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On the Love of Music
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Both music and love, although in the view of some not necessary for a “useful” or “productive” life, are nonetheless of utmost importance for a good or happy one. They are the exultant expression of a joyful spirit, arriving spontaneously and helping the person to flourish. In the writing of Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, as indeed throughout the Christian tradition, music and love are indissolubly bound together. This essay will describe the explicit and implicit connections made between love and music in the writing of Joseph Ratzinger, focusing on the *The Spirit of the Liturgy* and *Deus Caritas Est*, with reference to *A New Song for the Lord, The Feast of Faith*, and the apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Music will be employed as an aid to understanding the sometimes-abstract descriptions of love found in the encyclical, while Benedict’s clarifications on the subject of love will help elucidate certain controversial issues in musical philosophy.

In the introduction to *Sacramentum Caritatis*, which Pope Benedict asks to be considered “alongside [his] first Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est* ... which ... frequently mentioned the sacrament of the Eucharist and stressed its relationship to Christian love,”¹ Pope Benedict teaches that “In the sacrament of the Eucharist, Jesus shows us in particular the truth about the love which is the very essence of God. It is this evangelical truth which challenges each of us and our whole being. For this reason, the Church, which finds in the Eucharist the very centre of her life, is constantly concerned to

¹ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, paragraph 5.

proclaim to all, opportune importune (cf. 2 *Tim* 4:2), that God is love.”² It is thus fitting to focus this discussion on the relationship between love and sacred music, both because this is the relationship that Ratzinger has elucidated most explicitly, and because of the essential role of sacred music in the Eucharist, the “Sacrament of Love”. Pope Benedict sees the repertoire of Catholic sacred music as a “rich patrimony of faith and love” which “should be well integrated into the whole celebration” of the liturgy.³

In *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Cardinal Ratzinger offers an insight that helps explain why music is such an integral part of the Mass.

“When man comes into contact with God, mere speech is not enough. Areas of his existence are awakened that spontaneously turn into song.”⁴ Singing is seen as the most fitting method to express both the Sacred Scripture that is employed within the liturgy and the prayers of the liturgy itself. Ratzinger sees this focus as an early development within the Church:

“Quite spontaneously, the Psalter becomes the prayer book of the infant Church, which, with equal spontaneity, has become a Church that sings her prayers. That applies first of all to the Psalter, which Christians, of course, now pray together with Christ.... The Holy Spirit, who had inspired David to sing and to pray, moves him to speak of Christ, indeed causes him to become the very mouth of Christ, thus enabling us in the Psalms to speak through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, to the Father. Now this exegesis of the Psalms, at once Christological and pneumatological, not only concerns the text but also includes the element of music. It is the Holy Spirit who teaches us to sing—first David, and then, through him, Israel and the Church. Yes, singing, the surpassing of ordinary

² Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, 2.

³ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, 42.

⁴ Ratzinger, *The spirit of the liturgy*, 136.

speech, is a ‘pneumatic’ event. Church music comes into being as a ‘charism’, a gift of the Spirit.”⁵ Or, as Ratzinger writes in *A New Song for the Lord*, “Christ himself thus becomes the choir director who teaches us the new song and gives the Church the way in which she can praise God appropriately and blend into the heavenly liturgy”.⁶

Throughout his career, Joseph Ratzinger has described the relationship between music and love in explicit terms. In *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Ratzinger describes what he terms “the Trinitarian interpretation of Church music”: “The singing of the Church comes ultimately out of love. It is the utter depth of love that produces the singing. ‘Cantare amantis est’, says St. Augustine, singing is a lover’s thing. ... The Holy Spirit is love, and it is he who produces the singing. He is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit who draws us into love for Christ and so leads to the Father.”⁷ Ratzinger further explains the role of the Spirit in Christian prayer and music: “St. Paul tells us that of ourselves we do not know how to pray as we ought but that the Spirit himself intercedes for us... Prayer is a gift of the Holy Spirit, both prayer in general and that particular kind of prayer which is the gift of singing and praying before God. The Holy Spirit is love. He enkindles love in us and thus moves us to sing.”⁸

For the lover, beauty is able to inspire and sustain attraction and desire for the beloved, and likewise beautiful sacred music, in addition to its fitting expression of the beauty of God, offers an attractive reason for listening to the words that are sung. Benedict teaches in *Sacramentum Caritatis* that

⁵ Ratzinger, *The spirit of the liturgy*, 139-140.

⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *A new song for the Lord : Faith in Christ and liturgy today*, tr. Martha M. Matesich, (New York : Crossroad Pub., 1996), 97.

⁷ Joseph Ratzinger ; *The spirit of the liturgy*, tr. John Saward, (San Francisco : Ignatius Press, 2000), 142.

⁸ Ratzinger, *The spirit of the liturgy*, 149.

Like the rest of Christian Revelation, the liturgy is inherently linked to beauty: it is veritatis splendor. The liturgy is a radiant expression of the paschal mystery, in which Christ draws us to himself and calls us to communion. As Saint Bonaventure would say, in Jesus we contemplate beauty and splendour at their source. This is no mere aestheticism, but the concrete way in which the truth of God's love in Christ encounters us, attracts us and delights us, enabling us to emerge from ourselves and drawing us towards our true vocation, which is love. ... Beauty, then, is not mere decoration, but rather an essential element of the liturgical action, since it is an attribute of God himself and his revelation.

Despite the intervention of God in sacred music, the precise role of music within the liturgy has often been a point of controversy, as Augustine attests to in book ten of the *Confessions*: “Very fierce am I sometimes in the desire of having the melody of all pleasant music, to which David’s Psalter is so often sung, banished both from mine own ears, and out of the whole Church too.”⁹ Augustine acknowledges the good of the institution of music, however, recalling “the tears I shed at the hearing of thy church songs, in the beginning of my recovered faith.”¹⁰

Ratzinger sees this tearful acknowledgment as a central moment in Augustine’s development: “With Augustine the academic, a man who had come to appreciate Christianity as a philosophy but was uneasy about the Church herself ... it was the singing Church which gave him a shattering experience, penetrating the whole man, and which led him forward on the way to the Church,”¹¹ citing Augustine’s account of “How I wept to hear Your hymns and songs, deeply moved by the voices of Your sweetly singing Church! Their voices penetrated my ears, and with them truth found its way into my heart; my frozen feeling for God began to thaw, tears flowed and I experienced joy

⁹ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, X:33.

¹⁰ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, X:33.

¹¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *The feast of faith : approaches to a theology of the liturgy*, tr. Graham Harrison, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 116.

and relief.”¹² The heavenly beauty of the Church’s song allows Augustine to overcome his aversion to the earthly sin and corruption readily discernable within the Church.

Neither music nor love spring from the self without provocation—they come from contact with another. In the midst of discussing the relationship between *eros* and *agape*, Benedict points out that “man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift.”¹³ By no means does this mean that man is incapable of bestowing love, for God “encounters us ever anew, in the men and women who reflect his presence, in his Word, in the sacraments, and especially in the Eucharist. In the Church’s liturgy, in her prayer, in the living community of believers, we experience the love of God, we perceive his presence, and we thus learn to recognize that presence in our daily lives. He has loved us first, and he continues to do so; we too, then, can respond with love. God does not demand of us a feeling which we ourselves are incapable of producing. He loves us, he makes us see and experience his love, and since he has ‘loved us first’, love can blossom as a response within us.”¹⁴ “Love can be ‘commanded’”, Benedict writes, “because it has first been given.”¹⁵

We have considered the role of the Holy Spirit as *provocateur* of musical prayer. Sacred music is thus necessarily the result of an encounter with another who inspires us, that is, who fills us with the breath and spirit necessary to sing the praises of God. Ratzinger critiques the attempt to remove the necessity of the encounter with another: “In

¹² St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, IX, cit. Ratzinger, *Feast*, 116.

¹³ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 7.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 17.

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 14.

idealistic philosophy the human spirit is no longer primarily receptive—it does not receive, but is only productive.”¹⁶ In the final extreme of this attempt, art “turns into experimenting with self-created worlds, empty ‘creativity’, which no long perceives the *Creator Spiritus*, the Creator Spirit. It attempts to take his place, and yet, in so doing, it manages to produce only what is arbitrary and vacuous, bringing home to man the absurdity of his role as creator.”¹⁷ Human love, when removed from the influence of God, takes on similar absurdity, for “there is a certain relationship between love and the Divine. Love promises infinity, eternity—a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence.”¹⁸

There is a strong contrast in the writings of Joseph Ratzinger between the rival modes of intoxication and sober inebriation as paradigms for love and music. In *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict writes that “the Greeks — not unlike other cultures — considered *eros* principally as a kind of intoxication, the overpowering of reason by a “divine madness” which tears man away from his finite existence and enables him, in the very process of being overwhelmed by divine power, to experience supreme happiness.” This is comparable to the music Ratzinger describes in *The Spirit of the Liturgy* as “Dionysian”, music that “drags man into the intoxication of the senses, crushes rationality, and subjects the spirit to the senses.”¹⁹

In contrast to intoxicated love, Benedict points to the purified love that consists of “concern and care for the other. No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication

¹⁶ Ratzinger, *A New Song*, 106.

