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Benedict & Hymnody

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Distinctly Catholic

Pope Benedict was not wrong when he said, in his comments at an ecumenical prayer service in Westminster Abbey, that “the choir sang” the entrance hymn “Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation.” The choir did sing. But, so too did the congregation. As I watched that moment, I wondered if Pope Benedict grasped the beauty of congregational singing.

Hymnody is one of the great Christian art forms but it is largely unknown in the Roman liturgy. Indeed, at the Mass the next day at Westminster Cathedral, most of the singing was choir-only. But, some hymns are like little symphonies, their four-part harmonies creating a beauty that is both accessible and transcendent. They have great didactic value as well: words that are sung are more easily remembered, and the centrality of certain Christian doctrines shines through, animating belief as well as beauty. The contrast between the congregation joining in “Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation” at the Abbey and the Sistine Singers at St. Peter’s must have been noticed by the pontiff’s musical ear. The singing of “Praise to the Holiest in the Height” at the beatification Mass for Cardinal Newman was appropriate not only because Newman wrote the words, but because it was glorious!

During EWTN’s coverage of the papal ceremonies, Mr. Raymond Arroyo and Father Robert Sirico snickered at the inclusion of female altar servers, suggesting it reflected “an agenda” when, in fact, it reflected standard practice in the UK, as it does in the U.S. Sirico also commented that the anthem sung by the choir at Westminster at the start of the service seemed out of place, when it, too, was glorious. There is plenty of room for musical and liturgical diversity in our Catholic faith. I hope Benedict came away from the hymn singing of the Brits with the question, “Why don’t we do that here in Rome?”

Here is the video of the service at Westminster. The hymn begins at 5:10.

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Links:

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/node/160616>