

Introitus: The Entrance Chant of the mass in the Roman Rite

The Introit (*introitus* in Latin) is the proper chant which begins the Roman rite Mass. There is a unique introit with its own proper text for each Sunday and feast day of the Roman liturgy. The introit is essentially an antiphon or refrain sung by a choir, with psalm verses sung by one or more cantors or by the entire choir. Like all Gregorian chant, the introit is in Latin, sung in unison, and with texts from the Bible, predominantly from the Psalter. The introits are found in the chant book with all the Mass propers, the *Graduale Romanum*, which was published in 1974 for the liturgy as reformed by the Second Vatican Council. (Nearly all the introit chants are in the same place as before the reform.) Some other chant genres (e.g. the gradual) are formulaic, but the introits are not. Rather, each introit antiphon is a very unique composition with its own character.

Tradition has claimed that Pope St. Gregory the Great (d.604) ordered and arranged all the chant propers, and Gregorian chant takes its very name from the great pope. But it seems likely that the proper antiphons including the introit were selected and set a bit later in the seventh century under one of Gregory's successors. They were sung for papal liturgies by the pope's choir, which consisted of deacons and choirboys. The melodies then spread from Rome northward throughout Europe by musical missionaries who knew all the melodies for the entire church year by heart. Most scholars believe that the melodies of the Mass propers were adapted and adjusted in the later 8th century in modern day France into the form in which they have come down to us.

We read the following about the entrance chant in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* no. 47: "The purpose of this chant is to open the celebration, foster the unity of those who have been gathered, introduce their thoughts to the mystery of the liturgical season or festivity, and accompany the procession of the priest and ministers." Although current legislation allows the use of any freely chosen hymn, song or chant which fulfills these purposes, it is significant that the *General Instruction* lists the proper introit antiphon as the first choice. Listening to the choir can also be a means of participating actively. The people "unite themselves interiorly to what the ministers or choir sing, so that by listening to them they may raise their minds to God" (*Musicam Sacram*, Roman instruction of 1967, no. 15). As the proper introit is sung, the congregation is united in its spiritual purpose as its thoughts turn to the liturgy to be celebrated and the ministers process to the sanctuary.

Before the reform the common practice was to sing the antiphon, then one psalm verse, then the doxology *Gloria Patri* ("Glory to the Father..."), and finally the antiphon again. The earlier practice in the first millennium had been to sing the antiphon three times, at the beginning, after the psalm verse, and after the doxology, and this threefold repetition was given a Trinitarian situation and the length of the procession. Several psalm verses might be sung; the doxology might be omitted; the antiphon might be sung only once.

Such flexibility is a feature of the reformed liturgy: *Musicam Sacram*, which warmly recommends the use of Latin chant in the reformed liturgy, also states at no. 33, "It is desirable that the assembly of the faithful should participate in the songs of the Proper as

much as possible, especially through simple responses and other suitable settings.” This means that liturgy planners will take into account many things as they make use of the treasures of chant, such as the abilities of the choir, the nature of the congregation, and the overall plan of the liturgy with its many modes of participation. Mass might begin with a vernacular congregational antiphon, or a congregational hymn, or a vernacular choir setting of the proper entrance antiphon, or, when one is blessed with rich musical resources, the proper Gregorian chant introit will be sung.

The names of some introits are well-known, even if not everyone realizes where the name comes from. The Requiem Mass – the funeral Mass – takes its name from the first words of the introit, “Requiem aeternam.” Laetare Sunday in Advent and Gaudete Sunday in Lent are named for the first words of the introit of the day. The hunchback of Notre Dame, Quasimodo, got his name from the introit for the Second Sunday of Easter, “Quasi mode geniti infants,” “Like newborn babes.” To this day, German Lutherans name every Sunday of the church year according to the opening words of the proper Latin introit.

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