

CHAPTER 1

A BRIEF LOOK
AT THE HISTORY OF
CHANT

The sacred universe
into which Gregorian chant introduces us
is the world of prayer—
or, if you prefer, of union with God,
which is the ultimate goal of prayer.¹

—*Dom Jacques Hourlier*



WHAT IS CHANT?

What is this thing called “plainsong,” or as it is sometimes referred to, “plainchant,” or “Gregorian chant,” or simply “the chant”? In a nutshell, the chant is the unique music of Western Christianity and our closest living link with the church of the first centuries. In a broader context, it is truly the foundation of all our Western music.

“The chant grew originally out of the music of the Jewish ritual. The first Christians, themselves Jews, . . . brought into their worship the ancient Jewish custom of chanting aloud the books of the Bible. The melodies they used brought out the meaning of the words, made the text audible to a large gathering of people, and added beauty and dignity to the reading. In particular, the chanting of the psalms was to become the firm basis for all future Christian worship.”²

Indeed, “the practice of singing psalms in the name of the Lord is observed everywhere,” wrote Eusebius, the great church historian of the early fourth century. In pagan Rome, Christians were persecuted and often martyred, so they were forced to meet clandestinely in house churches and in the catacombs in order to pray together. A major aspect of their worship was the singing of psalms and other Scriptures. As Christianity spread among Gentiles, groups began to develop regular times throughout the day to assemble for prayer. This was one way of following the New Testament injunction to “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

During the following centuries, the practice of gathering for prayer several times a day continued—at first secretly during the periods of persecution, and then openly after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century.

In the eastern part of the Roman Empire, Greek was the primary language. In the West, it was natural for the ancient prayers to be sung in Latin. As these times of prayer evolved, they came to be known as the Liturgy of the Hours, or the Divine Office. “Liturgy” comes from a Greek word for a public duty or service undertaken by a citizen. “Office”

comes from the Latin word meaning “duty”—therefore “Divine Office” simply means “Sacred Duty.” The terms “Divine” and “Office” recognize the Christian’s sacred duty to pray continually.

WHO IS SAINT BENEDICT AND WHAT WAS HIS INVOLVEMENT WITH THE CHANT?

In Europe, numerous forms of the Liturgy of the Hours developed. In the sixth century, Saint Benedict wrote his *Rule*—a handbook for monks and nuns on how to live together in community. In the *Rule* Benedict prescribed a regular rhythm of life revolving around chanted prayer offices. Benedict’s *Rule*, and his pattern of singing the chant offices spread throughout the West, leading to the establishment of hundreds of monasteries—and along with them, the widespread use of chant in worship. Though Benedict borrowed from earlier monastic practices, it was his form that would become the basis of all Western monastic prayer.

Few details are known about Benedict’s life. He was born in Nursia (Italy) in about AD 480. He studied in Rome, where, confronted with the immorality and corruption of society, he decided to withdraw from the world and seek a life of dedication to God. For a time he lived as a hermit in a cave at Subiaco, but soon a community of men grew up around him. After a time, he moved with a small group of followers to Monte Cassino, where he remained until his death, sometime after 546. It was during his time at Monte Cassino that Benedict wrote the *Rule* for his followers.

Benedict's *Rule* stressed the ideals of the monastic life as it had evolved in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine, but tempered these with sensible and practical instructions designed to assist ordinary people in their pursuit of God. Two generations after Benedict's death, Pope Gregory I described the *Rule* as "remarkable for its discretion and its clarity of language." Benedict's knowledge and acceptance of human weaknesses led him to address such practical issues as food, drink, sleep, and work, as well as the spiritual virtues that should come to mark the life of each monk. In his organization of the corporate life of the monastery, he envisioned the community as a family in which the abbot served his fellow monks as a loving father, and they, in turn, learned to serve and care for one another.

The *Rule* set up a framework in which each individual could develop a daily relationship with God. Benedict planned a well-balanced schedule that divided the monastic day in this manner:

- the chanting of the psalms (*Opus Dei* in Latin, meaning "the work of God")
- manual work
- the study of Scripture and holy books.

Benedict left no question as to the hierarchy of these activities, stating simply, "Nothing is to be preferred to the work of God." This is evident in that he devoted twelve full chapters of the *Rule* (out of a total of seventy-three) to the chanting of the psalms.

