

Pastoral Judgment of Music as Prayer

PART III

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In the second of this series on Music as Prayer, we outlined some standards by which those of us who choose music for our liturgies as well as those who participate in rendering it or, even only listen to it, may judge it from a musical and liturgical standpoint. There is a third norm, a very important one, according to which worship music must be judged and selected. We may ask: 1. Is it good music, good art, in every sense of the word? 2. Is it liturgically appropriate, intensifying the meaning of the liturgical action which it accompanies? 3. Will this music we choose serve the pastoral needs of this congregation praying here in this place now?

If music is to fulfill its pastoral ministerial function, some preliminary study of the profile of the particular parish ought to take place. This is one of the surveys conducted by the parish worship committee as part of the Liturgy Training Program offered as one of the services of the Diocesan Liturgy Office. Once the cultural and educational background, the life-style and areas of interest and concern of a given parish are known, then the liturgy and music used ought to complement these findings.

Since congregational singing is mainly a people-problem, and therefore, a pastoral problem, great care must be exercised in choosing hymns and other parts of the liturgy. Large groups of people do not easily sing music that is dull, texts that are archaic

and rhythms that are stilted and intricate. Tricky melodic ventures and difficult rhythms are the domain of a well-trained choir. Nevertheless, unless clear enunciation and fine diction are a priority of the choir director, those who listen to a careless rendition will not always be able to pray along. Careless rendition will not always be able to pray along.

Psalms in singable settings are generally a good choice especially if a cantor or song-leader intones the simple refrain which the people repeat between verses which are sung by the cantor or choir. Psalms provide an excellent vehicle for putting the distribution of roles of various people into practice. A certain amount of variety in using hymns is desirable. Just as the constant repetition of vocal prayers such as the Hail Mary in the rosary can become routine, without much advertance to the meaning of what is said, so too, singing the same hymns every Sunday with nothing to catch the attention of the participants can become boring. In such cases there is neither music nor prayer, neither communication nor celebration. Entrance hymns should be sung joyfully and briskly to express the joy over coming together to celebrate Christ. A slow, dull text in a minor mode is anything but suited to unifying the assembly.

The recessional hymn is a burst of praise and thanksgiving for what has just been enacted in our midst, a sort of cheer as we go forth to spread and share the good news of the kingdom. If too many new hymns are required,

none will be sung with spirit. Acclamations rightfully belong to the people. Alleluias, the Holy, Holy and Amen are expressions of affirmation that should bring us spontaneously to our feet. If what we do in song means anything, our acclamation "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again" should make us jump up and shout it. It is like a cheer at a football game or a round of applause at the close of a dramatic aria. How ridiculous to have a cheerleader step to the "mike" and announce: "Our team has just scored. Now please stand and enthusiastically shout cheer #87 E on page 26 of your program guide." What would we call this? "Ritual theology" or "celebration theology," routine response or spontaneity?

Evaluation

Finally, when planning music for liturgies we ought to remember never to underestimate the musical or spiritual potential of a congregation; nor should we ever overestimate their musical knowledge. Even non-singers want to join in singing if good motivation and attractive music are present. St. Augustine is said to have observed that "he who sings prays twice (doubly)." Does the music we choose evoke willing response? Do congregations know the relationship of what they are asked to sing to the moment of liturgy? It is not simply a question then of making the liturgy more beautiful by adding more music, nor of making it more simple by using less, but of making it more true and pastorally meaningful.

INSIGHTS On Pastoral Liturgy

Our worship music needs constant evaluation if it is to serve the pastoral needs of the praying community. It is just possible that the music being used is intrinsically excellent as music, but inept, ineffective and downright bad for true, liturgical and

pastoral celebration. Judging and evaluating worship music against the reliable and justifiable criteria presented in these articles should prove to be a giant step forward in collating an acceptable repertoire for enriching liturgical celebrations.

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WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mt. 22:34-40. (R1) Ex. 22:20-26. (R2) 1 Thes. 1:5-10.

Last winter when it was below zero, a girl told her sweetheart she couldn't think of marrying him until he had saved at least one thousand dollars. When June came busting out all over, she asked him how much he had saved.

Hesitatingly, he said, "About thirty-five dollars."

"Well," she replied, "that's close enough."

Sunday's Liturgy talks about love. Real love overleaps things and goes to persons. Love is a many-splendored thing.

First, love is hierarchical. Speaking of the greatest commandment Jesus said, the first love must be the love of God. Everything else flows from that. The next love must be of yourself. Then love of neighbor. We cannot have sunlight without the sun. We cannot have moonlight without the moon. Nor can we really love ourselves and our neighbors unless first we love God.

Secondly, love is dynamic. It was St. Gregory the Great who wrote: "Love is not idle; where it exists, it does great things." Love is not like a blotter that sops up, but like a dynamo that generates activity. Thus God's love is creation. His love is redemption. His love is sanctification.

Speaking of the centrifugal force of love, John Oxenham wrote:

Love ever gives, -
Forgives, - outlives, -
And ever stands
With open hands.
And, while it lives,
It gives.

For this is Love's prerogative, -
To give, - and give, - and give.

Thirdly, love is neighborly. The first reading describes to whom we must give. To the **aliens**: the "outsiders," the friendless ones, like the Vietnamese exiles. To the **widows and orphans**: the helpless ones, the alone and lonely. To the **poor**: the needy ones, the easy marks for the loan sharks and exploiters.

And why must we love them - the stranger, the bereft, the needy? Because God first loved us. We must do no less for others than has been done for us. Moses reminded the Hebrews that they had been slaves once. And Paul reminds us that it was "Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." The conclusion is obvious.

For those who will not heed the call of love, the first reading contains a **threat** by the Lord. Speaking of widows and orphans, God said, "If ever you wrong them . . . I will kill you with the sword; then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans." What did God mean by that? He meant that **war will follow upon social injustice**, and war has a way of turning wives and children into widows and orphans.

Lastly, love must have a standard. How ought I to love others? As myself. And how may that be? I love myself, whether I deserve it or not, don't I? I always give myself the benefit of the doubt, don't I? I always try to do what is best for myself, don't I?

Then we must do the same for others.

We must not rashly judge others. We must always give others the benefit of the doubt too. We must do what is best for others whether in the womb or out of it. We must determine our service to others, not according to their merits, but according to their needs.



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