

# word on worship

## SONGS FOR THE JOURNEY

### A Practical Guide to Music at Mass

*The following article by Sr. Sheila Browne, R.S.M. appeared in the Fall 1988 issue of CHURCH magazine. We gratefully acknowledge permission received from the National Pastoral Life Center to reprint it here.*

Few activities of parish life generate such lively enthusiasm or wholehearted disdain as singing at Sunday Eucharist. Music at Mass causes some people to plan their Sunday morning—changing schedules to avoid what they do not like, or traveling a distance to participate in a well-sung liturgy. The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life tells us that Catholic people are opposed not so much to singing at Mass as to the quality of the music and the singing. This information leaves pastors wondering what they can do to have good celebrations with enthusiastic singing from the assembly. A reminder of some key documents on music, a review of each one's role in music ministry, suggestions for selecting and teaching hymns, and reflections on joining music with ritual can help a parish on the journey to pleasing and authentic worship.

#### Music Guides

Anyone involved in liturgical music, from the pastor to the second guitarist, needs to read "Music in Catholic Worship." This short work of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy presents a theology of celebration and an examination of when to sing at Mass and why. With its companions, "Liturgical Music Today" and "Environment and Art in Catholic Worship," along with the General Instruction on the Roman Missal and the Introduction to the Lectionary, it furnishes a basic sense of what the church does at liturgy. It is from this foundation that music ministry programs develop and planning begins.

There is a difference between singing the Mass, which requires the participation of the celebrant and deacon as well as the congregation, and singing at Mass. We recognize that the sung liturgy is the norm, even though here we will be looking principally at the congregation's participation in the liturgy.

#### Who Makes Music?

Key people in encouraging the assembly to sing are the pastor, the song leader, organist, choir, and folk group. A supportive and interested pastor is essential. Even if he is not a musician, his cooperation, praise, and authentic criticism are the impetus for everyone else's work. Without his support, little can be accomplished.

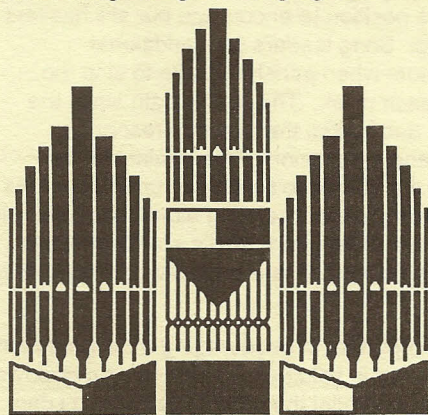
The great French liturgist and composer Joseph Gelineau has called the song leader an "animator," the one who, without drawing attention to self, invites and encourages the song of the people. The best song leaders believe what they sing, practice and know the music well, have pleasing voices that don't overpower the congregation, display an inviting, hospitable manner, and use simple gestures to bring the congregation into the song. It is important that this leader be seen by the people, for it is the whole person who invites participation, not just the voice. Organists who sing (even with a microphone) while playing at the console, no matter where it is placed, are not in a position to encourage our still hesitant congregations to sing. Song leaders gain additional responsibility as cantors when parishes begin to sing the responsorial psalm each week. The leader both sings the verses of the psalm and invites the people's response. Careful preparation and articulation of the psalm text is important if we want the people to be able to understand the words simply by listening without reading along. General rules of good singing, like the placing of final d's and t's on words, and the careful singing of vowels are easy enough to put into practice.

The organist is also important in encouraging a congregation's participation. In size and in volume, the organ can overpower any song leader. It is essential then that organist and song leader coordinate their work and that the organist be skilled in more than playing correct notes. The introduction to a hymn or song should establish key and tempo and the feel of the piece, beckoning the singers to join in. Sometimes this is done by playing the whole selection through; at other times,

the first and last phrases are enough. However it works best, the assembly should be able to recognize the hymn and know when to sing. A good organist does not ritard at the end of every verse, but keeps a steady tempo to the end. A good organist breathes with the people, that is, actually lifts hands and feet from the keyboard and pedals for a pulse at the end of a phrase for the people to breathe. This moves the pieces musically and makes it easier for people to sing.

The organist needs to be aware of the text of the hymn he or she is playing, and s/he can phrase better and breathe better because the text will inform the music. The registration of the organ, that is, the selection of stops used, also affects the singing. Too many 16' stops (the deepest sounding ones, like the bass 16') make a muddy or tubby sound, not conducive to good singing. Too many 4' or 2' stops (the highest pitched ones, like the super octave 2') are harsh sounding, and can give you a four-verse headache. Skillful organists who know how to balance sound will change the registration for some verses of a hymn and lead up to the final verse by adding stops to make a fuller sound, or even modulate up a step, bringing excitement to this concluding moment. Correct pedal playing gives the underlying support to the music, and helps to move the singers along. The best pastoral organists I know continue to study with a teacher, improving their skills and expanding their repertoire. Budgeting continuing education funds for the organist (and other musicians) is money well spent.

