

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

In the 16th chapter of the Book of Samuel, a melancholic King Saul, who believes he is tormented by an evil spirit, dispatches his servants to find "a skillful harpist." They return with David, future king of the Israelites.

"Whenever the (evil spirit) seized Saul, David would take the harp and play, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, for the evil spirit would leave him," the writer recorded.

John Polce, a Christian folk singer and guitarist, has been chasing away spirits of melancholy and despair from his audience members for well over two decades now. A prolific artist who has recorded seven Christian albums since the early 1970s, Polce is a Catholic native of Providence, R.I., who noted that the story of Saul and David shows how music can touch people's souls in a way no other medium can.

"You can listen to a song that has a Christian message, and you wouldn't be as quick to tune it out (as you would) if it was preaching and verbal," he said.

Polce, who sees himself as a "troubadour" for God, recently shared his music with two diocesan audiences, one at St. Mary's Church in Corning on April 24, and another at Guardian Angels Church in Henrietta on April 26.

Polce discussed his life and music with the *Catholic Courier* in a phone interview from St. Mary's Rectory in Corning on April 24.

Polce said he began his music ministry in 1974 after having performed several years professionally on the folk and rock music circuits. His last major secular gig was with Ken Lyon and the Tombstone Blues Band on Columbia Records, he said, noting that he left the band after arranging its first album because of artistic differences with his band-mates.

At the same time he was searching for his own musical direction, he was also searching for deeper meaning in his own life, he said.

"I was out there playing and writing songs, but there was something missing in me," he said, adding that he had tried everything from Eastern meditation to philosophy to try to fill the void.

"Nothing I tried could fill that space which I know now only God can fill," he said.

A friend and he prayed together one day, and Polce said he experienced a dramatic conversion after he "surrendered" his life to God.

"At that moment, I felt a real peace in my heart," he said. "I had a real personal experience with Jesus in my heart that I had never had before. It was an immediate sense of his presence. It was an experience of a feeling, for the first time in my life, of unconditional love. I really wanted



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Singer/guitarist John Polce practices April 24 at St. Mary's Church, Corning, for his performance that evening.

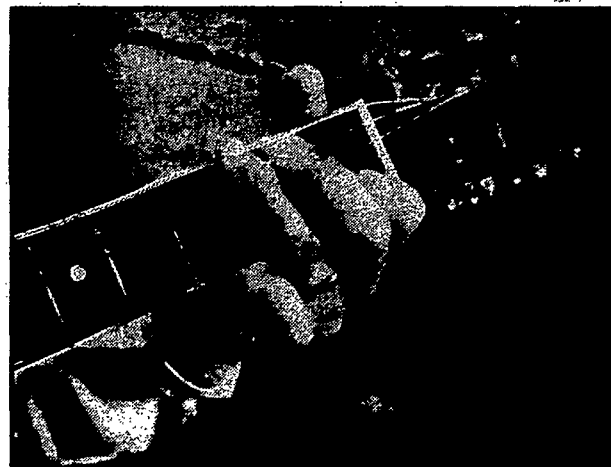
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to serve God with my life. I felt like I was coming home in a sense."

He eventually returned to the Catholic Church, and became involved in the charismatic renewal movement, he said. He also played on a daily Catholic radio show in Providence from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, he said.

So strong was the calling he felt to serve God that for 10 years he lived a celibate life in anticipation of entering a religious community, he recalled. However, a cleric who served as his spiritual director eventually helped him realize he wasn't called to the religious life, and Polce found a new vocation — marriage.

He wound up wedding a fellow



Catholic, now his wife of 13 years, Deborah. He said he had known her since the mid-1970s when they met at the church they both attended. The couple have a 10-year-old son who bears the same name as Saul's beloved harpist — David.

Deborah also serves as his manager, Polce said, noting he supports himself on record sales and donations from his concerts. He plays at Catholic and non-Catholic Christian churches, and has performed all over the world, he said.

"When I go into a parish, I try to support and deepen people's experience of God that night," he said. "If that happens they draw closer to God on their own."

Polce and his family lived in Massachusetts from 1987 until 1993 when they moved to the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle in England at the invitation of Bishop Ambrose Griffiths. The bishop had heard a recording of Polce's, and brought him to England to spread his musical message throughout the diocese and the rest of Great Britain, Polce said.

While there, Polce performed at several churches and at large outdoor festivals, and also met Jim Hornsby, a guitarist who specialized in Nashville-style playing. The two clicked together musically, and Hornsby agreed to produce Polce's most recent self-released album, "Ordinary Man."

A compilation of 10 country, gospel and Irish songs, much of the album could sit with contemporary hits in a country music saloon jukebox — albeit, one used by well-behaved patrons. Take "I Need Your Lovin," the title and music of which might lead the listener to believe he's about to hear a crying-in-your-beer tune. But Polce's lyrics speak of a different kind

of "lovin'" than most secular songs celebrate.

"Cause I see more clearly / Just who I am / Without your love Lord / I'm half a man," Polce sings.

The record's pedal steel guitar flavorings and tight harmonies have earned "Ordinary Man" good listener response from English Christian radio stations, Polce said.

Although the musicians on it were not avowed Christians, they were both skilled at their craft and down-to-

earth in their relationship with him, he said.

"They're not primadonnas," he said of those men and women. "They didn't judge me because I was a Christian. They gave me 100 percent."

Christian musicians should give 100 percent to their music, he said, noting that secular audiences are more likely to listen to music crafted with the same diligence applied to many pop records.

"I always believed personally that ... if you give your art to God, it should have good elements in it," he said.

He added that Christian artists in recent years, like Amy Grant and Jars of Clay — two of whose members are from Gates and graduated from McQuaid Jesuit High School — have successfully crossed over to the pop music world because they made good records that people wanted to hear.

"I feel like God wants us out there," he said of Christian musicians. "He wants us to be a witness and be a light."

Polce has shared the stage with both secular and Christian artists, including Dave Van Ronk, Livingston Taylor and Dion DiMucci, the famed doo-wopper who sang such hits as "Runaround Sue," and whom Polce counts as a friend. Polce noted that Dion has also made Christian records in addition to his secular ones.

Polce added that he himself hasn't ruled out making an album targeted toward the secular market. But whatever path he takes, Polce said he'll keep in mind the advice his friend, Dion, gave him.

"He said: 'Always just be yourself. Just be honest,'" Polce recalled.

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