

# The musical language of liberation

By Ray Repp  
Guest contributor

An old story tells of a married couple who, while on vacation in the countryside of New England, were looking for a local church where they could attend Sunday services.

When they finally arrived at a small country church, they found the door being locked by an elderly caretaker. The couple ran over to the gentleman and asked, "Are we too late? Is the service over?"

The man smiled kindly at them and answered, "Yes, the celebration is over, but the service is only beginning."

Unfortunately, it's just a story. How many people, ordained or not, do you think really have the wisdom of the elderly man in this story? How many understand the implications of John's Gospel account of the Last Supper?

I've noticed in recent years a growing number of theologians, moral and biblical scholars and religious educators who have taken giant and courageous steps in uniting the dualism in religion. These people are teaching us that our responsible actions in everyday life are our faith response. Of course, this is really nothing new because this is the Gospel of the Lord. Michael Himes, in a talk to RENEW leaders, observed clearly that "Social justice and loving one's neighbor are not just part of the Gospel message — it is the Gospel message." Loving God and loving one's neighbor are not two laws — they are one.

But what I have also noticed is that usually only the "professional" Christians have the leisure or the income or even the professed interest to attend conferences at which such insightful leaders are speaking. The same is also true when it comes to reading books and articles written by these people.

What about the other 99 percent of the people who make up our family that we call the church? Where do they get their "update" on current religious thought? Where do they get their insight, encouragement or religious enthusiasm?

Without even addressing the reality that encounters with God can take place as readily in the "marketplace" as in church, let's assume that for most people, Sunday liturgy is the opportunity for this "update." If this is true, then I believe that the two sources most likely to either encourage a change of thought or to reinforce an existing bias are the pulpit and the music.

The strengths and weaknesses of the pulpit speak for themselves. The person proclaiming the Word — and the extended "Word" of the homily/sermon — may or may not be one of those "professional Christians" who has the time or interest in being updated on matters which affect faith development. But the music is far too often underplayed as a source of influence.

The forward to the New Episcopal Hymnal describes one of the clear purposes for liturgical music as educating the community about current theological and biblical teachings of the church. Whether other denominations agree with this purpose, and whether the Episcopal Church follows her own recommendations, the fact remains: People take home with them the theology contained in the music they sing in church.

Let's assume that music can really educate and that not only the composers, but also the people choosing the music can affect the faith development of the church. What kind of theology do we want people to take home? We might begin by asking the questions "Why should people come to church in the first place?" and "Why do people come to church?"

Most people would probably agree that the answer to the second question is to worship God. People might also add that they go to church to meet God in the Word and the sacraments, to pray for our needs and the needs of the world, and to recognize God as our creator and savior. Many people are quick to point out that they go to church to get away from the cares and problems of the world for a while and spend time in peaceful prayer and thought on more eternal subjects.

All of these reasons sound noble in themselves — but are they in keeping with the Gospel? Is going to church to worship God and get away from it all even remotely contained in the Gospel message?

William Sloan Coffin, in his book *The Courage To Love*, says that the desire for personal salvation may be the most obnoxious form of greed there is. We are called as Christians — as humans — to work for the salvation or liberation of everyone. This does not mean just our close family and friends, but the poor, the outcast, the "others," the Samaritans.

An interesting theme recurs in the music of the 19th century American Negro spirituals: in the next life would come the reward for all the abomination endured in this life. Psychologically, it was important for black slaves of that time to have hope in something. Their music gave it to them. But it is also true that the white plantation owners encouraged their slaves to sing their spirituals and believe in the promises of their religion. After all, as long as these people had hope in a time to come, they would endure the hardships of the present. It was just good business sense to encourage this kind of faith.

But what would have happened if the 19th

century Negro spirituals had been filled with concepts like self-esteem, dignity, equality and justice — to mention just a few of the key principles of the Gospel? I suspect that if these themes had been part of that music, the Civil War would not have been fought between North and South, but between black and white; and the civil rights movement in this country would have begun long before 1957, when Rosa Parks refused to sit in the back of the bus in Montgomery, Ala.

So why should we go to church in the first place? I believe that we should go to church — together — to hear once again the Word of God, a Word that calls us to bring liberty to those who have not; to bring God's loving presence where there is darkness; to be able to think of others more than ourselves; and to be willing to risk everything because it is the right thing to do. We also should go to church to be nourished and encouraged by the sacrament of the Eucharist — and by each other, the greatest sacrament of God's presence in the world — so that we can go out and do something to make the Gospel vision a reality.

Many liturgists and liturgical musicians define "liturgical music" as music that accompanies the action of the liturgy. This makes sense to me, but it also presumes that all the actions of the liturgy make sense and are inscrutable. Are we not more caught up today in "acclamation-jargon" than in Gospel vision? To hear some liturgical musicians speak, one would think the high point of the liturgy is the responsorial psalm.

