

Pope Benedict Defends Instruments And Images

by Steve Gibson

A noteworthy discussion of the Roman Catholic perspective on instrumental music in worship is found in the recently translated work of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000). It is undoubtedly an historic statement of the Catholic position. For as the book jacket explains, “Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, was for over two decades the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Pope John Paul II. He is a renowned theologian and author of numerous works.” Of especial interest to controversialists is the third part of his book concerning “Art and Liturgy,” which addresses “The Question of Images” (chapter one, pages 115-135), followed by a discussion of “Music and Liturgy” (chapter two, pages 136-156).

Although Pope Benedict defends the modern Church’s use of musical instruments in worship, he admits, significantly, that the early church did not use them. Benedict grants that the Apostolic church employed a “purely vocal style of singing taken over from the synagogue” (p. 144). It was not until “the late Middle Ages” that “instruments came back into divine worship,” based on the argument that the Church was not only to continue the traditions of the synagogue, but also those of the temple (p. 145).

The Pope also acknowledges that the late introduction of instruments was neither quietly nor universally accepted. Benedict admits that in the matter of “sacred music, we come up against the special path trod by the West as opposed to the East” (p. 166). Contrasting “the East” (Greek Orthodox) with “the West” (Roman Catholic), he no doubt alludes to the former Church’s unremitting opposition to instrumental music in worship. Pope Benedict also alludes to the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers’ challenge to Catholic instruments, noting that “the Council of Trent intervened in the culture war that had broken out” and made it a “norm that liturgical music should be at the service of the Word,” after which “the use of instruments was substantially reduced” (p. 146).

Pope Benedict maintains that the New Testament’s specification of singing does not exclude the use of instruments. Summarizing the teachings of Trent, he affirms, “Singing in the liturgy has priority over instrumental music, though it does not in any way exclude it” (p. 149). The Pope argues that the example of the early church does not bear exclusive force, because the subsequent introduction of instrumental music was a “lawful development” that occurred in harmony with “the Tradition of faith” (pp. 82, 166). Benedict restates the long-standing Roman Catholic position: “In addition to congregational singing, Christian liturgy of its very nature finds a suitable place for the choir, and for musical instruments, too, which no purism about collective singing should be allowed to contest” (p. 209).

Interestingly, Pope Benedict likens the Church’s right to add instruments to her power to issue authoritative creeds. He explains, “The authority of the liturgy can certainly be compared to that of the great confessions of faith of the early Church. Like these, it developed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 16:13)” (p. 167). This is why the Pope terms instrumental music a “lawful development” (p. 166). The Roman Catholic view is that the Holy Spirit continued to guide the post-apostolic church through doctrinal “developments” revealed to its inspired hierarchy.

In this connection, Pope Benedict classes the use of instruments with the use of images. The

very structure and arrangement of his treatise on the liturgy confirms that sacred instruments and sacred statues are essentially parallel. It is significant that the Pope classifies these two historic questions together and seeks to resolve them both by appeal to a common rationale. Benedict argues that both practices find precedent in Solomon's temple, pointing to its statuesque Cherubim and priestly instruments (pp. 115, 145). Perhaps, it is not just a coincidence that instruments and images both flourished in the thirteenth-century, when the Catholic Church rediscovered its "temple" roots (pp. 124, 133-134, 145). Claiming a right to reproduce the ark and harps from temple scenes in the Book of Revelation, the Pope says, "This art is intended to insert us into the liturgy of heaven" (p. 130; cf. p. 137 citing Rev. 15:3).

Accordingly, the Pope unabashedly advocates adoring statues of canonized "saints" and would have icons displayed for devotees at every house of worship. He states categorically, "Images of beauty, in which the mystery of the invisible God becomes visible, are an essential part of Christian worship" (p. 131). Benedict especially lauds statues of Mary, saying, "What power of inward devotion lies in the images of the Mother of God!" Such images are "an invitation to prayer, because they are permeated with prayer from within" (p. 128). Benedict opines that "iconostasis" lends the house of worship "a sense of the sacred that can touch the hearts even of agnostics" (p. 129).

In support of these images, Pope Benedict cites 2 Corinthians 3:18. "Sacred art stands beneath the imperative stated in the second epistle to the Corinthians. Gazing at the Lord, we are 'changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit' (3:18)" (pp. 134-135). However, express authority for this admitted innovation is only found in the creeds promulgated by later church councils. Benedict states, "The Second Council of Nicea and all the following councils concerned with icons regard it as a confession of faith in the Incarnation and iconoclasm as a denial of the Incarnation, as the summation of all heresies" (p. 122).

It is only this same specie of authority that the Pope can offer in defense of instrumental music in worship. Benedict makes passing reference to Ephesians 5:19 as a proof-text for church instruments, saying, "The Greek Bible translated the Hebrew *zamir* by the word *psallein*, which in Greek meant 'to pluck' (especially in the sense of a stringed instrument) but now became the word for the special kind of instrumental playing used in Jewish worship and later described the singing of Christians" (pp. 142-143). However, the Pope's second proof-text is worth about as much as his first, because there is admittedly no evidence that the apostolic church employed either instruments or images. Once again, the underlying assumption is the authority of councils and creeds. According to Pope Benedict, images were confirmed as a lawful development of apostolic doctrine at the Second Council of Nicea (A.D. 787), while instruments were confirmed by the Council of Trent (A. D. 1545-1563) (pp. 122, 146). Once again, it is of the greatest significant that the Pope classifies these two historic issues together and seeks to resolve them both by appeal to a common hermeneutical standard addressing a broader underlying principle. That principle is the Catholic concept of Church Authority, as opposed to the Protestant concept of Scriptural Authority. The Catholic notion of continuing revelation, doctrinal development, creedal pronouncement, and the resulting authority of tradition is the very antithesis of the Protestant plea of *sola scriptura*, or appeal to the Bible alone.