THE MONASTIC DAY

As with everything else in the *Rule*, Benedict's rationale for the structure and content of each office was rooted in Scripture and in pastoral common sense. By following an ancient biblical practice of praying seven times during the day ("Seven times a day I praise you."—Psalm 119:164a), and once at night ("At midnight I rise to give you thanks."—Psalm 119:62a), those who followed Benedict's *Rule* recited the entire Psalter each week and still kept a balance between worship and manual work.

The Night Office, or *Matins*, was set in the middle of the night, while the Day Offices were spread more or less evenly throughout the daylight hours: *Lauds*, at daybreak, followed by *Prime*, *Terce*, *Sext*, *None*, *Vespers*, and, finally, *Compline* in the evening. Each of these times of prayer is commonly called an "office."

As precise as Benedict was in setting forth the schedule for the monk's day, he allowed for the possibility of each monastic house adapting the schedule to fit its own needs. This flexibility is part of the reason Benedict had such an enormous effect on religious and secular life over the ensuing centuries: it has allowed those who follow the *Rule* to adapt to various cultures and times.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Christians of many traditions wrestled with how to maintain the round of daily offices in the midst of the pressures of modern life and demanding ministries. Many modern monastic houses, including the Community of Jesus, have heeded Benedict's suggestion and have altered their schedules to

better fit their own unique circumstances. By observing four offices a day (Lauds, Midday, Vespers, and Compline), we at the Community of Jesus keep the spirit of Benedict's *Rule* while realistically adjusting it to the demands of modern life.

THE FLOWERING OF CHANT

In the ninth century, Charlemagne joined various strands of spiritual practice—all having their roots in the ancient church—to help solidify his kingdom. Gregorian chant, as one of these strands, became a unifying force in Christian worship in an empire that included large portions of Western Europe. Although the Holy Roman Empire crumbled after Charlemagne's death, the form of chant that he promoted continued in practice throughout the West for centuries.

During these centuries, monks made two major contributions to chant. First, they organized the chants into an ancient Greek system of eight modes (we'll say more about modes in chapter 8). And second, the monks invented a way to write down the notes using elaborate markings called *neumes*—in some ways they resemble modern shorthand. The neumes represented the shape and the line of a melody.

The earliest chant melodies were simple, much as we would consider a children's hymn to be simple. When later chants were sung to more fluid and elaborate melodies, they still maintained their purity of form designed primarily to enhance the sound and emphasize the meaning of the words.

THE STANDARDIZATION AND CHANGE IN PERFORMANCE STYLE

For several hundred years, regional variations of the chant continued in what was primarily an oral tradition handed down from one singer to another. Then in the eleventh century, the Italian monk Guido d'Arezzo invented a system of lines and letters to portray the chant melodies. By the end of the twelfth century, square shapes began to be used to indicate pitch. When you look at sheet music or a hymnbook, you see that the music is represented by lines and notes. Modern music uses a later development of what Guido d'Arezzo invented.

Once chant music could be written down, using the newly invented line-and-square note system, the ancient neumes fell out of use. However, while the new notation could show pitches, as does modern musical notation, the system of lines and notes could not show the fluid nuances of rhythm portrayed by the ancient neumes. The oral tradition that had been handed down for generations began to die out and a heavier style of chant developed. This style came to be known as “plainchant,” and remained the style for chant performance until the middle of the nineteenth century.

RESTORATION AND NEW INTEREST IN CHANT

In the 1830s, the young French monk Dom Prosper Guéranger reopened the vacant monastery of Solesmes in his hometown of Sablé, and charged his monks with the task of restoring chant to its former

beauty. This restoration consisted of two primary components: the study of ancient manuscripts and the development of a lighter style of chanting where “words took on their true meaning, and the musical phrases recovered much of their natural suppleness and beauty.”³ By the 1850s, Solesmes monks were copying chant manuscripts from all over Europe. Carefully comparing manuscripts containing the ancient neumes to manuscripts containing lines and notes, they set about to determine how the chant would have been sung in its original form.

