

5 HELPING PEOPLE TO PRAY THROUGH MUSIC

Archbishop Weakland delivered this presentation to music ministers in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee at the annual Music Ministry Day on February 19, 2000, at the Archbishop Cousins Catholic Center in Milwaukee.

There is a custom in Madagascar that when you get up to speak you begin with your apologies, so you can be forgiven later. I was also told when people started their apologies one should not cut them off, but let them have their say so they would feel comfortable later on. It seems to me that during the Jubilee Year I am beginning every talk with apologies, so why not for you musicians, also?

My apology is that, as I look back over the 22 years I have been archbishop here, I confess that I really haven't done enough to be supportive and encouraging to the ministers of music in the archdiocese. In the beginning I probably did that on purpose. I did not want to create the image that I was coming to Milwaukee as a Benedictine liturgical reform bishop for you people and that I was going to make you all into Benedictine monks! But perhaps I haven't contributed as much as I should have. That's why I appreciate this opportunity to begin with a word of encouragement and to offer some preliminary remarks about you and your vocation as music ministers in the Church before I get into liturgical music itself.

I was thinking about the 22 years I have been here in the diocese. So many problems that seemed urgent 22 years ago you have forgotten all about now. When I came here the major problem was the question of doing away with choirs. Do you remember that, some of you older ones? There was a big tussle as to whether or not choirs would survive. Congregational singing and cantors were accented so strongly that people said there was no longer a need for choirs. That problem has totally disappeared. On the other hand, in many parishes I don't think we have enough cantors today. Therefore, we are not necessarily better off; we simply have a different set of problems now than we did back then.

YOUR VOCATION AS MINISTERS

My first remarks to you as musicians must be on your vocation. I asked myself before I started this talk: What can I say that will be a guiding principle for all the musicians of the archdiocese in this new millennium? What would I want them to see as their role, as their specific task? And I put these words on paper: *To help people pray.*

If you say that to yourself over and over and over again, if you continue to focus on your role of facilitating people's encounter with God, if you keep that before you as your vocation in the Church, then I think you will be okay. It was Schillebeeckx who said that every liturgy is an encounter with Jesus Christ. Our role, ministers of all sorts at the liturgy, is to facilitate that encounter. You've got to keep that before you all the time; otherwise you will not be an effective liturgical or musical minister. We encounter Jesus Christ in the liturgy, and our role is to facilitate that encounter — I don't say we *create* it — we *facilitate* it. God uses us and our music for that encounter. Therefore, it is up to us to help all of the people assembled to see and experience the presence of the Risen Lord in our midst.

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This has to be done on two levels. First of all, nothing you do should distract people from why they are there worshipping. It's important that you not do anything that takes them out of that ambiance, that liturgical moment, as fine as your music might be in itself. Secondly, you must deal with the whole community and every individual who makes up that assembly.

I keep this idea as a rule before me: Liturgy is the worship *of the people* and there is no doubt about that. It is the assembly, but the assembly is composed of individuals and you can't separate these two. It's not just an assembly "out there" somewhere. These people are the assembly. There is no such thing as private worship, but there is very personal worship and everyone present worships personally in this assembly — but not privately. Does that make sense to you? We have to get our people accustomed to that. Don't create a dichotomy between the individual and the assembly, because the individuals make up the assembly and they are the ones who are praying. There is no such thing as an assembly praying somewhere, not composed of the individuals who are praying. You can make the dichotomy between personal and private, but not between the people praying and the assembly. It's important that we don't get too abstract in that whole problem.