¹⁷ Ratzinger, *Spirit*, 131.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 5.

¹⁹ Ratzinger, *Spirit*, 150.

of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation, and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice.”²⁰ “God loves, and his love may certainly be called *eros*, yet it is also totally *agape*.”²¹ This embrace of *agape* is in no way a renunciation of the erotic character of love, for the “universal principle of creation—the *logos*, primordial reason—is at the same time a lover with all the passions of a true love.”²² Ratzinger likewise contrasts “Dionysian” music with the music of Apollo, “music that draws senses into spirit and so draws man to wholeness. It does not abolish the senses, but inserts them into the unity of this creature that is man. It elevates the senses by uniting them with the Spirit.”²³

Sacred music, receiving the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is described as something of a mean between these two forms of music: “It is above all in Church music that the ‘sober inebriation’ of faith takes place—and inebriation surpassing all the possibilities of mere rationality. But this intoxication remains sober, because Christ and the Holy Spirit belong together, because this drunken speech stays totally within the discipline of the Logos, in a new rationality that, beyond all words, serves the primordial Word, the ground of all reason.”²⁴

Despite our most earnest attempts, the music and love we are able to express in this fallen world are necessarily impermanent and fleeting. Styles of music are in constant flux throughout history due to this same impermanence. As the expressions of imperfect creatures they are necessarily imperfect representations of the truth, beauty and goodness

²⁰ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 6.

²¹ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 7.

²² Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 10.

²³ Ratzinger, *Spirit*, 150.

²⁴ Ratzinger, *Spirit*, 140.

which music attempts to express. When we perform music the sound inevitably decays, just as physical human love in the expression found in marriage can only last until death. The initial outpouring of love for another person springs from the encounter with that person, but for its continuation requires that “one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God”.²⁵ The musician likewise continually requires inspiration in order to produce worthy music, finding this support in the generosity of the Holy Spirit.

Benedict addresses this issue in describing the transition of terminology for love in the *Song of Songs* from “*dodim*, a plural form suggesting a love that is still insecure, indeterminate, and searching to the term “*ahabá* ... [which] expresses the experience of a love which involves a real discovery of the other, moving beyond the selfish character that prevailed earlier.”²⁶ This represents the purification of love, now seeking permanence. “Love embraces the whole of existence in each of its dimensions, including the dimension of time. It could hardly be otherwise, since its promise looks towards its definitive goal: love looks to the eternal.”²⁷

This striving for the eternal, although it is of course something impossible to achieve in this life, is still a worthy aim, for its achievement is possible in the next. The liturgy, in the view of Pope Benedict, is our primary world mode of participating in the joy and permanence of heaven: “For us, the Eucharistic banquet is a real foretaste of the final banquet foretold by the prophets (cf. *Is* 25:6-9) and described in the New Testament as ‘the marriage-feast of the Lamb’ (Rev 19:7-9), to be celebrated in the joy of the

²⁵ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 7.

²⁶ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 6.

²⁷ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 6.

communion of saints.”²⁸ “Receiving the Eucharist means adoring him whom we receive. Only in this way do we become one with him, and are given, as it were, a foretaste of the beauty of the heavenly liturgy.”²⁹ As Ratzinger describes in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, “Christian liturgy is always a cosmic liturgy.... The Preface, the first part of the Eucharistic Prayer, always ends with the affirmation that we are singing ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ together with the cherubim and seraphim and with all the choirs of heaven.... In the celebration of Holy Mass, we insert ourselves into this liturgy that always goes before us. All our singing is a singing and praying with the great liturgy that spans the whole of creation.”³⁰

In heaven, as we know from Scripture, the love between men and women will be perfected and will exist in a way different than those forms with which we are familiar. Likewise, our experience of music will likely be quite different in a world without death and decay. Nevertheless, these great blessings of love and music that God has bestowed upon us, the example of his love for men and his own song of creation, can be of great assistance to us in this life, helping us to compose our own love-song for the Lord.

²⁸ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 31.

²⁹ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 66.

³⁰ Ratzinger, *Spirit*, 152.