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To Nourish or Destroy?

What can we learn about music and preaching?

by Clare Johnson

Introduction

"Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken and destroy it"¹ – this statement from *Music in Catholic Worship*, sums up well the instinct that many people have about the relationship between liturgy and faith. Those charged with the responsibility of planning and leading liturgical celebrations hold a sacred trust – to do everything in their power to ensure that the celebrations they plan and lead are in fact 'good' celebrations from the perspective of the worshipping assembly whose faith can be either nourished or destroyed by those celebrations, and from the perspective of the Church which has outlined with increasing specificity in recent times, its official vision of what constitutes 'good' liturgical celebrations.² Just what makes a 'good celebration' and what makes a 'poor celebration' in pastoral practice must be determined to some extent by the presiders, liturgists, and musicians entrusted with the tasks of planning and leading the Church's public prayer at the local level. There are certain universals though, that are always present in good celebrations and which help to achieve the dual aims of the liturgy, namely the glorification of God and the sanctification of humanity.³ These include: God-centredness, facilitation of the full, conscious and active participation of the assembly, appropriate use of silence, well-prepared and confident ministers,⁴ a smooth ritual flow (which can be achieved through good planning and rehearsal), a sense of reverence, inclusiveness and decorum, etc., the list goes on.

Leadership in worship

For those preparing and leading liturgical celebrations, understanding the centrality of the assembly in worship is absolutely crucial, because biblically and theologically, the assembly is the fundamental expression of the Church. It is not an act of the Church when a priest prays alone – the Church is constituted only when two or three are gathered in Christ's name (Mt 18:20), because the priest is only "a minister of Christ precisely because he is a minister of the Church."⁵ St. Paul's analogy of the Church as the Body of Christ, head and members (1 Cor 12) is the central biblical image via which we understand our purpose in coming together to worship God, which is "the corporate and ritual expression of the whole of Christian life, with its goal as incorporation into Christ."⁶ Judith Kubicki explains that: "this gathered liturgical community is recognized, in its local particularity, as the Body of Christ, and therefore, as an instance of Church." She continues: "Christ's real presence is sacramentalized by the mutual presence which the assembly offers to each other. This stipulation of mutual presence requires that each member of the assembly take seriously their participative role in worship."⁷ The most effective presiders, musicians, and liturgical planners are those who have learned to maintain a clear focus on serving

the needs of the assembly prior to any personal needs they may have, when making decisions about the liturgy that affect the experience of the entire assembly at worship.

It is commonly agreed that the two elements of the church's worship which attract the most comment and critique are preaching and music.⁸ The preaching and music change with every new celebration and are the liturgical elements which reflect most closely the choices of individuals made on behalf of the entire assembly. Assembly members feel strongly about the quality of liturgical preaching and music precisely because they are subject to change in every liturgy.⁹ Assemblies are less likely to become quite so excited by those aspects of worship which are not subject to change¹⁰ (i.e., the Ordinary of the Mass¹¹), or are not so subject to the influence of individual choice (i.e., the Lectionary readings or the predetermined corpus of Eucharistic Prayers and Propers). This is because many assembly members know these stable aspects of the liturgy by heart and allow themselves to be swept up in their recognizable rhythms and expected imagery without necessarily focusing specifically on each individual part of their customary patterns. Preaching and music are subject to change and reflect individual choices to which all are subject. As such they tend to attract attention and critique as in them our hopes and expectations for something new and engaging or familiar and inviting can be either realised or dashed depending on the skill and choices of preacher or musician.

Homily

The topic and content of the homily is in most cases left entirely up to the preacher, while the liturgical music reflects the choices of the music ministers. These individually-made choices become part of the liturgical experience of the entire assembly.¹² High quality liturgical preaching and music hold enormous potential to contribute to good celebrations. Conversely, low quality preaching and music hold enormous potential to contribute most particularly to poor celebrations. Assemblies rightly focus their attention on these worship elements because they are tools of mass communication which cannot be escaped in the liturgical context – short of blocking their ears, assemblies cannot not hear the homily, and cannot not be exposed to the liturgical music.¹³

At its best, the homily can contain effectively delivered rhetoric that opens up the Word of God in order to change attitudes toward life as a whole or just for the week ahead, drawing people into a deeper and more meaningful relationship with God, and a more compassionate and selfless relationship with those around them. The *Instrumentum Laboris* prepared for the 12th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October, 2008), states that:

In the homily, preachers need to make a greater effort to be faithful

*to the biblical text and mindful of
the condition of the faithful,
providing them assistance in
interpreting the events of their
personal lives and historical
happenings in the light of faith
This biblical aspect can opportunely
be supplemented with the basics of
theology and morality
Consequently a proper formation of
future ministers is indispensable*¹⁴

