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How Firm a Foundation

The Theology of Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship

Judith M. Kubicki, CSSF, PhD


When a new Church document is first released, the typical focus is often on changes in the rubrics. In other words, we look to see what has changed regarding what or when some ritual action (in this case singing) is performed or who performs it. Questions regarding why a change is made do not usually delve much below the surface. Rather, concern usually focuses on whether there is a change in what is considered "liturgically correct." To get to deeper levels of understanding "why," one needs to move into the realm of theology.

In the case of Sing to the Lord, the theology is both traditional and radical. It is traditional because it embodies the ancient faith of the Church in new circumstances of time and place. It is radical because its directives take their inspiration from the most fundamental principles of that faith. These theological principles resonate with what we, as Catholics, already believe about creation, Jesus Christ, human nature, sacraments (especially Baptism), God, and the Church. This is not to say that the document is a theological tome. Rather, its theology is like a gentle but steady undercurrent from which its assertions...
The openness to diverse cultures that Sing to the Lord exposes is the authentic response of a sacramental Church that believes that this is the way God has chosen to enter into a loving relationship with all humankind.

THE GATHERED ASSEMBLY

Throughout Sing to the Lord are many references to the gathered assembly. The first of these highlights the action of gathering week by week (5). But the invitation of Christ is not simply to gather together, but to participate in the sacred mysteries (23), a participatory act reiterated many times in the document. Indeed, since the promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy at the Second Vatican Council, the full, conscious, and active participation by all the people has been identified as "the action to be considered after all else, for it is the primary and indispensible source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit" (CSC 10), a particular internal dimension of the participation that is signaled and promoted by an external demeanor. Both are necessary so that, as the gathered assembly, we might enter into song in a way that enables us to rise above our self-preoccupation and give ourselves over to participating in Christ's Paschal Mystery (12-14). This connection between exterior and interior also highlights the sacramental nature of the singing in which Christ invites us (13, 14).

But there is another important dimension to the role of the assembly as primary music-maker in its very designation as "gathered." Both the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2002, 366) and the Constitution on Sacred Liturgy emphasize that the assembly gathers in order to form one body. Sing to the Lord echoes this emphasis on unity (see 25, 27, 67, 72, 73, 142, 189, 191, 192). Such repetition of an idea signals that deep theological principles are at work in this insistence called to unity. These principles include an understanding of the gathered assembly as an instance of the presence of Christ and an understanding of the assembly as participating in the life and love of the Trinity.

The Gospel according to Matthew (18:20) records Christ promising his disciples that "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I in the midst." At the last Supper Jesus prayed: "May they all be one." Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me" (John 17:21). These scriptural passages root the Church's conviction that unity is both a sign of the presence of Christ in the life of the Trinity and a means to the end of the Church's mission. When we gather, or more precisely, when, by the power of the Spirit we are gathered, Christ is present in the Church in order to incorporate us more fully into his Paschal Mystery (Kubicki, 38). The music of the Church is the expression of this mystery, the more fully we, as gathered assembly, become the one body of Christ. This is what it means to be Church.

SINGING THE SONGS

Singing the song, therefore, plays a critical role as a witness to the nation of which the Church is the people and the Cantus organization is the makeup of the assembly in mind. It is promoted when music leadership understands its role as service to the assembly's song. It also occurs when the assembly participates wholeheartedly to the invitation to sing its prayer. When such dynamics exist, singing assists not only in uniting the assembly in worship of God, but also in giving it a tangible experience of being one. This unity, however, does not eliminate the need for diverse musical expression. In fact, it presupposes. As Still 30, explains, both the treasury of sacred music and the music of various cultures are welcomed. This diversity of musical expression requires that the assembly learns to respect and to move into styles and genres of music that may be unfamiliar. Doing so may involve letting go of personal preferences and reaching out in hospitality to an increasingly diverse local community. This is part of what is meant by the transformative effect of communal music-making. Still 10, turns it up well when it quotes Saint Paul: "We, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another" (Romans 12:5).