By the 1880s, Solesmes monks were printing chant books based on the old sources. For years, controversy raged between those who advocated “plainchant” and the Solesmes monks who advocated returning the chant to its expressive, ancient form. In 1903 Pope Pius X authorized the monks of Solesmes to prepare editions of chant for the Mass of the entire Roman Catholic Church, and during the next sixty years, the “Solesmes Method” of chant was taught throughout Europe and North America. Even as scholars debated the value of the Solesmes teachings, the recordings of the Solesmes monks became popular, and their books were widely distributed.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a deeper understanding of chant taught by Dom Eugène Cardine, a monk of Solesmes, brought about the publication of chant books containing both line and note music as well as representations of various forms of ancient neumes. These books allowed singers to read the melodies using the lines and notes, and yet grasp the subtle nuances of the chants portrayed by the ancient neumes. Before his death in 1988, Dom Cardine insisted that the restoration work should be ongoing, and that he was leaving it to his successors to continue the search for the truth and beauty contained in the ancient chants.

ADAPTING THE DIVINE OFFICE TO A CHANGING WORLD

In the second half of the twentieth century, many churches, Catholic and Protestant, felt the need to reform and renew their liturgy, bringing it up to date with the needs of a modern world that had been devastated by two world wars. The renewal in the Roman Catholic Church took place under Pope John XXIII, who convened the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). Observers from Protestant denominations were invited to witness the events that took place.

As part of the overall renewal of the Catholic liturgy, the Divine Office underwent reforms in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Much reflection went into the question of what material is needed to form an office. The council concluded that four elements were essential: a hymn, psalmody, a reading, and prayers. Under this wide umbrella, there is room to fit the particular needs of every community.

CHANT TODAY

In recent years, chant has had a rebirth in the church and, perhaps somewhat more astonishingly, among the general public! The world of music was startled by the sudden popularity of an album of chant, released first as a phonograph record and re-released by Angel Records as a CD in 1994. This CD was recorded by the monks of the Spanish monastery Santo Domingo de Silos. Entitled simply *Chant*, the album peaked at number three on the *Billboard* 200 music chart and was certified as triple platinum, making it the best-selling album of Gregorian chant

ever released. Indeed, Gregorian chant as a form of church music has made a resurgence in the eyes and ears of the general public.

Other forces have also converged to bring the chant into the popular realm, as many people across the world who would otherwise have never known of the chant, are finding that the “sacred universe” into which chant introduces us really is available to them. Pope Benedict XVI has, from the beginning of his papacy, said that Gregorian chant has a very unique place in the life of the church, in the liturgy, and in sacred music.

The work of chant restoration continues. Throughout the world, numerous groups promote the singing of chant, including the scholas of the American choir, *Gloriæ Dei Cantores*, based at the Community of Jesus. While chant recordings are no longer reaching the triple platinum level, they continue to sell widely and steadily. In a world filled with noise, stress, and anxiety, the sounds of monks or nuns singing in a quiet church, filling it with ancient strains of praise to God can bring an otherworldly comfort.

However, as beautiful as it may sound, chant was not intended simply to be heard. The only way to fully explore its purpose and depth of meaning is to actively participate in it. People who offer their prayers using chant find themselves caught up in something much larger than themselves and are rewarded with unexpected fruit—just as Christians have been discovering for over 1500 years.

CHAPTER 2

CHANT IS FOR EVERYONE

When sung in Gregorian chant,
the prayer of the Church is supported
by the best music there is
for nourishing the soul, music which is also
an artistic masterpiece.⁴

—Dom Jacques Hourlier



A DAILY RHYTHM OF PRAYER

Prayer chanted at various times spaced throughout the day provides a rhythm of prayer by which we offer praise to God and ponder his Word. The very act of chanting helps us lift our bodies and engage our minds in a way not common to everyday conversation. By taking time out of our busy day to keep this rhythm, we are reminded that the source and the meaning of our lives are to be found beyond the mundane tasks that otherwise define our daily schedules. Through these chanted prayers, whether

we are alone or with others, we become part of a company of voices worshipping God.

An image sometimes used to describe the daily rhythm of prayer is that of a bridge between temporal time and eternity. The hours of prayer are the pylons that support this bridge and sustain the “traffic” that goes back and forth. When we engage in chant, we enter into eternal time and into Jesus Christ’s presence in a particularly effective manner. In this way, we pilgrims, passing through this world, maintain a connection with our eternal home.