Part of the reason why people attend liturgy is because they are hungry for persuasive new words to inspire and challenge them in their daily lives as Christians,¹⁵ and because many of them have a soul-deep yearning for new interpretations and applications of the Gospel message and its relevance to today's world. The *Instrumentum Laboris* notes the reality that, "For a majority of Christians the world over, the celebration of the Eucharist on Sundays is the sole encounter with the Word of God"¹⁶ Ideally, the homily will interpret and draw forth the practical applications of the Word of God for the People of God, however, as the document notes, "...the faithful's hunger for the Word of God is not always receiving an adequate response in the preaching of the Church's Pastors, because of a deficiency in seminary preparation or pastoral practice"¹⁷ It continues: "Homilies could clearly stand improvement"¹⁸

Music

At its best, liturgical music can constitute an effective ritual language with the capacity to reach a heart in need of healing or to express an inexpressible joy, elevating the spirit as can no other idiom. In its recent statement *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops explains that music as a

*... common, sung expression of faith
within liturgical celebrations
strengthens our faith when it grows
weak and draws us into the divinely
inspired voice of the Church at
prayer. Faith grows when it is well
expressed in celebration. Good
music makes[s] the liturgical
prayers of the Christian community
more alive and fervent so that
everyone can praise and beseech the
Triune God more powerfully, more
intently and more effectively*¹⁹

The faithful are hungry for evocative, well-chosen, high quality music that lifts their spirits and encourages them to raise their voices as one united body in praise of God. *Sing to the Lord* reinforces the importance of choosing music that invites the assembly into active participation rather than music that actually prevents the assembly from fulfilling its role in the liturgy by being exclusive, stating that: "Singing is one of the primary ways that the assembly of the faithful participates actively in the Liturgy. The people are encouraged 'to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalms, antiphons [and] hymns...' The musical formation of the assembly

must be a continuing concern in order to foster full, conscious, and active participation"²⁰

The hunger for strong preaching

When the hunger of an assembly for excellent preaching goes unsated because the homily is poorly constructed, lacking in substance, or delivered unenthusiastically,²¹ or when the desire of an assembly for appropriate, high-quality, engaging music that invites congregational participation remains unfulfilled because the music is ill-chosen, exclusive or poorly performed,²² a feeling of disappointed emptiness can predominate among the dispersing assembly. Their level of disgruntlement may be expressed through comments passed on directly or indirectly to liturgical leaders, or may be expressed via the simple choice of not returning to that place of worship in the future. With only 15.3% of Australian Catholics attending worship on a weekly basis,²³ one cannot help but wonder if attendances might rise were our parishes to pay more attention to the quality of preaching and music in our liturgies.

Evangelical congregations competing for their growing market-share of Christians understand and openly exploit the power of good preaching and engaging music in worship. Relevant preaching and attractive music are the chief components of megachurch worship at Hillsong, Crossway, CityLife, Riverview and Planetshakers among other evangelical congregations operating in Australia's large cities. These groups have invested serious financial resources in producing highly-attractive, professional worship experiences, designed to fill the hunger among our communities for appealing, meaningful, relevant encounters with God and other Christians.

Sheep-stealing

In an era of 'sheep-stealing' (i.e., the recruitment of members of one Christian denomination by another) when there is a very real threat that evangelical congregations can attract Catholics away from their own parishes, paying attention to the quality of preaching and music in our own liturgical celebrations seems prudent. This is not to suggest that regular Catholic parish musicians ought necessarily to attempt to emulate the Christian rock/pop style of music frequently found in the megachurch context, or that Catholic homilists should attempt to recreate the 'high-energy' theatre-like enthusiasm of the evangelical preachers, as this may risk the appearance of inauthenticity. Rather it is to suggest that Catholics may benefit from noting how well these churches utilize the power of good quality preaching and music (in whatever style is appropriate to each worship context) to engage an assembly in full, conscious and active participation in worship.

Feedback

Sometimes individual members of the local assembly are afraid to offer comment openly on the quality (or lack of quality) of the preaching and music in local parishes because they do not want to hurt anyone's feelings, or because they feel lucky to have a priest ministering to the local assembly at all, or because they think: 'at least the dedicated (but not necessarily competent) amateur musician is willing to

turn up to play or sing each week.' But if we accept the principle that good liturgies foster and nourish faith and poor liturgies may weaken or destroy it, is saying nothing about poor quality preaching and music appropriate when what is at stake is the very faith of the assembly? Is settling for preaching and music of a lesser quality 'good enough' in our worship of almighty God?

On a practical level, what can be done in the immediate term to improve the quality of preaching and music in our local parishes?