Choirs and folk groups are partners in music ministry too. Their role is to lead and support the congregation, while taking their own appropriate moments for singing by themselves. They should always support the congregation in singing the acclamations of the eucharistic prayer and the gospel verse, perhaps dressing them up with harmony or added instrumentation. Settings of these parts for choir alone are not appropriate. Most of the Masses composed today have a part for the congregation as well as parts for the choir. Entrance hymns and recessionals can be sung together also, with the choir or folk group singing the harmony or even a verse by themselves. Publishers advertise "concertato" setting of the most popular hymns, such as "Alleluia, Sing to Jesus," and "Praise to the Lord," that have special parts for the choir without neglecting the congregation. Publishers of



contemporary music, that is songs like Marty Haugen's "We Remember" and Dan Schutte's "Here I Am, Lord," sell much of their music in collections that have harmonization and instrumental parts.

It is important that, while respecting

and supporting the song of the assembly, these special groups sing by themselves. The time during the presentation of gifts, before or after the people's hymn at Communion, the final song, or even at the "Glory to God," are all places where the choir can sing appropriate music. Guidelines for selecting this

music are similar to those we will present below for congregational music. The repertoire of these groups need not be exercises in nostalgia, but can foster the sense of good music wedded to faithful text and used at the right moment, even if some of the selections are hundreds of years old. In planning their works, choirs and folk groups need to remember the hospitality of the place: be on time, do well what you do, tune up or practice out of the hearing of those gathering for Mass.

### Selecting the Music

The musical repertoire of the congregation needs to be updated, for although we know the people like to sing old familiar hymns, they like to learn new ones too. How does one choose new music? Not everything that is printed is right for every parish. Let us explore a few ways of determining what might work.

First to consider is the basic source of parish music, the hymnal, missalette, or song book. There are pros and cons for the use of each which touch on cost, parish planning, the vision for the music program, the body of music the people already know, and the symbolic value of a book as compared to disposable newsprint or paperbacks. Pertinent data from the Notre Dame study indicate that churches that use hymn books incorporating the entire Mass, sung and spoken parts, as well as hymns, do better at sung participation than places that have other kinds of aids.

"Music in Catholic Worship" suggests three categories of criteria for selecting liturgical music: musical, liturgical, and pastoral. As musical criteria, one asks: Is the music of this hymn good enough to invest people's time learning it? Will we sing it for a few years without tiring of it? Good music is hard to define, but it most likely has these qualities: a discernable melody, harmony that supports the melody, reasonable interval skips, a felt pulse and rhythmic drive, a wedding of these elements, with energy and passion binding it all together. You can probably find these in any hymn tune or song that has been around awhile. In addition, the most comfortable range of most congregational tunes is generally from the D above middle C to its octave. "Crown Him with Many Crowns," "For the Beauty of the Earth," and Dan Schutte's "Glory and Praise to Our God" fit this range. Because Suzanne Toolan's "I Am the Bread of Life" has a wider range of over an octave and a half and wide intervals, congregations can find it difficult to sing. Yet the great spirit they can muster to sing this reminds us that we cannot restrict our music entirely to the D to D octave. To determine whether our congregation will do well with a more demanding piece, I often live with it for a while, invite some people to learn it with me, and then come to a joint decision about adopting it.

The liturgical judgment is important too, for the actions of the liturgy have their own character, which the music should express and support. Settings for the acclamations, especially the alleluia or other gospel verse, and for the sung parts of the eucharistic prayer (holy, memorial, amen) need to have the feel of an acclamation: strong, to the point, and singable without introduction. It disturbs the flow of the eucharistic prayer as a whole if after the celebrant has enthusiastically invoked a response with, "We proclaim your glory and join in their unending hymn of praise" and then has to wait for eight measures of introduction before the

congregation acclaim "Holy, holy, holy Lord." The wide success of Richard Proulx's "Community Mass" with its one- and two-note introductions attests to the value of a setting that uses no protracted introduction. The responsorial psalm, on the other hand, is generally considered to be more meditative in nature. It is the people's response to the first reading and the music should do this for the text. The responses and psalmody of Joseph Gelineau and the newer melodic writing of Michael Joncas, David Haas, and Marty Haugen, the ICEL collections, and the new series from World Library and Oregon Press provide many tuneful and reflective settings from which to choose. To make these liturgical judgments, those who select music need a sense of the liturgy, knowing how to make the various moments come alive in sung prayer.

