

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 18, 2006 at 9:32am

Mozart, Masonry and Catholicism

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

In a 1996 interview, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger recalled that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart "thoroughly penetrated our souls" in rural Bavaria, in the shadow of Salzburg.

"His music is by no means just entertainment; it contains the whole tragedy of human existence," he said. As is well known, Benedict XVI tries to get in a few minutes at the keyboard every day, usually Mozart.

The pope is hardly alone in this passion.

Such disparate theological voices as Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Hans Küng and Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini have all penned tributes. The Protestant Barth once wrote that when he arrived in Heaven he would seek out Mozart, a Catholic, ahead of Luther or Calvin. Barth even proposed a performance of Mozart's "Coronation Mass" at a meeting of the Protestant World Council of Churches in Evanston, Illinois, an ecumenical gesture that in 1954 proved too far ahead of its time.

On this 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth, however, a nagging question concerns the extent to which Mozart's grasp of the "tragedy of human existence" was colored by the liberal and anti-clerical currents of his day, especially Freemasonry.

According to historians, Mozart was initiated into a Masonic lodge in Vienna at 28, and eventually became a Master Mason. He wrote at least eight pieces of music for the Masons. *Conoscenti* also detect influences of Masonry in his famous opera "The Magic Flute."

Mozart joined despite the fact that Pope Clement XII had prohibited membership in 1738, and this antipathy is still alive. In 1983, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reiterated: "Faithful who enroll in Masonic associations are in a state of grave sin and may not receive Holy Communion."

One understands, therefore, why links between the pope's favorite composer and the Masons make Catholics nervous.

Yet Mozart also composed some of the most famous Roman Catholic Masses and other liturgical scores in Western history, more than 60 pieces of sacred music altogether. How to reconcile these two aspects of his biography has long been a puzzle.

Once again, Schönborn is at the center of the debate.

Speaking July 16 in Chieti, Italy, at the opening of a Mozart festival, the Austrian cardinal asserted that "there's no foundation for his frequently mentioned membership in the Masons."

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"To prove the point," Schönborn said, "there's the fact that the composer came from a Catholic family that belonged to ordinary society, conformed to and defined by a religious life."

Mozart "merely belonged to a circle of intellectuals," Schönborn said, rather than taking his Masonry seriously. He was "sustained by a solid Catholic faith thanks to which his sublime music, in particular that composed for the Mass, was a faithful expression of the liturgical text."

That brought a rebuke from Luigi Danesin, Grand Master of the Italian Lodge of the Masons.

"To affirm that a connection never existed between Mozart and Masonry is a historic falsehood that's part of a revisionism which, for some time, has gone on around the figure of Mozart," Danesin said.

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To discuss Mozart's Masonry and his Catholicism, I interviewed Robert Levin of Harvard University, a concert pianist and harpsichordist and an expert on Mozart. Levin recently completed a setting of Mozart's "C Minor Mass," making it liturgically complete for the first time. He hopes to arrange a performance at the Vatican.

Cardinal Christoph Schönborn has questioned Mozart's ties to the Masons. What do we know?

His association with Freemasonry has never been a matter of controversy. For one thing, we know the exact lodge to which he belonged, known in German as "Crowned Hope." He persuaded his father to become a Mason, and perhaps his friend Haydn. He wrote a substantial body of music for the lodges and for various Masonic ceremonies and functions, for example his famous Masonic funeral service. The last piece he finished before his death was K.623, "The Little Masonic Cantata." ... To argue that Mozart wrote these compositions merely at arm's length as a kind of commercial proposition is not particularly persuasive.

Did Mozart feel a tension between his Masonry and his Catholicism?

We shouldn't drive a wedge between these two things ... Individuals, and artists in particular, often can be more nuanced than the official positions. Mozart saw no conflict. He was the assistant choirmaster at St.

Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna and expected to become the master, anticipating writing a glorious series of sacred music. The Masonic lodges Mozart visited weren't subversive. He found them attractive because of their fascination with human dignity and human freedom. They represented a break with the aristocracy and oligarchy.

What about Mozart's Catholicism?

The best way to approach it is through his music. I find it very, very hard to believe that the fervor and expressiveness of the music Mozart wrote for the church, such as the "C Minor Mass" or the "Requiem," is just the equivalent of an opera composer making a good pitch for his libretto. The sense of the glory of God is so powerful ... Mozart's spirituality emphasizes majesty, grandeur, and affirmation. There's relatively little terror and trembling. ... His music of greatest solemnity and complexity always comes at the resurrection, not the crucifixion. Some might say it's a sugar-coated Catholicism, but the tenderness he brings to the *Et Incarnatus Est* in the "C Minor Mass," for example, is special. In the 18th century, the "doctrine of affections" was in force, which held that each key symbolized a particular human emotion. It's telling that even though the "C Minor Mass" starts out in that key, it's C Major which dominates, the key of majesty and glory. ... Mozart's Catholicism is a powerful affirmative force, without being subject to the "stick" of terror, threatening eternal damnation to those who didn't believe. It's overwhelmingly music of tenderness, empathy, and at times of grandeur.

What about his bawdy sense of humor and active libido?

First of all, it has to be seen in context. Some of the salacious expressions he used in letters to his cousin are also used by his mother in letters to his father, all of which sounds shocking to 21st century ears. It was a way of letting off steam, and we should not assume that these people therefore lacked faith or piety.

...

Mozart saw deeper into the human spirit than almost anyone, yet he didn't make judgments. In the operas, he allows his characters to be who they want to be. Thus when Don Giovanni raises his champagne glass for a toast, even though we know he's a monster, we want to go to the party. ... Mozart forces us to look at who we really are, what actually motivates us. In that way, our relationship with our Creator and Savior becomes immeasurably stronger.

You don't find anything jarring about the pope admiring the music of a Mason?

Not at all. Mozart himself would be thrilled. ... His Holiness is not doing anything controversial in listening to Mozart. He'll be a better pope if he does!

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Though Mozart never wrote at length on religion, some of his attitudes can be gleaned from letters and recollections of contemporaries. One source is the journal of Friederich Rochlitz, published in 1801, which records a visit by Mozart to Leipzig in 1789.

According to Rochlitz, Mozart said that an "enlightened Protestant" could never understand what the *Agnus Dei* of the Catholic Mass meant to him.

"But if someone has been introduced from earliest childhood, as I have been, into the mystical sanctuary of our religion; if there, when you did not yet know how to cope with your dark but urgent feelings, you waited for worship with an utterly fervent heart, without really knowing what you wanted, and went away with a lighter and uplifted heart without really knowing what you had; if you thought how lucky were those who received the Eucharist, and at the communion the music spoke in quiet joy from the hearts of those kneeling there, *Benedictus qui venit*, then it is all quite different."

"Once you really take in again words which you have heard a thousand times, in order to set them to music, it all comes back. It stands before you, and moves your soul," Mozart said.

Scholars debate the Rochlitz's reliability, but since he would have been present for this exchange, many regard it as authentic.

How to reconcile this Catholic piety with Masonry?

One way is to recall that down the centuries, criticism of individual churchmen or of ecclesiastical systems by Catholics often had little to do with one's faith. Moderns may reject Catholicism if they become frustrated with the church, but that's not how someone like Mozart thought.

Perhaps the best glimpse of this comes in a 1771 letter to his father, after Mozart had a falling out with the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg, Hieronymus Colloredo, who among other indignities insisted on lodging him with household servants.

Noting that "I hate the archbishop to insanity," Mozart wrote:

"Always remember, as we do, that our Mufti [Colloredo] is an idiot, but that God is compassionate, merciful and loving."

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