THE BOTH-AND OF OUR FAITH

We are facing today a new problem in liturgy. There is a dichotomy between the assembly and what is happening in terms of the liturgy. I get upset when people begin to make divisions of this sort, as if we can make a division in the liturgy between the “human” element and the “divine” element or between the assembly and the transcendent. Recently the periodical *Antiphon* carried an article saying we have placed the emphasis too much on the assembly; we have to place it more on Jesus Christ. That makes no sense. It’s not either-or; it’s both-and all the time. Any time somebody wants to draw you into a controversy on either-or, jump back a step, and you will find the Catholic answer is always both-and. Don’t pit the assembly against the transcendent; don’t pit the divine against the human. That’s what incarnation is all about — the divine and the human come together and it’s both-and, never either-or.

It is the assembly that is praying. Thomas Aquinas put it this way: *sacramenta propter homines* — sacraments are meant for people. There are no sacraments “out there somewhere”; sacraments are meant for people. You need both elements in every liturgy. It is objectively an encounter with Jesus Christ, but it is people who do that encountering, not some abstract church somewhere. Thus, you need to keep both of those elements constantly before you as you carry out your role in facilitating that encounter.

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HELPING PEOPLE TO PRAY

It is very important that your aim be to help the assembly; keep that in mind. So often I feel the musicians believe their task is to help the choir, but your main task is to help the assembly. Keep the assembly before your eyes at all times. Even the choir’s singing is to help the people pray. If you don’t do that, you are going to lose the important role of what liturgy is all about and what people are there to do, which is to participate. That participation is what you are facilitating at all times. Make the assembly and their prayer the first object of your concern. As a good touchstone for what you are doing, ask yourself: Will this help people to pray? Keep asking yourself that question over and over again.

There is a temptation now in the Christian churches — in order to fill them up - to turn our liturgy into entertainment. That is a danger for all of us. It is part of our American culture to want to be entertained. Thus, it’s very difficult for us when people come to church to keep away from turning it into just entertainment. We all know that weddings are the hardest because people who come to weddings generally do not form an assembly or a community. They are there to gape, and it’s a very difficult moment because most of the time they want to be entertained.

COMMUNITY PRAYER, NOT PERFECTION

Because your focus should always be on the whole assembly and their prayer, you might have to put up with some musical imperfections that otherwise you wouldn't want to tolerate. I hate to put it that bluntly. When I was a young idealist and went to study in Rome, the music director at Sant'Anselmo, our monastery, was Father Derochette. Some of you oldsters might remember the many books he wrote on chant accompaniment.

I'll never forget — I bought all these books on accompaniment (he had written volume after volume on accompanying the entire Gradual, etc.). I bought them all and thought it would be what he'd want me to play. "Oh, no," he said, "play your own accompaniments; they're much better than mine." I liked him from the very beginning! But the one point he kept saying over and over again was, "Don't forget, Rembert, when you are dealing with the prayer of a whole community it can never be perfect. This is not a collection of select singers to do a Bach Cantata. You have to be patient with what you have."

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It's the people in the assembly who will determine the level of perfection that you can acquire. You have to be concerned about that but also very patient with it. More than ever before, I feel that so often now. As I see people coming up, I would say our culture is gradually becoming musically illiterate. Years ago everybody took music education in high school. Now music is on an even lower plain in the curriculum than ever before. Thus, we don't have the musical culture we once had, and therefore we will never get the perfection that perhaps we should have in our worship. Yet that is what we begin with, and that's what we work with. You help facilitate their prayer.

The assembly should be the first object of our concern. It's not the choir, it's not the cantors, but it is the assembly. So often when I am out in the parishes I hear the choir sing something really beautiful and I sit there and say, "Wow, that's wonderful!" And then I am told to rise and sing, and it's lousy. I feel awful inside because we should have done better than that, but nobody seems to care. We have to worry about how the congregation is doing. The better the choir does, the more pressure it puts on having the congregation do better, because then you feel you're "with it"; it's not just a concern for the choir but for the entire praying assembly.

A STABLE REPERTOIRE

Perhaps that's one of the reasons why the people you are all dealing with in your congregations cannot be constantly learning new music and be expected to do a good job with it. The amount of music we expect our people to sing now is far above their ability to do well. We just keep piling up new music for people to sing and by the time they learn it, we move on to something else; they never get a chance to do it really well, as they want to. We need a much more stable repertoire for our people. The choir is another story, but for our people we need a more stable repertoire.

