

Saturday 11th July 2009

Dear Pueri Cantores,
Dear boys and girls,

I am very happy to celebrate this mass together with you. Since you have come to Stockholm from all over Europe, from Germany, France, Italy, Poland, and of course, Sweden, I could not miss the chance of coming here as well from Rome to be with you. I bring you Pope Benedict's warmest greetings. As you know, the Pope is very fond of church music. Even if he is not here, he feels very close to all of you and thanks you for your "musical" commitment. He sends you his blessing for this meeting in Stockholm.

The fact that this European meeting is taking place today is very appropriate. Today we celebrate a saint who contributed greatly to Church music. I am referring to Saint Benedict, the founder of the Benedictine Order, which developed in the whole of Europe and throughout the world. In his rules, Saint Benedict establishes precisely which psalms had to be sung on specific days and at specific times of the day. The Benedictine Order became one of the main promoters of Gregorian choir music, which are the basis and the model for all later Church music.

The Sunday Gospel tells us why we sing during the Mass and during the celebration of the Eucharist. The Gospel recounts that Jesus sent his disciples to chase away the evil spirits. Evil spirits exist even today. They are those spirits that make us feel miserable, passive, disheartened and deprive us of the joy of living. They make us see only the ugly and nasty things in the world and in our lives, all the worse things that people inflict upon each other. They paint everything black.

Jesus wanted to chase away those negative spirits. Through his death on the cross and his resurrection, he defeated all evil powers – deception, hatred, violence –, and offered to us the most precious gift: love, joy, hope and true life. Jesus himself sang while going to the olive grove together with his disciples. He knew that his suffering – that suffering in general – would not have the last word: Good will prevail in the end. God and his kingdom will have the upper hand.

Each time that we celebrate the Eucharist, we celebrate this victory of life over death, love over hatred. This is why early Christian communities – just like us today – were used to singing while celebrating the Eucharist, as a sign of gratitude for new hope and new life in Christ. Singing is therefore part and parcel of the Eucharist celebration, which is a form of thanksgiving. The most famous hymn is the Alleluia - give praise and thanks to the Lord for he is great and good; Gloria in excelsis Deo - glory to God in the highest and peace to the people on earth; Holy, holy, holy, God of might and power.

Singing is a wonderful gift. It can be heard but not seen or grasped. It is a mysterious reality. Through it, we can express our deepest feelings – sadness, joy, hope, love -, and share them with others. Even those who cannot understand our language can understand our music. Music is the language of the heart: it passes directly from one heart to the other.

This enables you to be here in Stockholm and sing together with other young people whose language you do not know. And while you sing together, all barriers of language and nationality are overcome and a new wider community takes shape. Singing creates new bonds and chases away the evil spirits of mutual distrust, hostility and hatred. Singing unites people and promotes peace. Singing and playing music together is therefore a great peace movement; I would say, the most beautiful one. And you belong to this movement too.

Today even Christians who, sadly, are otherwise divided – Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox – are united through singing. Catholics sing Johann Sebastian Bach, the greatest Protestant composer of Church music. Protestants sing Hayden and Mozart, the greatest Catholic masters. And we are all deeply touched by the beautiful Russian Orthodox singing with those warm bass voices. Thank to God, Church music is today ecumenical; it has become a true bridge between Churches.

They lift our soul from our normal – often banal – world of visible things up to a new spiritual world, where we come closer to God. When we sing, we show that there is more than all that we can see and touch, eat and drink, own and keep. The visible world with its material pleasures is not all; it is not even the most important part of our life. There is something other that fills our hearts with joy. Only God is great enough to fill our deep desire for happiness. We should be immensely grateful to him, and sing to him as often as we can.

It is rightly said that angels in heaven sing and play music. Through our singing, you can and should already bring a piece of heaven onto earth. Through your singing, you are ambassadors of this other new world, you are messengers of the good news of the Gospel, you can disclose a part of heaven to other people, comfort them, make them happy and chase away their bad spirits by giving them hope and trust.

We can find many examples of songs in the Bible. I have already mentioned Jesus and Mary. But we can go further back in the Scriptures. It is said that, after crossing the Red Sea safely, the Israelites sang to the Lord: “I will sing to God, for he is highly exalted”. It is then recounted that Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took the tambourine in her hand and all women followed her with tambourines and dances. Furthermore we know that David especially was fond of music; he was a singer and composer to whom the tradition ascribes many of the psalms. The psalms mention cymbals, harps, horns, drums that were used to praise the Lord. Even the Apostle Paul encourages us to sing. He urges us: “Let the word of

Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God”.

Some saints are associated with music more than others. I have already mentioned Saint Benedict. I could also add Pope Gregory the Great, after whom Gregorian chant is named, as well as Saint Cecilia, the great patroness of Church music, who is commonly portrayed with an organ. Saint Cecilia is a martyr of the time for the early Christian persecutions. Before dying, she was brutally tortured. That did not prevent her from singing, thanks to her joy and hope in eternal life. She overcame the evil spirits through her singing, and through her singing she had the upper hand over the cruelty inflicted upon her.

Dear Pueri Cantores, dear boys and girls, thank you for your singing. Thank you for the apostolate of your singing. Thank you for chasing away the evil spirits, for bringing to others the joyful message of our faith and making it seep into their hearts. Thank you for helping us to beautifully shape the Mass, our thanksgiving to the Lord. Praising the Lord is our task as well as yours. I hope that praising the Lord will make your heart grow wider and wider, more and more joyful. Sing to the Lord! To sing the joy of our faith is our strength. Amen.