Yes, it is true that today we speak of the "gathering rite" — a major step forward in my opinion. But what is the official action of this rite? There is almost none. So for those who hold that liturgical music accompanies the actions of the liturgy, the music for the "gathering rite" is still what it used to be, an entrance song — and whose entrance?

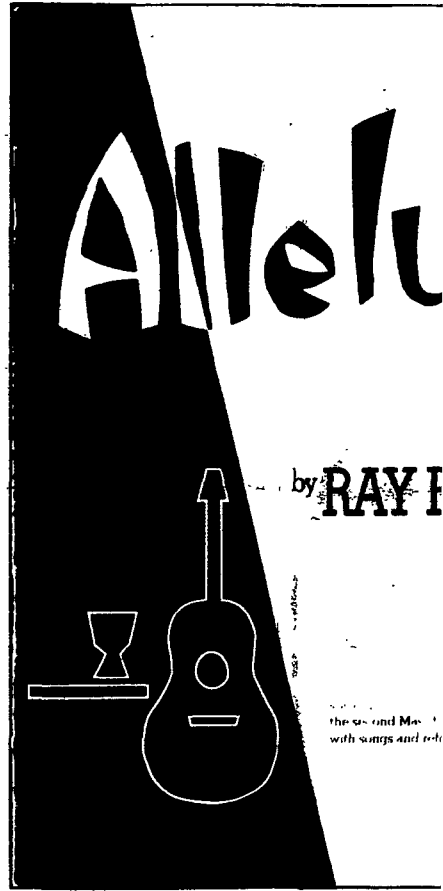
I suggest that music that accompanies poor or unclear actions only adds to the confusion. "Makers of rites" would do well to fashion an action for the "gathering rite" in the spirit of Marty Haugen's song *Gather Us In*.

People are natural sacramental perceivers. They know when they are welcome. They know when they are taken seriously and appreciated. They also know when they are being treated as second-class lay members of the parish family. If we want to keep the people feeling subservient, we can do so with our liturgical actions, but we can also do it with the language of our music, as did the white plantation owners of the 19th century.

The texts of our music offer great potential for liberation and evangelization in the best use of the

word. To deny this potential is not only irresponsible. We can help call each other as God has been doing since the beginning: the loving, gifted, responsible and just people are capable of being. If the actions of the liturgy are at times vague, or the sermons something, people can still leave church with words of encouragement and challenge to their hearts. It is not enough to leave church with pious platitudes and self-serving Scriptures taken out of context. What does "Praise the Lord" have to do with the challenge of the Gospel? Does the Lord really like to be entertained and sung to? Doesn't it make sense that we sing together with the Lord, about our willingness to live out our promise?

The definition of "liturgy" that I apply is one given by Thomas Merton many years ago: "Liturgy is an action in which people become what they are, and who they wish to become." To take Merton's definition of liturgy seriously, all liturgical music would have to speak to the people we "wish to become" — the people we intend to live out.



## Parishes backslide on 'matter of justice'

During the 1960s, an explosion of folk music, transmitted by hand-cranked ditto machines and newly affordable photocopiers, helped fuel a liturgical revolution in Catholic parishes.

In 1976, the osmotic spread of this idealistic new music from parish to parish collided with a more materialistic mentality.

Music publisher F.E.L. Publications filed a multi-million-dollar claim against the Archdiocese of Chicago, alleging that its parishes were reproducing copyrighted songs without permission. Suddenly, instead of the latest refrains, liturgical musicians began exchanging tips on how to save on licensing fees, while pastors were on the lookout for copyright patrols passing through their parishes.

"After the lawsuit, people were really tight on (observing copyright restrictions), and a lot of dioceses cracked down because they were worried about liability," recalled John Kubiniec, a former diocesan associate director for liturgical music and current director of music at St. Helen's, Gates.

Nowadays, the paranoia has largely passed. "For the most part, people are conscious (of the law), but pretty loose (in observing it)," Kubiniec said.

Copyright protection reserves the right to publish, produce or sell a literary, musical or artistic work or commercial symbol to a particular individual or

company that holds the copyright, usually for a limited period of time. Thus, anyone who reproduces copyrighted words and/or music, whether for a congregation or the members of a parish, is required by law to gain — and usually pay for — permission.

Because music publishers are in the business of making their music heard, most offer a variety of ways to purchase a license. For one flat fee, major publishers offer an annual license, which allows the parish or group to copy and distribute an unlimited number of times. Many publishers also offer a one-time license, often requested for special services. Some publishers even offer a "pay per copy" option, simply requesting a license for each copy.

In each case, the purchasing parish or group is required to include proper copyright notice and to inform them each time a piece is copied — usually by submitting a copy of the copyright notice to the publisher. Sister Margaret Caufield, RSM, comments that the procedure as "expensive, but not difficult."

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