Even if we chant just one prayer each day, we join in the ceaseless round of prayer and praise that flows upward to God from every corner of the world. Even when we sing chant by ourselves, *we are never alone.*

PROTESTANTS AND THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS

Today, many Protestants sing the Liturgy of the Hours in some form as prescribed by Benedict.

In the sixteenth century, the rhythm of work, study, and prayer that characterized monastic life came to an end in the parts of Europe that were affected by the Protestant Reformation. Throughout these lands, monasteries were dissolved and seized or sold, and the monks and nuns often were forced to learn a trade and live “secular” lives.

Although the institutions that practiced chant were no longer in existence, the regular rhythm of prayer that they practiced continued.

In Germany, “[Martin] Luther embraced the Liturgy of the Hours as the prayer services of the whole church, laity and clergy alike. . . . Luther used the Daily Office as the foundation for his devotional life and his prayers.”⁵

In Britain, the long tradition of the Liturgy of the Hours continued in the Anglican Church, and the offices were sung or said in English. The Book of Common Prayer incorporated the morning chant offices into the service of Morning Prayer, and the evening chant offices into the service of Evening Prayer. The office of Compline was renamed Night Prayer.

Several centuries after the Reformation, many Protestants felt called to return to formal monastic life. Despite a long period of prohibition, small groups of men and women formed communities that practiced Benedict’s *Rule* while remaining in their Protestant denominations. Today, one can find Anglican Benedictine communities, Episcopal Benedictine communities, Lutheran Benedictine communities, and ecumenical Benedictine communities, such as the Community of Jesus. In one form or another, these modern communities observe the Liturgy of the Hours.

CHANT AT THE COMMUNITY OF JESUS

The Community of Jesus, Orleans, Massachusetts, is an ecumenical monastic community in the Benedictine tradition, which strives to hold in balance the values inherent in work, study, and prayer. Since its inception, the Community of Jesus has held as its primary vocation the worship of Almighty God. To that end, a regular rhythm of prayer in word and sacrament has evolved, including the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the

Hours. Members of the Community of Jesus gather several times a day for chant services, and we would like to use one of these services to help introduce you to chant—the office of Compline.

Compline is sung in the evening, completing the day and “putting the church to bed.” Originally, Compline consisted of very simple and easily memorized psalms and prayers, so that before electric lights were invented, monks could sing this office in their dormitory with little or no light. It was not until later in the Middle Ages that the office was moved into the church, providing the possibility of illumination by a few candles.

Compline is part of the heritage of the universal church and the singing of Compline is a wonderful way to finish the day and prepare for rest. It’s appropriate to chant Compline alone, but you might want to invite others to join you. You can sing with family or friends, such as a prayer group, a Bible study, a small group meeting, or a house church, and you can sing it in your home, church, or a place that works best for you. Wherever and with whomever you sing, you can be sure that you’re joining with millions of others who are praising God, using the time-honored, beautiful sounds of chant.

CHANTING IN LATIN

After the Second Vatican Council, some communities kept the beautiful Gregorian melodies but substituted their own language for the Latin. The use of a modern language makes the texts immediately accessible to both singer and listener. However, because the melodies were created originally for Latin texts, they often needed to be adapted to fit

the speech patterns of the modern language. Other communities elected to retain Latin for the Liturgy of the Hours. Still other communities chose to combine elements of Latin and their own language in their chant offices. The Community of Jesus belongs in this third category.

There are good reasons for continuing the use of Latin. For centuries, Latin was the language of worship in the West. While modern languages were developing, Latin was a constant presence in most of the Western church for more than a thousand years. Those who sing chant in Latin use the same words, and perhaps the same melodies, that have sustained worship for sixty generations of Christians. Those who sing Compline in Latin may well be chanting the same words and using the same melodies as Christians from the time of Constantine, the time of Charlemagne, the time of Saint Francis of Assisi, and the time of the Protestant Reformation.

Since the Latin words and the melodies were vitally linked, something is lost in this “marriage” if one of the partners were to change identity: it would no longer be the same union, and therefore it would no longer convey the meaning in the same way.

Reformers, such as Thomas Cranmer in England, Jean Calvin in Geneva, and Martin Luther in Germany, favored changing to the common dialects of their respective countries. Adopting the native language of a people, whether English, French, or German, was an important element of the Reformation, because for the first time it made the offices understandable to the laity who no longer knew Latin. Now, five centuries after the Reformation, many Protestants are rediscovering the value of singing Gregorian chant as it was originally

written. When we chant the ancient texts, we are united with others who speak a different modern language but incorporate Latin in their worship. The choice to use Latin in worship is made, not to preserve Gregorian chant as a museum exhibit for the modern world, but rather to plunge ourselves into a current of prayer and praise that will help to transform us.