Presiders could have their homilies videoed for later viewing to look for pointers as to what improvements could be noted for next time – in teaching preaching to seminarians, this has proven an excellent tool for improving preaching content and delivery. Presiders could intentionally ask for direct feedback on the content and delivery of their homilies from select members of the assembly whose opinion is valued and who will honestly but kindly 'tell it like it is' so that new ways of connecting with the local target audience can be learned. Studying closely the preaching craft of a colleague whose style is particularly admired can teach a presider how to improve his own preaching.

Dialogue in truth and love

Music ministers could solicit the opinion of a variety of assembly members as to what aspects of the music are done well or what needs improvement. Music ministers could attend the professional development workshops presented by their Archdiocese on liturgical music, choral conducting or how to be an effective leader of song in order to be enthused and inspired by new ideas and approaches. If music ministers are not particularly strong in one aspect of their ministerial or musical skill-sets, the parish could sponsor them in some lessons to update and improve their levels of competence.

Members of the assembly have a right under Canon Law²⁴ to volunteer suggestions and feedback to presiders and music leaders regarding the quality of liturgical preaching and music in their parishes. This does not mean a free-for-all character assassination or gripe session, but rather a considered reflection on the needs of the assembly and how these are or are not being met by the current liturgical leadership of the parish. The best leaders can bear suggestions or gentle criticism if they are convinced they will lead to an overall improvement in the liturgical life of the local assembly. An open and respectful exchange between members of the assembly and their presiders and music leaders can contribute toward fostering 'good celebrations' of the liturgy.

Conclusion

Through their ministries of preaching and music-making our presiders and musicians have been entrusted with the power either to foster and nourish faith in the hearts and minds of our assemblies, or to destroy that faith if they do not perform their ministerial tasks well. The word 'minister' in Latin means 'servant,' and it is important that those presiding at worship and producing music for worship keep uppermost in their minds that their role is one of

service in the liturgy – service of God and service of the assembly. In the case of presiders, STTL reminds us that: "No other single factor affects the liturgy as much as the attitude, style, and bearing of the priest celebrant, who 'prays in the name of the Church and of the assembled community' When he celebrates the Eucharist, [the priest] must serve God and the people with dignity and humility..."²⁵ In the case of liturgical musicians, STTL explains that: "Liturgical musicians are first of all disciples, and only then are they ministers. Joined to Christ through the Sacraments of Initiation, musicians belong to the assembly of the baptized faithful; they are worshipers above all else."²⁶ Ministering well in liturgical preaching and music means recognising that service of God and service of the assembly must always take precedence over personal preferences and agendas,²⁷ because what is at stake is the very faith of the assembly.

References

¹ USCCB Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy (1972/83) *Music in Catholic Worship in The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource*, ed. Elizabeth Hoffmann (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991) §6, 277.

² See for example *Sacrosanctum Concilium in The Liturgy Documents*, 9-35 (hereafter referred to as SC), *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (3rd edition which contains the 5th edition of GIRM 2000). http://www.acbc.catholic.org.au/documents/20070703_1933.pdf (internet, accessed July, 2008) (Hereafter referred to as GIRM3) *Varietates Legitimae in Origins* 23:43 (April 14, 1994): 745, 747-756; and *Redemptionis Sacramentum in Origins* 33:47 (May 6, 2004) 801, 803-22.

³ SC §10, *The Liturgy Documents*, 12.

⁴ See GIRM3, §352.

⁵ John F. Baldovin, "An Embodied Eucharistic Prayer," Introduction to *The Postures of the Assembly During the Eucharistic Prayer*, John K. Leonard and Nathan D. Mitchell, editors (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994) 7.

⁶ *ibid.*, 5.

⁷ Judith M. Kubicki, *The Presence of Christ in the Gathered Assembly*. (New York: Continuum, 2006) 45.

⁸ The *Instrumentum Laboris* prepared for the October 2008 Synod of Bishops notes this explicitly in the case of preaching, stating: "Finally, preaching in its many forms remains not only one of the pre-eminent means of communicating the faith in the Church but also, perhaps, the one most exposed to the judgment of the faithful." Catholic Church, *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 12th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops *Instrumentum Laboris* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008) §45. (Hereafter referred to as 'IL, 12th Synod').

⁹ The other element subject to change and the influence of individual choices made on behalf of all in each liturgy, is the Prayer of the Faithful, but these prayers do not seem to elicit quite so much comment as the preaching and music.

¹⁰ The church has determined that “... the liturgy is made up of immutable elements, divinely instituted, and of elements subject to change” SC §21

¹¹ We recognise that the Ordinary of the Mass will change with the introduction of the Third Typical Edition of the *Roman Missal* of Paul VI, but once introduced, this new translation of the Mass will remain stable and eventually will take on the familiarity of the present Ordinary among the assembly.