Pope Benedict acknowledges the Protestant alternative, but dismisses it as divisive. He observes that "a not insignificant number of people today are trying to reconstruct the liturgy afresh on the basis of *sola scriptura*," but responds that "the *sola scriptura* principle cannot

provide a foundation for the Church and the commonality of her faith,” the way the long-standing traditions of the Roman Catholic Church can do (pp. 167-168). Benedict maintains that the Catholic Church is consistent to approve both instruments and images, but contends that Martin Luther’s personal inconsistency on matters of worship bequeathed a legacy of confusion to the whole Protestant movement. The Pope’s criticism is thought-provoking, “Despite the radicalism of his reversion to the principle of ‘Scripture alone,’ Luther did not contest the validity of ancient Christian creeds and thereby left behind an inner tension that became the fundamental problem in the history of the Reformation” (p. 167).

It was this very “tension” that the nineteenth-century restoration movement in America sought to resolve by uniformly rejecting all human creeds and adhering to an image-less, instrument-less worship more consistently reflecting the principle of *sola scriptura*, the authority of the Bible alone. It is to be greatly regretted that a sizable digression from this movement later adopted instrumental music in worship—and that based on justifications not dissimilar to the rationales articulated by Pope Benedict himself. Another Benedict, this one a church historian, once observed that staunch reformers in former times “would as soon have tolerated the Pope of Rome in their pulpits as an organ in their galleries” (David Benedict, *Fifty Years Among The Baptists*, 1860, p. 283). However, Pope Benedict’s recent defense of images and instruments reminds one of a stark historical reality. Whenever a congregation employs a preacher who appeals to David’s psalms, Solomon’s temple, Paul’s *psalms*, and John’s harps to sustain the church’s authority to order its worship with instruments, they *do* have “the Pope of Rome in their pulpit”—or at least an ambassador from the Vatican who has borrowed the Pontiff’s own sermon outline!

Moreover, if such papal arguments succeed in justifying musical instruments in the church’s worship, why do they not also serve to justify, as their decorated author insists, the adoration of sacred images? If tradition is the path to unity, and one is a proven aid to devotion—why, oh why, not the other? Are instruments in worship really anything more than musical artwork? It is not without reason that the scholarly cardinal with an assumed name discusses both practices under the heading of “Art and Liturgy.” The Pope observes, “Even in our own time, important works of art, inspired by faith, have been produced and are being produced—in visual art as well as in music” (p. 156).

Regarding both instruments and images, the Pope urges that “the Church as a whole must, for the sake of God, strive for the best,” aesthetically speaking (p. 209). But if the beautiful tones of the organ can “touch the hearts” of unbelievers and stimulate faith in ways that rational influences cannot, then why may the artistic beauty of sacred statuary not be employed to the same end? Does the authority principle have clear application when it comes to pleasing human eyes, but an entirely different meaning when it comes to tickling human ears? Are instruments in church not the auricular equivalent of icons? Where, Protestant iconoclasts, is the consistency in defending Catholic instruments while opposing Catholic images? Paul probes this very sort of self-contradiction when he asks, “Thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege?” (Romans 2:22).

Perhaps, the analogy to idolatry would seem overdrawn, did Pope Benedict himself not admit that both instruments and images entered the church as a result of unspiritual pressure tactics mounted by the uninformed masses. At the very least, Benedict regards both practices as post-apostolic “developments” which originated in concession to worshipers’ demands. The Pope admits, “Popular piety in its many different forms inevitably found expression in the place dedicated to divine worship. The question of sacred images had to be resolved. Church music

had to be fitted into the spatial structure” (p. 74). But what sort of authority derives from “popular piety?” Did Aaron not appeal to “popular piety” to justify the manufacture of his sacred statue, when he explained to Moses, “You know the people, that they are set on mischief” (Exodus 32:22)? Like Aaron, and Saul of Kish after him, it would appear that those who introduced images and instruments into Christian worship also “feared the people and obeyed their voice” (1 Sam. 15:24). Pope Benedict himself seems to acknowledge as much when he observes that, over the course of time, the music of the Church followed “the same pattern” seen “in sacred images” (p. 139).

The Lord Jesus Christ, the true head of the church, warned his disciples against allowing the authority of tradition to determine the means of God’s worship. He taught, “Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition” and “in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:6, 9). He then sent his Holy Spirit to lead the Apostle John to warn against the adoration of material images, admonishing, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). The same apostle also presaged the catholic principle of “doctrinal development,” warning, “Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God” (2 John 9 ASV). The penman of Revelation essentially repeated the same thought when he closed the canon of scripture by saying, “If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book” (Revelation 22:18). In light of these verses, faithful men who find themselves in erring churches at any time and place have no alternative but to “reconstruct” the worship of God “afresh on the basis of *sola scriptura*” (p. 167). Certainly, the words of Christ and his apostles compel all true believers to reject alike the images and instruments of the papal apostasy.

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