I really like some of the responsories for Lent and Advent that are based on the same theme every Sunday so people know that theme and come to associate it with that time of year. That was the way it was done in Latin years ago. There are certain themes that belong to the season, and if we keep to them, it's so much easier for our people to sing what they know and to pray through that.

I just take it for granted now that there is congregational singing at every Mass. There is no excuse not to have singing at any Mass — weekday, Sunday, it doesn't matter. There is simply no need for a silent Mass. Certain parts of the Mass you really can't say — you can't say alleluia. Alleluia has to be sung. We have to make sure that every Mass is a Mass with singing and that the congregation should sing and not feel this is something imposed upon them. Maybe I can put it this way: try to help your people to pray in song. That's a better way to say it than simply helping them to pray.

As a good touchstone for what you are doing, ask yourself: Will this help people to pray?

SINGING AND LISTENING

There is another debate that has been going on since the Council, and that is the big question about listening as a form of participation. Don't get caught in that either-or. One can participate by listening, there is no doubt about it, but that should not deprive people of the opportunity to sing. It's not as easy as you think to pray while listening. When I was studying at Columbia University, I used to laugh when some in the class would say, "Why doesn't the Catholic Church use Palestrina again?" Well, when you listen to Palestrina, do you really hear the words? Can you really follow eight parts at one time — that's hard listening! If you really listen to Palestrina, you are tired at the end, because there is a lot to listen to there and it's not easy.

Yes, one can pray, and listening is important, but it should not be either-or; it's a both-and. In fact, when the choir is singing alone or when you are playing the organ alone, ask yourself if the congregation can pray by listening. What do I want them to do while I am playing? What do I want them to do while the choir is singing? So

often after Communion, after the people have sung, then the choir sings. What are the people supposed to do while the choir is singing? Pray? What are they supposed to be praying about? Sometimes the song being sung by the choir has no relationship to what just happened liturgically. I have heard grandiose marches being sung at that point, and I would like to get up and say, "Let's take our banners and run around the church a few times!" It has nothing to do with that particular moment. Regarding singing and listening, it's a both-and.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTING MUSIC

Now I want to get on to the criteria for what kind of music to select. The first one will get you angry at me! Don't have the congregation sing any music you feel they won't be singing ten years from now. Give some thought to that. Don't make the people your experimental base. You can do that with your choir if you feel you must, but don't do it with the congregation. The people should not be given music to sing if you feel that music will not be sung ten years from now.

The assembly should be the first object of our concern. It's not the choir, it's not the cantors, but it is the assembly.

I got into a big fight with somebody the other day when I said that. They wanted to know how you can know it is going to be sung ten years from now. Every good musician knows in his or her gut whether music is good or not — I defy you to say you don't! You know when you are playing junk and you know when you are playing or singing good music. You are all trained, and I have that faith and confidence in you.

Once I had a wonderful professor in composition, Henry Cowell. He came into class one time and said he had been on the West Coast and had visited George Antheil. When I was a young man, George Antheil was considered *the* up and coming great composer. When Cowell went to see Antheil, George was in his study at his piano and didn't want to be disturbed. As Cowell sat there all he heard from Antheil was the same chord over and over and over again. After about 20 minutes of that chord, Cowell banged on the door and went into the study and said, "George, what the hell are you doing?" And Antheil said, "It's quite simple. I'm giving that chord the test of time." Doesn't that say something?

I was not surprised this week when the reviewer in *The New York Times* said of a 20-year-old Philip Glass opera that was redone, "This music doesn't hold up; I don't want to hear it again, it just isn't there." I could have told him that 20 years ago! If you really understand a piece of music and feel you have exhausted it at the first hearing, don't use it.