The pastoral is the most nebulous to put on paper but perhaps the easiest to see and hear. What works well in this place, at this time, for this celebration, and with these people? Here the musician had better know the people and be ready to make adjustments in his or her attitude. Those selecting the music should neither overrate nor underrate the capacity of the congregation to find various hymns fitting. "How Great Thou Art" contradicts many of the musical suggestions made above, especially in its awkward skips and wide range, yet it is sung well in many places. "O Healing River" is a hymn out of a particular tradition, the Black tradition, and has a very unusual style, yet it has become a lively part of the repertoire of our Irish-Italian middle-class parish. Conversely, parishes with gospel choirs can find an English setting like the Forest Green setting for "Blessed be the God of Israel" eminently suitable to their worship.

Examining texts of hymns is an important part of the selection process. Does this hymn text express the faith of the church? Can it move us to a wider vision of faith or action? What image of God does it project? Is the language inclusive of men and women? These are some of the questions one might use in judging texts. Since a parish should probably introduce no more than six or seven new hymns a year, it is important to select ones that can make a difference. What is your parish vision for the next few years? Are there hymns to help support that vision? A music committee might decide to teach Dan Schutte's "City of God" rather than another hymn of praise because of the social implications of the text. Those who choose hymns need a good sense of theology and an ear for well-crafted text.

### Introducing New Music

Teaching the new hymn, acclamation, or responsorial psalm refrain takes a bit of planning; making the church a music classroom for five minutes before Mass is not the best way to do it. Weaving the melody into interlude or prelude music the weeks before is a way to begin. On the day it is to be used, or perhaps the previous week, the song leader introduces it to the assembly (congregation, celebrant, ministers) a few minutes before Mass. If it is to be sung with organ, the melody is played alone; then it is sung by the leader with organ or guitar. Finally, the assembly is asked to sing it. Approaching it as a piece to be learned perfectly at that moment can alienate most people. The song leader's enthusiasm, competence, and genuine regard for the congregation are more important here than having every note perfect.

We have found it helpful to use most new hymns for the first

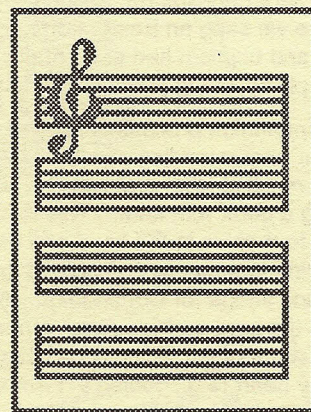
time during the collection and presentation (most, but not all; some are not appropriate here). The people can sit comfortably and hold the hymn book, and there is usually enough time to sing all the verses. It is satisfying to hear the singing get stronger verse-by-verse and week-by-week. It takes about a month to get the congregation to sing a piece fairly well. If the hymn doesn't work for the people (and you will hear them vote with their voices), drop it. If it does work, keep using it. After singing it at appropriate times over the course of a year or two, it might become a part of the people's hymn vocabulary. Remember: somewhere, sometime, "Holy God We Praise Thy Name" was brand new.

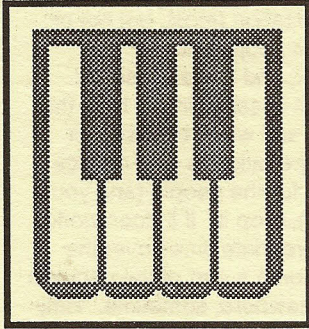
The musicians must also decide the appropriate key and tempo. Members of a congregation frequently comment on songs that are too high or too slow. We have already discussed the common range of D to D. Guitarists and organists, especially those who have transposers on their organs, will lower a hymn to a more comfortable key. Sometimes a step down is fine, but if lowered too much, the hymn is ruined, taking all life from it. It is often the occasional high note that gives the piece excitement and the congregation energy. Decisions about key should be made with a sense of the music, with fidelity to the composer, as well as for the ease of the congregation.

