

Life in the Novitiate of St. Bernard

Society of St. Pius X

The life of a religious is intimately bound up with the altar. Without the altar of sacrifice, the altar of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the religious has lost his bearing, he has lost his whole reason of being.

Everything around the altar is summed up in the Liturgy. The Liturgy is therefore the way in which the Church offers her praise to God. So the life of a religious, the life of a Brother is intimately bound up with the Liturgy.

It is for this reason that the Liturgy forms the most important part of the Novitiate. Preparing the altar, the ceremonies, serving the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, singing the music so loved by the Church, Gregorian chant; all this plays a most essential part in the life of the Brother and therefore in the life of the Novitiate.



Let us speak here a little about Gregorian Chant. How little it is known! It not only has a history that goes beyond St. Gregory the Great (year 600). It has a science about it which is so profound that it has even given classical music its very understanding. It is not just a pretty tune. Gregorian chant gives a profound expression to the liturgical texts. *Gregorian Chant has always been regarded as the supreme model for sacred music.* (Tra le Sollecitudini, Moto proprio of St. Pius X 1903)



So the religious Brother spends much time, in his postulancy, in his Novice year and even after his vows learning and practicing Gregorian chant. One would even say that the two hours per week here at the Novitiate is not sufficient.

At the Novitiate, the Brothers sing all the chants of the Mass every Sunday and first class feast days. Also, sometimes 2nd class feast days. Every evening the night prayers of Church, called *compline* is also sung. Sunday vespers is another office sung in its entirety.



Perhaps it is in the Sacred Triduum, Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, that the full splendour of Gregorian chant bursts it seams. The office of Matins (called Tenebrae on these three days), with its many psalms, hymns, responsories and lessons are so beautiful. We may wonder if this beautiful office is still sung anywhere in Asia.



Christmas too, beginning with matins at 10 pm on the vigil, then Midnight High Mass followed by lauds. At 2 am it is complete. Nearly four hours of Gregorian chant. All sung. What a treasure of holiness and beauty the Church has bequeathed to us!

There is no beat in Gregorian chant. It is also called Plain chant, because of its great simplicity. Worldly music is often written with many half notes, giving it a sentimental tune. In Plain chant only two half notes are used. For this reason it is called diatonic. Thus there is no sentimentality in Gregorian chant. It is not written for the passions of man. It is a music which is a prayer addressed from the soul to God.



These are the beautiful words of St. Pius X: *Sacred music should consequently possess, in the highest degree, the qualities proper to the liturgy, and in particular sanctity and goodness of form, which will spontaneously produce the final quality of universality. It must be holy, and must, therefore, exclude all profanity not only in itself, but in the manner in which it is presented by those who execute it. It must be true art, for otherwise it will be impossible for it to exercise on the minds of those who listen to it that efficacy which the Church aims at obtaining in admitting into her liturgy the art of musical sounds.*
(Tra le Sollecitudini, Moto proprio of St. Pius X 1903)

At the novitiate, great care is taken that the religious should learn to render this purity of plain chant in order to keep far from it any sentimentality, any rhythm to fire-up the passions, any vocal expression which would be unbecoming to the holiness and purity of Gregorian chant.



But, one may ask; do all Brothers sing? Can all religious sing? Do they all have wonderful voices?

Alas, evidently the answer is no. Nevertheless, it is amazingly true that for many their voices improve over their years here. Although some may never attain the degree of having a melodies voice, yet, by training they can acquire a basic true pitch. Gregorian chant, however, is not a solo chant. It is mostly sung in choir with equanimity of voice. Therefore, even if some religious never attain a high degree of perfection in chant, they can blend in their voices.

Again St. Pius X: *With the exception of the melodies proper to the celebrant at the altar and to the ministers, which must be always sung in Gregorian Chant, and without accompaniment of the organ, all the rest of the liturgical chant belongs to the choir of levites, and, therefore, singers in the church, even when they are laymen, are really taking the place of the ecclesiastical choir. Hence the music rendered by them must, at least for the greater part, retain the character of choral music.*



Thus the Novitiate aims at spreading through the Brothers this beautiful and holy art into all our chapels and Holy Mass centers so that the Liturgy may render her glory to God and bring about the edification of the faithful.