THE HOLY OR SACRED

In addition to the transformation or holiness of the assembly, there is also the question of the holiness of the music. In the 1963 Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (112), the Council Fathers explain: "Therefore sacred music is to be considered the more holy, the more closely connected it is with the living, present, and active action, whether making prayer more pleasing, promoting unity of minds, or conforming greater solemnity upon the sacred rites." The 1972 Music in Catholic Worship development this idea further when it connects the notion of sacred music as symbolic and integral by saying: "Among the many signs and symbols used by the church to celebrate its faith, music is of premier importance. As sacred song united in words, it forms a necessary integral part of the sacred liturgy" (MCWC, 23). The Constitution ties the holiness of music to its connection with the ritual action. Music in Catholic Worship ties the holiness of music to its connection with the liturgy: "The holiness of music is to its connection with texts. Sing to the Lord asserts something even more..."
profund. It says that "Sacred music is holy when it mediates the holiness of God and forms the Holy People of God more fully into communion with each other in Christ" (69). The focus here is on the transformation of the assembly into Christ and the mediation of relationships within the community and the community with God. This kind of theological thinking reflects the theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet. He speaks of symbolizing activity as mediating identity and relationships. The liturgy and its music-making are symbolizing activity. This articulation of the role of music reaffirms previous claims that music is integral to worship and that it has the potential to promote the ongoing conversion and transformation of the assembly into the one body of Christ. This is what makes music liturgical or sacred. This is why liturgical music-making is an awesome task.

In speaking of the Liturgy of the Hours, STL, 230, describes the role of daily prayer as "sanctifying time." This traditional language has been used in such documents as the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours and Laudis Canticum. However, if we take seriously the creation narrative in Genesis, we might argue that God sanctifies time, not human beings. What we can do is consecrate time by dedicating it to the praise and worship of God. This word also appears in Church documents and may be more theologically precise. If we use the word "sanctifying," we are acknowledging that time, as part of fallen creation, is in need of redemption. If we use the word "sanctifying," we are acknowledging that time is a gift of our Creator God who made all things very good. By setting aside time to worship, we are consecrating it to the praise of God and our transformation into Christ.

ROOTED IN BAPTISM

Time is a dimension, not only of the Liturgy of the Hours, but also of the Eucharist. We observe the periodicity of time when we gather at regular intervals, whether weekly or daily. The Christian impulse to gather on the Lord's Day is our response to an invitation that God extends to each of us through our Baptism. Baptism plunges us into the Paschal Mystery and enables us to respond to God's self gift through our self gift. Because we are baptized, we are "authorized" to do Eucharist, that is, to respond to Christ's mandate to "do this in memory of me." It is ultimately Baptism, therefore, that gathers us into the one body of Christ and enables us to participate in the life of the Trinity through our life in the Church.

All ministry in the Church, including music ministry, is rooted in Baptism. Its context is grace. Understanding it this way signals a return to the New Testament notion of diakonia (service). This notion of service or ministry is grounded in the community and is performed for the sake of building up the kingdom of God. It applies to all aspects of music ministry, including that of cantor, psalmist, choir, instrumentalist, director of music ministries, organist, singing presider or deacon, and the singing assembly. Nevertheless, despite this differentiation of roles, all liturgical ministers belong first to the assembly. Called forth from the assembly, music ministers are invited to offer their gifts at the service of the community's prayer, not to flaunt personal talent.

CONCLUSION

Much food for theological reflection is in Sing to the Lord. It offers all those involved in liturgy, but particularly those involved in music ministries, the opportunity to ponder more deeply the faith dimension of their vocation. It also provides an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the meaning of our music-making within the context of liturgy. Possibilities for such reflection include focusing on the mystery of creation, Incarnation, redemption, sacramentality, and ministry. Most especially it includes our participation in living out, through our music-making, the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ!

QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever had a tangible experience of the bodiliness of singing the liturgy as a means of communing with God? In what way did the music enable this experience?
2. What specific guidance does Sing to the Lord offer you for enabling the assembly to see itself as the body of Christ through communal music-making?
3. How can our weekly and yearly musical planning enhance the assembly's experience of unity?
4. What one new approach to music ministry can you implement now to heighten both the assembly's and your awareness of the sacramentality of music-making?
5. Will knowing the theology behind the directives in Sing to the Lord make a difference in the way you approach your liturgical ministry?
6. Which point(s) made in this essay do you believe is (are) most important to share with your local assembly? Why?
7. Do you see your life and ministry as a participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ? What does that mean in the concrete?  

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