

Homily for the Feast of St Pius X [August 21, 2010]
Secondary Patron of the Archdiocese of Atlanta, Georgia
Opening Mass of the Southeastern Liturgical Music Symposium
Preached by Msgr Andrew Wadsworth, Executive Director of ICEL

On 4 August 1903, when Cardinal Giuseppe Sarto, Patriarch of Venice, was elected pope, nobody could have known that among his most significant legacies would be the reform of liturgical music. Within three months of his election, Pope Pius X published his motu proprio *‘Tra le sollecitudini’* (*‘Among our concerns’*), which laid down principles for a return to the sources of the Church’s liturgical music and a reform that would in many ways introduce ideas that would bear fruit sixty years later when another Patriarch of Venice, Angelo Roncalli, would be pope and as Pope John XXIII would convene the Second Vatican Council.

It has been suggested that the motivating force and guiding hand behind this early concern for liturgical music was Sarto’s friend, the musician Msgr Lorenzo Perosi. Since 1898, Perosi had been Director of the Sistine Chapel Choir and in his own work he had tried to reverse the trend of the day which favoured Classical and Baroque music over Gregorian chant. Pope Pius X announced a return to earlier musical styles, as evidenced by the approach championed by Perosi.

He also ushered in a period of renewed scholarly interest in Gregorian Chant resulting in the publication of new authoritative editions. Pius X’s choice of Dom Joseph Pothier to supervise the production of new editions of the chant led to the official adoption of the Solesmes edition by the Holy See and established the basis for scholarship which continued there throughout the twentieth century and is still authoritative in our own time.

Usually when an account of the life of St Pius X is being given, these details are passed over in preference for his reforms lowering of the age of First Communion, encouraging the frequent reception of Holy Communion or the revision of the Breviary. While these things are obviously very important, the occasion of our Symposium suggests to

me that the significance of today's saint for our own work is something that we could easily miss and that would be a great shame.

As those who serve the Church with our gifts of music, I think we are in continual need of both encouragement and inspiration. Fortunately there is plenty to be had, ready for the taking, in the Church's rich tradition, but often we need someone to help us identify or uncover the most relevant aspects of that tradition for our present tasks and our current needs.

The saints do that for us, for in the extraordinariness of their individual heroic witness and in the unworldliness of their holiness there are also clear indications of those many things which we share with them: not only their concerns but their particular likes and dislikes, their interests, their passions. As an Englishman, I often think of Cardinal (soon to be Blessed) John Henry Newman, who in between writing some of the most sublime theology ever composed in the English language, found recreation playing the viola either alone or in a string quartet.

Music is so very often transparent of the spiritual and nowhere more so than when we celebrate the liturgy. St Pius X understood that and greatly desired to bring about a renewal of the music of the liturgy that would enable it to be a more effective vehicle of the truths it expresses. In that first 'moto proprio', he wrote:

“Since [its] Sacred Music's chief function is to clothe with suitable melody the liturgical text presented for the understanding of the faithful, its own proper end is to make the text more meaningful for them”¹

I think that is as true today as when St Pius X wrote it, over a hundred years ago. In many ways it defines our task and implies an itinerary for our deliberations together. I pray that this great saint will be with us to share in our work and help us to find good paths for the renewal of our liturgy. St Pius X: pray for us!

¹ Tra le sollecitudine, 222,19