The tempo at which one sings a hymn tune or song has something to do with the integrity of the music and the text. Singing too fast can trivialize it; singing too slowly can kill it, and the congregation. Some melodies feel right at a certain tempo, others are harder to determine. The tempo for a hymn tune can often be set by looking for the measures with the most divided beats, usually the eighth notes, and deciding how those measures can be sung best. The rest of the hymn follows from there. For instance, the last phrase of "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today" has measures where we sing "Alleluia." The tempo at which those measures can be sung with vitality (it is Easter) determines the tempo of the hymn. For others, musical movement to the end of the phrase can be the indicator. Musically, we should sing, "God Father praise and glory, thy children bring to Thee," on one breath. The organist plays that whole phrase, then breathes, so the congregation can breathe and go on without gasping or giving up. Another indicator is the tempo at which the congregation can sing musically and easily, with energy. It is the breath that gives life, the breath of the body and the breath of the Spirit. They both have to do with the life of the liturgical assembly.

### The Purpose of the Music

While we are concerned with techniques of singing and playing, selection of music, and training of ministers, there is another level of sung liturgy with which we are concerned. This is the level at which understanding breaks through and we get a glimpse of the effects of sung





liturgical prayer. Do we ever think that something will happen to us, to the church, because of what we sing? These are not empty words in our hymns, but the prayer of the church. We might find ourselves changed, opened to conversion, formed in our understanding and belief as song is joined to ritual. A look at American cultural life can

help us to understand this better.

The song "We Shall Overcome" came to symbolize a national movement. For those who took part in the marches and sit-ins of the 1960s, singing this song with others, marching, and holding hands all gave strength to individuals and bonding to the group. For some this was a vehicle of conversion, moving them from quiet onlooker to personal and vocal participant in the quest for racial justice. For many today, hearing that song recalls the persons, scenes, sounds, pain, and joy of that whole period. It is a door through which they can enter a movement.

Singing at Mass can be the "door" through which one enters the liturgy. It can be a vehicle for conversion, putting on our own lips the words of faith that move us to action and to deeper belief in what we sing. A few years ago our parish lived through quite a furor over the opening of a shelter for the homeless in an unused portion of the church. During those weeks we sang "Whatsoever You Do" at the Sunday Eucharist. A few people remarked that it was the text of this hymn that strengthened them in their belief in the shelter. For one person, it was crucial, lingering with him all week, and helping to change his mind from opposition to support.

Music joined to ritual has power to shape belief and understanding. Short refrains, acclamations, even hymns used to accompany certain actions can bring them to life. For all the Sundays of Easter, our entrance procession moves first to the font where the water rite is celebrated, and we sing Howard Hughes's "We Have Put on Christ" as the people are sprinkled. We use this same music for every baptism in the parish. Recently, I heard one of our ushers discussing his grandchild's baptism, remarking how much it was like Easter because we sang an Easter song. Here a connection between Easter and baptism had been made without long explanations, but simply by letting people experience it.

The Communion procession, joined to good music, can help form our understanding of what it is we do. I find people usually resist singing and walking, especially if it means carrying a book with them. This is further complicated if one wishes to receive in the hand and drink from the cup. Yet journeying together to the table of the Lord, joined in song, is a very good image for Communion. We show in our bodies our unity in the Lord and with each other in the body of Christ. We solved some of the difficulty by using only hymns that people know by heart (e.g., Toolan's "I Am the Bread of Life") or, better still, ones with short refrains ("Eat This Bread," from Taize, Joncas' "When We Eat This Bread," the Eucharistic Congress hymn, "Gift of Finest Wheat"). The people needed to carry nothing but themselves to Communion. A further refinement has been using only five or six Communion songs for the year.

In this way, the people really get to know them and feel comfortable singing. Song leaders easily invite people to sing on their way, and little by little, they are doing just that. Song informs action; action informs the song; opportunity for understanding is present.

The power of God can be heightened by music too, as the ritual and its music engage our attention. The proclamation of the gospel is preceded by a sung acclamation. The same acclamation can be used after the gospel, thus framing the good news in sung praise. Some interesting homilies can happen when people ask why we would sing/respond with "alleluia" after Jesus tells us to lose our life in order to save it, or that anyone who wishes to be first must be the servant of all. Catechumens and baptized alike hear these challenging words, and the contradiction of the good news is acted out by acclaiming it in joy.

These few ways of joining music with ritual engage us to act out very simply who we are and what we believe. We put on our lips the words of faith and allow ourselves to be gradually formed in that faith. Continuity becomes important. You can't have a different hymn book or music director every other year, or constantly change the way a parish celebrates major festivals, and then expect hymns and psalms to spring from people's lips in sung prayer. A part of ritual is that people know what to expect. The bigger the feast and the larger the crowd, the more familiar the music should be. It is inhospitable to invite a crowd and expect them to sing unfamiliar music. Christmas isn't Christmas with all new music. People wait for some known hymns to touch base with the best of our tradition, and then hand it on, both the new and the old, to others: our catechumens and our children.