No matter which language is used for the Liturgy of the Hours, Christians continue to enjoy this ancient and beautiful song of prayer to offer praise to God.

*Before you read the next chapter, please take time to listen to the Compline office on **TRACK 1** of the CD that accompanies this book—it's about fifteen minutes long. The words and music for the office of Compline are given in Appendix E, but we encourage you to just listen to it first.*

CHAPTER 3

PRAYING WITH THE
BODY AS WELL AS
WITH THE VOICE



Both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures tell us that true worship involves the whole person—the body as well as the mind and heart. In other words, there is meaning in what we *do* as well as in what we say.

When we sing chant in Latin, we have plenty to keep our minds occupied: singing the melodies of the psalms, pronouncing the Latin words properly, and trying to understand the meaning of what we are chanting. At the same time, our bodies can also be fully involved in several ways, through various postures and gestures. Our bodies carry and

express the prayer and aspirations of our hearts, much as a hug can say “I love you” more effectively than words alone.

BOWING

In every office there are specific points when it is traditional to bow. These include any time we acknowledge the Holy Trinity with the words *Glória Patri, et Fílio, et Spirítui Sancto* (Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit). This happens in the opening of the office and at the end of each psalm: we bow as we sing those words, and we come back upright at the words *Sicut erat in princípío* (as it was in the beginning . . .).

Likewise, we bow during the final verse of the hymn, when extolling the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We also bow during the Lord’s Prayer, rising up again at the words *Et ne nos indúcas in tentatiónem* (and lead us not into temptation). We bow again during the collect (a short prayer at the end of the service).

If you are singing the office of Compline in a church, you might consider opening and closing the office by bowing toward the altar out of reverence for God, and, if others are singing with you, you may follow this by a half bow to the other person(s), as a sign of reverence for the presence of Christ in them.

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

So that we may all begin the office in unison—with one gesture as well as with one voice—as we chant the opening versicle, *Deus in*

adiutórium meum inténde (O God, come to my assistance), we make the sign of the cross: the four underlined syllables are the moments when we touch our forehead, our heart, our left shoulder, and then our right shoulder.

The sign of the cross is an ancient gesture. As far back as the third century, there is evidence that Christians “sealed” themselves on the forehead with this sign, both as a symbol of mutual recognition in times of persecution and as a way of sanctifying themselves and the activities of daily life. Soon thereafter, the sign of the cross was employed at both baptism and confirmation, symbolizing a seal of ownership, by which the candidate was reminded that he or she belonged to God. As a liturgical action, this sign came to be used for the blessing of both persons and things. Later, the simple gesture of making the sign upon one’s forehead developed into what we now know as the tracing of the cross upon our bodies.

SITTING AND STANDING

We begin and end the office standing. Standing is a sign of reverence to God. As shown in paintings on the walls of the catacombs in Rome, the early Christians used to pray standing, with their arms uplifted. Although less familiar to us, standing was, for many centuries, the usual posture for communal prayer, and it is still the norm in Eastern Orthodox churches. In the Liturgy of the Hours, following the antiphon and intonation of the first half of the first psalm verse, we sit for the psalm. We stand again after chanting the first half of the last verse of

each psalm, and bow for the *Glória Patri*. Through all of these gestures, we are, as creatures, paying homage to God, our Creator, and to his majesty, and thus the gestures carry a weight of meaning far beyond the actual motions we make.

If we remind ourselves of the significance of what we are doing and fully enter into it, these actions will add another dimension to our worship. They will, in turn, shape us. As George Guiver, superior of the Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield, England, put it: “The world is real, and prayer is real. If both are brought together, both will be more real still. . . . It is therefore inevitable that Christian prayer, no less than Christian service, will demand a living-to-the-full of the incarnation. . . . We cannot be human this side of the veil without our body, and neither can we be Christian. . . . It is a great mistake to believe we can leave our body out of prayer.”⁶



Now that we have looked at some of the history of the chant, and some of the mechanics accompanying it, we will learn how to sing it.