

Book might offer cues for both talk and song

Why Catholics Can't Sing: The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste, by Thomas Day; Crossroad (New York, N.Y., 1990); 184 pages; \$19.95.

By Father Robert F. McNamara
Guest contributor

This little best seller might better have been titled *Why Catholics Don't Sing*, for it examines why they clam up at hymn time.

Vatican II authorized a necessary revision of the eucharistic liturgy. Liturgical alterations, major or minor, are a constant in the Catholic Church's agenda. This time the revision was major, because it included the provision for Mass in the vernacular. One of the innovation's implications was that each language group would have to acquire a new repertoire of congregational hymns.

Now Thomas Day asks: first, have we developed a good repertoire over the past three decades? and, second, have our congregations learned to sing the hymns with devotional zest? In addition to being a professional musician, organist and choir director, Day is chairman of the music department at Salve Regina University in Newport, R.I. Talent and experience entitle him to ask and answer both questions.

He replies "no" to both. The fault lies, he claims, not in the Vatican Council's reforms but in their implementation. Catholics can sing as well as anybody else, yet for some reason they have not taken to singing hymns as readily as anticipated.

Day devotes most of his book to searching out that reason. Although he writes without much system, he uses a witty, popular style.

One obvious impediment to congregational song is, of course, the tradition of silent liturgies that arose in Ireland during the days of religious persecution. But even though this tradition was carried over to America, it was surely not the only factor that has discouraged hymn singing at Mass over the past 30 years.

If I were to list the author's theories about the other obstacles, I would deprive future readers of the fun of reading this thought-provoking book. I found one of his explanations particularly interesting and persuasive. It is the fact that the vernacular Mass introduced what might be called a "vernacular spirit."

The revised or vernacularized Mass tended to create a sort of vacuum, and its leading functionaries felt called upon to fill up the space with individualistic efforts. Thus what was intended to be an exalted act of common

worship too often became a "show," Hollywood style, in which each leading performer did "his own thing."

The priest, "Mr. Nice Guy," became an "M.C.," video-style. The music leader, "Mr. Caruso," using the mike like a rock star, drowned out all the other voices.

The folk group, perhaps unconsciously, seemed to be copying the "Grand Old Opry." The vernacular music itself supported in its lyrics the egotism of these "stars." Luckily, the hootenanny hymns wore out rather quickly. But they were succeeded by "sweet songs." The texts were more scriptural and spiritual, but the "caressing" tunes, difficult for congregational singing, were too reminiscent of Rogers and Hammerstein. These performances, which marked the "triumph of bad taste," were intended to coerce the congregation into singing. The people, however, were sensible. They would not be coerced.

The author does not castigate the new musical repertory alone. He deplores the accompanying tendency to spurn the treasure of the church's musical past, and the past in general. He deplores the current English Mass-texts. He points out the value of hiring good organists and choir directors. He holds that guitar accompaniment works only with a small, homogeneous group, and is counterproductive with a large congregation. Finally, he finds the barrenness of new churches built on the principle of "less is better" a deterrent to devout Eucharists.

The time has come to review our revised liturgy and ask seriously why it is defective. Fortunately, the biblical texts are being improved and the Mass-texts recast. More books such as Day's should be written to evoke constructive thoughts from Catholics in general.

Why Catholics Can't Sing would be an excellent conversation-starter for parish discussions in which the pastor, music minister, organist, choir, folk group, and liturgy planners participate, along with congregation members, both singers and non-singers. Day will needle all of them, but with a shot in the arm.

Someday, with the help of God, our parish liturgies will recover the spirit of fervent community adoration. Then our congregations will sing out with joy, for they will sense that they are truly "a chosen race, a royal priesthood," called to the ministry of praise.

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John Johnson-Hollywood Pictures
For two skilled skiers from Detroit, T.J. Burke (Paul Gross, left), and his best friend, Dexter Rutecki (Peter Berg), Aspen, Colo., is the fabled key to a better life away from their auto assembly line work in *Aspen Extreme*.

Plot got lost on the slopes of flimsy *Aspen Extreme*

By Gerri Pare
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — The pretty *Aspen Extreme* (Hollywood) is a lot of whooshing skiing footage in search of a movie to wrap around it.

The story, such as it is, has Dex (Peter Berg) and T.J. (Paul Gross), two lifelong pals, ditching dull jobs in Detroit for the ski slopes as Aspen ski instructors to the rich and glamorous.

With his sleek shape and sexy smile, T.J. fits right in. Dex doesn't, gets in trouble, and leaves it to T.J. to rescue him, severely straining their friendship.

Thrown in for good measure are T.J.'s on-again, off-again romances with the predatory Bryce (Finola Hughes) and down-home disc jockey Robin (Teri Polo).

The pristine scenery — the Canadian

Rockies stand in for Aspen — and the daredevil skiing are the real magnets for the audience. Ski enthusiasts should enjoy this one, but with its fluffed-out story, others may find it more of a snow job.

If the movie were better realized by writer-director and former ski instructor Patrick Hasburgh, it could be seen as a cautionary tale of what can happen when nice guys get caught up in life in the fast lane. But mostly, it just coasts along, content to capture the danger and exhilaration of downhill skiing amid eye-popping vistas.

Due to an implied affair, brief nudity, a shot of drug abuse and minimal rough language, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children 13.

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