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Between Medieval And Folk, Two Mass Audiences

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Catholics don't argue about abortion or the death penalty nearly as much as they argue about what music is sung (or not sung, or used to be sung) at their local Sunday Mass. It was ever thus -- at least since the 1960s, when Sister first shortened her habit, strummed a G7 chord and, to hear some Catholics tell it, all heck broke loose.

Among his more fastidious devotees, [Pope Benedict XVI](#) is valued most for the fact that he is not Casey Kasem, and Mass is no place for a hit parade, and church is most relevant when it is serious. (The point of this trip is just that: *G et serious.*) Do not hold your breath waiting for "One Bread, One Body" -- a '70s liturgical hit at most American parishes -- to be performed at His Holiness's mega-Mass tomorrow at [Nationals Park](#).

But don't listen for too many sacred hits of the 10th century either. While Benedict understands the deep power of ritual, and loves little more than a Gregorian chant, what he and 46,000 others will be singing (or not singing) tomorrow will be a sort of compromise, neither modern nor traditional, but a little of everything. As soon as tomorrow's Mass playlist hit the Web, the new traditionalists were fuming on blogs and comment threads. (The pre-show includes African hymns, a "celebratory merengue" and some [Mozart](#); the Mass itself includes a gospel-style Kyrie, some traditional Latin chants and several new interpretations of standard hymns.)

Like devout record store clerks, American Catholics are still having a sort of Stones-vs.-[Beatles](#) debate about what the classics really are.

Imagine a bizarro world where all the 25-year-olds want Mozart and all the 60-year-olds want adult-contemporary. The kids think the adults are too wild. The backlash against "Kumbaya Catholicism" has anyone under 40 allegedly clamoring for the Tridentine Mass in Latin, while the old folks are most sentimental about Casual Sunday (even more rockin', the Saturday vigil Mass), and still cling to what's evolved from the lite-rock guitar liturgies of the 1970s. The result, for most parishes, has been decades of Masses in which no one is entirely satisfied, and very few enjoy the music enough to sing along.

"The great majority [of Catholics] are totally inert at Mass," says Thomas Day, 65, a humanities and music professor at Salve Regina University in [Newport, R.I.](#) Day wrote a book called "Why Catholics Can't Sing: The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste," which is often cited by those who'd like to see a return to Mass music that is to them more sacred. "Most Catholics have either forgotten or never knew traditional music," Day says.

The great enemy in the Benedict era? Why, somehow, it's Sister and her guitar.

Although everyone says rock Mass is long dead, there are parishioners still complaining about it. There are faded, nearly gone memories of singing nuns and hippie laity and teenage guitar armies at the altar of love; or faded stories of pop phenomena like Sister Janet Mead, the now 70-year-old Australian nun who discofied "The Lord's Prayer" and charted gold on Billboard's Hot 100 in 1974 (and who then released an album of an entire rock Mass).

It's been a long time since anyone at church was singing the hosanna from "Jesus Christ Superstar" or Cat Stevens's "Morning Has Broken" at the offertory. Even the vast catalogue of the [St. Louis](#) Jesuits -- the stalwart, lite-rock ballads heard in almost any Mass for the past few decades ("One Bread, One Body"; "Be Not Afraid"; "For You Are My God") -- has come under assault.

It's "Day by Day" -- *out*, and Agnus Dei -- *in*. Younger priests now go to weekend-long workshops to brush up on their Gregorian chants, or to learn the lost seminary art of singing the entire Mass in Latin, English or both.

"You know, just today I received a publication from a mainline Catholic music organization, and there are aspects of it that seem like the musical version of the [AARP](#) quarterly, if you know what I mean," says Jeffrey Tucker, 44, a choir director who lives in Auburn, [Ala.](#), and is the managing editor of Sacred Music, a journal of the Church Music Association of America. "There is no question that we are talking about a generational issue here. The young priests and the young people just can't seem to get 'hep' to the whole 1970s thing, and the old people just don't understand why."

Tucker encounters this all the time, and blogs about it frequently. At a recent conference, a jazz pianist confided to Tucker that he'd been playing at church, but there was a new, young pastor who had taken over and "he said, 'You know what that means.' [And] I said, 'Well, I'm not entirely sure.' So he added, surprised that he would have to clarify, 'That means he wants Gregorian chant!' " In one of his many blog posts at New Liturgical Movement, Tucker characterized most Catholic church parishes as ruled by a "hard-core" group that "is fanatically attached to music of the 1970s and fears even the slightest hint of solemnity, warning darkly that the new priest is going to take the parish into a new Dark Age."

In news stories with a "conservative Catholics" angle, the church's most faithful frequently mention the nightmare of Mass as it was in the decades after the [Second Vatican Council](#). Loaded words like "hippie" and "total mess" and "Brady Bunch" get thrown around. There are stories of suburban churches built in mod, saucer-shaped architecture. ("Lots of guitars and banjos," a 32-year-old Catholic man moaned

to The Post's Metro section the other day, recalling the church scene of his youth. "I felt uncomfortable about it constantly.")

So really it's a retro movement, but instead of "I Love the '80s" (or '70s or '60s), it's "I Love the 1000s [Up Until 1963]," with Benedict encouraging Catholics toward rediscovering the beauty of the old way. He is on record as thinking of rock music as "anti-Christian," and once fretted (according to his memoirs) over [Bob Dylan](#)'s appearance with [Pope John Paul II](#) in 1997. Benedict canceled a Vatican Christmas concert in 2006, fearing it far too pop in nature. He also shuns guitars in church. (Sister has been in big trouble lately. The pope doesn't like her music, isn't so wild about some of her politics, and when it comes to her role in priestly matters, don't even go there.)

Tucker says the music debates going on in parishes nationwide present a more serious issue for American Catholics, "having to do with what is appropriate at liturgy, what is timeless, what is sacred -- but the [young vs. old] demographic element is very difficult to deny."

In defense of guitar Mass, was it really so bad? It was the soundtrack of a lot of social justice efforts. The St. Louis Jesuits stuff conjures up, for many, memories of food banks and felt banners, of youth group carwashes and, more nobly, martyred nuns and priests in [Central America](#). Maybe that was the problem for some churchgoers? The groovier music really was of its time, and came with an agenda?

"What about silence?" wonders Day, the music professor, 18 years after he wrote "Why Catholics Can't Sing."

If he has any prescriptive at all for Mass music, he says, "it would be to cool it. Pick plain, simple music. Plain, square hymns with reasonable accompaniment. And listen to silence occasionally."

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