There is a certain mystery about good music, isn't there? There is a certain feeling when you have heard or played it that you have to do it again to get it right, that you never totally plumbed the depth of what is in that piece. You do it over again and over again and over again, always a little dissatisfied. Maybe one or the other time it soars; but great music will attract us that way and it's something we want to hear again; we want to do it again.

When you select new music, choose music you really want to last, to hear again, and that people will make their own.

MUSIC OF THE PAST

Now, I want to say a few other things about quality. Every so often, go into your choir loft closet and take a look at all the old music piled up and ask yourself if there is something there that is really good that has been lost. The other day I was at a big celebration and the choir sang an old Peloquin piece and I thought, "What happened to Alexander Peloquin?" Do you remember *The Mass of the Bells* and how beautifully we sang that? Is all that music now relegated to the dustbin because he died and nobody is pushing that music anymore? Bob Kreutz, who died not long ago, did some beautiful things, not just *Gift of Finest Wheat*, but many others. Go back into your shelves and find that old music and see if there is something that people resonated with and that we should use again.

Don't let the market drive our liturgical music. That's what's happening now. I am not blaming publishers. If I were in the publishing business, I wouldn't be making this speech; I would be telling you to buy my new music. If I were making a living as a composer, I certainly would want you to buy all my new music. We can become the victims of the market by thinking we have to try all this new music, rather than realizing we should do so only if it's worthwhile. We are in a trend where everything has to be new music.

When I go to the installation of a new bishop, I always look at the dates of the music being sung. It's rare to find anything composed before 1985 now. I am not saying whether it's better or worse, but a lot of the older things simply have died, and many of them should be resurrected. So don't become the victims of that capitalist consumer society; we're all like teenagers when it comes to buying Church music.

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TEST THE TEXT

The first thing to do when you look at music is study the text. It should have quality and it should be appropriate. We have a few good poets out there, but certainly not enough. It cannot be trite or sentimental only. I hear a lot of music in parishes that is taken from the electronic churches. It may well serve there, but not in our Catholic churches. We have to be careful about just taking these “Sweet Jesus” hymns which all sound like Lawrence Welk warmed over or perhaps Gilbert and Sullivan patter songs; they’re scrubbed clean and predictable. We have to do better than that and usually it’s the text that will tell you right away that there’s not much quality to it. So take a good look, first of all, at the text to make sure that the Trinitarian aspects are there and it’s not just sweet, sentimental, and Jesus focused.

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The music also has to be something a whole community can pray with and not just “me” privately. Some texts are geared more toward the personalism than toward the “we.” It has to be “we” music and not just “me” music. Sometimes “me” music is okay for Communion hymns; I think that’s a very personal moment for most people. But it can’t be all the music that we sing. I ask myself: “Could I really pray those words, or am I just going to tolerate them?” I’m not always very good at praying about glassy waters and so on; there are many hymns that don’t resonate with me in terms of prayer. But most of the time I find that the old hymns are much more “prayable” than the more scrubbed up, modern (you’ve heard them once, you’ve heard them always) electronic church hymns.

DIFFICULTIES WITH CHURCH MUSIC

The greatest difficulty I find with our Church music right now is that it’s monochromatic, colorless. Does that make sense to you? In the Catholic Church we are good when it comes to glorious occasions when we have the wonderful trumpeter and the drums and we sing a glorious piece coming in or going out. But everything in-between sounds the same way. We are poor when it comes to meditative, contemplative music. After I have been at a ceremony, I often say there was one level of tone in that church and it was *mezzo forte* to *forte* through the whole ceremony — nothing below *mezzo forte*. I don’t say you have to go to Rachmaninoff with *pppp* and *ffff*, but surely there has to be more variety in our music so that it’s not always joyful noise. It also has to be challenging and reflective.

