



The Holy See

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINE BENEDICT XVI
TO THE GRAND CHANCELLOR
OF THE PONTIFICAL INSTITUTE OF SACRED MUSIC
ON THE 100th ANNIVERSARY OF ITS FOUNDATION**

*To my Venerable Brother
Cardinal Zenon Grocholewski
Grand Chancellor
of the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music*

One hundred years have passed since my holy Predecessor [Pius X](#) founded the School of Sacred Music, which [Pope Pius XI](#) raised to the rank of “Pontifical Institute” 20 years later. This important anniversary is a cause for joy to all enthusiasts of sacred music, but more generally for those, starting of course with Pastors of the Church, who have at heart the dignity of the liturgy, of which sacred song is an integral part (cf. Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [Sacrosanctum Concilium](#), n. 112). I am therefore particularly pleased to express my warm congratulations for this activity and to convey my cordial good wishes to you, Venerable Brother, to the President and to the entire community of the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music.

This Institute, which is dependent on the Holy See, is part of the unique academic situation established by the Pontifical Universities in Rome. It is also linked in a special way to the Athenaeum of Sant’Anselmo and to the Benedictine Order, as is also demonstrated by the fact that since 1983 the school has been based at the Abbey of San Girolamo in Urbe, while the legal and historical headquarters are still at Sant’Apollinare.

On the occasion of this centenary my thoughts go to all those — and the Lord alone knows perfectly who they are — who have in any way cooperated with the activity of what was first the “School of Sacred Music” and later the “Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music”: from the successive superiors who guided it, to the distinguished faculty members and the generations of students. Thanksgiving to God, for the many gifts granted, goes hand in hand with gratitude for all that each

one of them has given to the Church by cultivating the art of music at the service of divine worship.

To have a clear grasp of the identity and role of the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music, it is necessary to remember that [Pope St Pius X](#) founded this Institute eight years after issuing the Motu Proprio *Tra le Sollecitudini*, 22 November 1903, with which he brought about a profound reform in the field of sacred music, restoring the great tradition of the Church to counter the influence of profane music, especially light opera. In order to put this magisterial intervention into practice in the universal Church, a study and teaching centre was required that would pass on faithfully and competently the guidelines pointed out by the Supreme Pontiff, in accordance with the authentic and glorious tradition that dates back to St Gregory the Great.

In the span of the past century this Institution therefore assimilated, elaborated and passed down the doctrinal and pastoral content of Papal Documents and those of the [Second Vatican Council Documents](#) on sacred music so that it might illuminate and guide the work of composers, choir masters, liturgists, musicians and all formation teachers in this field.

I would also like to highlight one fundamental aspect of this which is particularly dear to me: namely, that since the time of [St Pius X](#) to this day the essential continuity of the Magisterium on sacred music, with its natural development, has been found in the liturgy.

The Pontiffs [Paul VI](#) and [John Paul II](#) in particular wished to reaffirm the aim of sacred music in the light of the conciliar Constitution [Sacrosanctum Concilium](#): in other words: “the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful” (n. 112), as well as the fundamental criteria of tradition; I limit myself to recalling: the sense of prayer, of dignity and of beauty; full adherence to the texts and to the liturgical gestures; the involvement of the assembly, hence a legitimate adaptation to the local culture while preserving at the same time the universality of the language; the primacy of Gregorian chant as a supreme model of sacred music and the wise use of other modes of expression that are part of the Church’s historical and liturgical patrimony, especially, but not only polyphony; the importance of the *schola cantorum*, particularly in cathedral churches. Today too these are important criteria which should be taken into careful consideration.

Sometimes, in fact, these elements that are found in [Sacrosanctum Concilium](#), such as, precisely, the value of the great ecclesial patrimony of sacred music or the universality that is characteristic of Gregorian chant, have been held to express a concept which corresponds with a past that needs to be superseded and set aside because it is supposed to limit the freedom and creativity of the individual and of communities. Yet we must always ask ourselves anew: who or what is the authentic subject of the liturgy? The answer is simple: the Church. It is not the individual person or group which is celebrating the liturgy, but is first and foremost God’s action through the Church which has her own history, her rich tradition and her creativity.

The liturgy, and consequently sacred music, “lives on a correct and constant relationship between

healthy *traditio* and *legitima progressio*”, keeping constantly in mind the fact that these two concepts — which the Council Fathers clearly underlined — merge since “tradition is a living reality, which therefore includes in itself the principle of development, of progress” (*Address to the Pontifical Liturgical Institute of the Athenaeum of Sant’Anselmo*, 6 May 2011).

All this, Venerable Brother, forms so to speak the “daily bread” of life and work at the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music. On the basis of these sound and reliable elements, to which may now be added a century of experience, I encourage you to continue with a fresh impetus and commitment your service in the professional training of students to ensure that they acquire serious and profound competence in the various disciplines of sacred music.

This Pontifical Institute will thus continue to make a valid contribution to the formation in this field of pastors and of lay faithful in the various particular Churches. It will also encourage a satisfactory discernment of the quality of the musical compositions used in liturgical celebrations. For this important objective you may count on my constant concern, accompanied by my special remembrance in prayer, which I entrust to the heavenly intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Cecilia, while, as I wish your centenary celebrations every success, I cordially impart to you, to the President, to the Teachers, to the Staff and to all the students of the Institute a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 13 May 2011

BENEDICTUS PP. XVI

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