounced as “ks”
XC	before e, ae, oe, i, y, pronounced as “ksh” (excita=ek-shee-tah); before other vowels, pronounced as “ksk”

Where You Can Find Latin Chant

Hymnals

Liber Usualis, the complete book of Gregorian chant
 St. Bonaventure Publications \$107
www.libers.com

Liber Cantualis
 GIA Publications
 \$13
www.catholicstore.com or www.giamusic.com

Adoremus Hymnal
 Ignatius Press (1997)
 Pew Edition, \$12.95
 Choir Edition, \$17.95
www.ignatius.com

Simple Kyriale
 Ignatius Press
 \$6.95
www.ignatius.com

Collegeville Hymnal
 The Liturgical Press (1990)
 \$11.95
www.litpress.org

The St. Michael Hymnal
 St. Boniface Church, Lafayette, Indiana (1998)
 \$15
www.stboniface.org

Recordings

(All are available through Ignatius Press, www.ignatius.com.)

Chant

St. Peter’s Abbey, Solesmes

Ave Verum Corpus
 St. Thomas More Church, Chicago

Catholic Latin Classics
 Cathedral Singers (Proulx)

Sublime Chant and More Sublime Chant
Cathedral Singers (Proulx)

Learning About Gregorian Chant
Monks of Solesmes

Women in Chant
Benedictine Sisters of Regina Laudis Abbey

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