I am impressed by how people nowadays hang on to Gregorian Chant. The younger generation loves Gregorian Chant. Why? Because there is something about that music which is contemplative. Even when they don’t understand the words, they know there is something about that music that is almost holy. We have to think

about what this is saying to us. Try to get much more variety in your styles. People say the question of style is hootenanny versus old hymns. That's not the style problem; the style problem is it's all loud and it's all the same tempo. We have to get more style in terms of variety of pieces we are singing.

THE LAW OF ASSOCIATION

When you choose music to sing, remember the old law of association. Let me give you an example of what I mean. In the '40s the choir at St. Patrick's in New York commissioned Refice, the great Italian composer of Church music at that time, to do a Mass for them, a Mass in the old sense of Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, etc. Refice sent this Mass to New York to the choir at St. Patrick's and they all started to rehearse it. It was based on a *cantus firmus* that sounded just like *Mighty Like a Rose*. Well, every time when they would come to this, everybody would giggle. They couldn't use this great piece of music that Refice had written for them, and, rightly, the choir director said if everybody in the choir starts to laugh, you can imagine what the people in the pews will do. There is a certain law of association that goes with everything cultural, and that is also true of music. Be very careful about that law of association.

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Brahms was rather a bore, and he always wore a hat in the house (it didn't just start with modern youth!). One of his pupils brought a piece of music he just composed and played it for Brahms. Every so often during the piece Brahms would lift his hat. When the piece was finished, the young man asked, "Mr. Brahms, why were you raising your hat?" "Oh," Brahms said, "I always salute old friends." When I hear so much music sung today, I wish I were wearing an old biretta like in the old days. I could raise my biretta and salute old friends.

There are laws of association you cannot get away from. You have to be careful when you pick your music so it does not project a different situation into the minds of people than an encounter with Jesus Christ, which is a very serious moment. That's why the Church forbade Wagner's *Wedding March*. It wasn't because that's a bad piece of music; it's probably better than all the other music used in church weddings. But if you had any culture in the last century and you heard the *Wedding March*, you knew you were in the opera house and you knew the whole story that went with the opera.

Thus, never give in to such requests as playing *Fiddler on the Roof* at a wedding. In trying to please people, you can so easily turn the church into a Broadway musical by the law of association. We simply have to be tough on that and assess whether allowing a popular song will really help the assembly come to an encounter with Jesus Christ. I doubt it. It's a hard question with regard to the youth today, isn't it? It is so difficult to find anything that doesn't have

some kind of an association with them. I know the Holy Father at all these massive gatherings has lots of Rock Music. I keep wondering how the law of association affects the prayer experience.

A constant observation I hear is that our current Church music is almost all written in a “cabaret” style. This is true. The rolling arpeggios in the base, the balladeer melody — all evoke a kind of country-style music that is easy to sing, that people like, but that all sounds alike.

On a positive note, make sure the music chosen fits the liturgical moment. Sometimes it is processional music and should cease when the procession ceases. Sometimes music covers an action, the Lamb of God, and should cease when the action is over. This music I often call “accordion” music, because it can be shortened or elongated according to the action. Then there are responsories and more meditative music needed for special liturgical moments. There are also seasonal pieces that should only be used at certain times of the year or for certain occasions.

If anything, we usually sing too much. I see, for example, no need for both a Gathering song and an Entrance hymn. We sing during Communion and then are expected to sing another hymn as a Thanksgiving hymn. Often I find it rather an intrusion. We sing an exit hymn, but are not allowed to exit until after the fifth verse because there is still an organ or choral finale. It is just too much music.

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CONCLUSION

As the liturgical renewal moves ahead, it becomes more and more evident that music is more important than we ever imagined. People pick the parish where they want to attend on the basis of two things: good homilies and good liturgy, especially good music. We spend much time and energy talking about evangelization and creating evangelization programs, but what are we bringing people home to?

Good worship is vital to today's Church. For this reason your ministry is so important. Do it so people can pray, can encounter Christ in Word and Sacrament.