We have looked at some short documents that provide direction for singing the Sunday Eucharist, at music ministers, the selection and teaching of new hymns, some musical problems and ways of joining music with ritual. While this is not all that can be said about improving the music at Mass, it is a start. Our hope for the future is that Catholics want good liturgy and singing at Sunday Eucharist. Saint Augustine said it so much better: "You should sing as wayfarers do—sing but continue your journey. Do not be lazy, but sing to make your journey more enjoyable. Sing, but keep going."

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# UPDATE: Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy

The following appeared in the August issue of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy Newsletter.

## Saint Andrew Dung-Lac, priest and martyr, November 24

Pope John Paul II has approved the inclusion of Saint Andrew Dung-Lac and companions, martyrs, in the Roman Calendar as an obligatory memorial. St. Andrew and his 116 companions suffered martyrdom in Vietnam in the eighteenth century. "Through the missionary efforts of various religious families beginning in the sixteenth century and continuing in succeeding centuries the Vietnamese people heard the message of the Gospel....This message was warmly welcomed by the people, who show a marked filial devotion toward the God of heaven, and among them the Gospel has reaped a joyous harvest....Through its sons and daughters the Church of Vietnam has not been "ashamed of the scandal of the cross" (*Ad gentes*, #24)....Many Christians of this Church received the gift of martyrdom....The liturgical celebration of holy martyrs manifests Christ's paschal mystery and presents to the faithful examples for them to imitate that are signs of the Church's

holiness through the ages." (excerpts from the decree prepared by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy; Prot. CD 154/89)

## June Meeting of the Committee on the Liturgy

The annual meeting of the members, consultants, advisors, and staff of the Committee on the Liturgy took place at Seton Hall University, So. Orange, NJ, from June 14-15, 1989. The following are some of the topics being discussed. Msgr. Alan Detscher reported that the Lectionary Subcommittee is continuing its work on the preparation of the second edition of the *Lectionary for Mass*. The entire text (including the Old Testament) of the *New American Bible* is being edited for horizontal inclusive language; a new translation of the psalms is being prepared; the readings will be in sense lines; difficult Hebrew and Greek proper names will be syllabified for ease in pronunciation; references to the Jews will be clarified in accord with the principles of the Council for Religious Relations with the Jews (1974); the summaries of the readings will be printed before the introduction to the reading; the alleluia

verse will be identified separately and be printed before the reference to the gospel; each of the Sunday cycles will be printed separately, that is, all of cycle A, followed by cycle B, then cycle C; a similar principle will be used for the weekday readings.

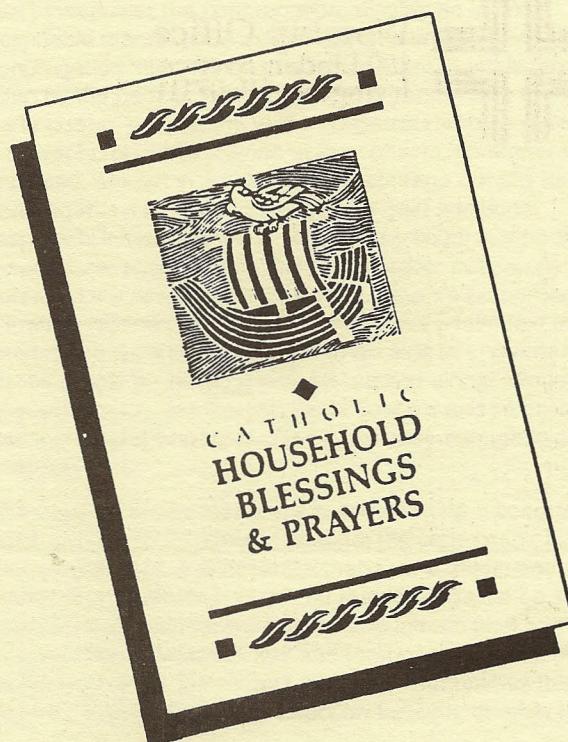
The Joint Committee (of the Committee on Doctrine and the Committee on the Liturgy) on Inclusive Language has submitted to the Committees on Liturgy and on Doctrine the latest draft of criteria to be used in the evaluation of inclusive language contained in biblical translations intended for use in the liturgy. The text is now being revised in light of the comments made by the two committees. Father Ronald Krisman reported that the final editorial work has been completed on the *Book of Blessings*, and the publication release date has been set for October 1, 1989. The *Order for the Solemn Exposition of the Holy Eucharist* has been completed and will be published in several months. Editorial work is nearing completion on the *Pastoral Companion to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*.

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