¹² GIRM3, §352 emphasizes the need for presiders and liturgy planners to bear in mind the needs of the assembly, stating that: “In planning the celebration of Mass, then, the priest should pay attention to the common spiritual good of the People of God, rather than his own inclinations. He should also remember that choices are to be made in consultation with those who perform some part in the celebration, including the faithful in regard to the parts that more directly belong to them.”

¹³ The USCCB explains in *Sing to the Lord. Music in Divine Worship that* “... unless music sounds, it is not music, and whenever it sounds, it is accessible to others. By its very nature song has both an individual and a communal dimension. Thus, it is no wonder that singing together in church expresses so well the sacramental presence of God to his people.” (Washington D.C.: USCCB, 2007) §2.

www.usccb.org/liturgy/SingToTheLord.pdf (internet, accessed July, 2008) (Hereafter referred to as STTL).

¹⁴ IL 12th Synod, §37

¹⁵ The IL 12th Synod notes that: “... The word of God should be presented as the sustenance of the Church’s faith throughout the ages,” §7c

¹⁶ *ibid*, §33

¹⁷ *ibid*, §27

¹⁸ *ibid*, §33

¹⁹ STTL §5. STTL §124 also notes that music “... is capable of expressing a dimension of meaning and feeling that words alone cannot convey. While this dimension of an individual musical composition is often difficult to describe, its affective power should be carefully considered along with its textual component.”

²⁰ STTL, §26.

²¹ A recent editorial in *America Magazine* commented that: “Too many of the faithful feel unenlightened and undernourished by what they hear each week from the pulpit. Nothing could strengthen the liturgy and give new vitality to the Catholic community as much as biblically rooted preaching.” “Synod on the Word of God” *America Magazine* (July 7, 2008)

http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=10908 (internet accessed July, 2008).

²² STTL §125 states: “The role of music is to serve the needs of the Liturgy and not to dominate it, seek to entertain, or draw attention to itself or the musicians. The primary role of music in the Liturgy is to help the members of the gathered assembly to join themselves with the action of Christ and to give voice to the gift of faith.”

²³ Figure quoted in ACBC Pastoral Projects Office final report, *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass* (February 2007)

<http://www.acbc.catholic.org.au/documents/200704031873.pdf> (internet accessed June, 2008)

²⁴ *The Code of Canon Law* (Can 212 §2) notes that the faithful have the freedom to make known their needs, especially their spiritual needs, and their desires to the pastors of the Church. Canon 212 §3 states that: “In accord with their knowledge, competence, and position, they have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the church...”

Quoted in John M. Huels, *The Pastoral Companion A Canon Law Handbook for Catholic Ministry*, rev. ed. (Quincy IL: Franciscan Press, 1995) 31

²⁵ STTL, §18.

²⁶ STTL, §49.

²⁷ SC §26 states plainly that: “Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations belonging to the whole church. Therefore, liturgical services involve the whole Body of the Church; they manifest it and have effects upon it...” Pope John Paul II in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (§52) wrote that the liturgy should not ever seem to be “anyone’s private property, whether of the celebrant or of the community in which the mysteries are celebrated.” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 95 (2003) 468

continued from page 8

⁴ *The Malta Report* N.4.

⁵ *The Common Declaration. ibid*, 118

⁶ ‘ARCIC 1 and II, An Anglican Perspective’

Talk given to the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin. March 7, 1998: 6.

⁷ ‘The Work of ARCIC 1968-2000’ in *One in Christ*, January 2004, 24-25.

⁸ Christopher Hill and Edward Yarnold sj *Anglicans and Roman Catholics. The Search for Unity.* CTS/ SPCK, 1994, 36.

⁹ *ibid*, 34.

¹⁰ *ibid*, 36.

¹¹ R. William Franklin ed. (1996) *Anglican Orders. Essays on the Centenary of Apostolicae Curae 1896-1996* (London: Mowbray) 127

¹² *ibid*, 16

¹³ Denis Edwards and Stuart Smith. “Anglican Orders – A Hundred Years Later” in *The Australian Catholic Record*, July 1996 Vol LXX111, 3 331

^{13a} Anglican Orders *op cit*, 10

¹⁴ *ibid*, 333

¹⁵ *ibid*, 334

¹⁶ *ibid*, 91

¹⁷ “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” in *Faith and Order Paper*, 111 36.

¹⁸ Hill and Yarnold *op cit*, 217, 221.

¹⁹ *ibid*, 236

²⁰ *ibid*, 267

²¹ *ibid*, 236

²² *ibid*, 267

²³ *ibid*, 95.