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To nourish or destroy?

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To Nourish or Destroy?
What can we learn about music and preaching?

Introduction

"Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken and destroy it" — 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. 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 aim of the liturgy, namely the glorification of God and the sanctification of humanity. These include: God-centredness, facilitation of the full, conscious and active participation of the assembly, appropriate use of silence, well-prepared and confident ministers, 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.” 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.” 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.”

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. 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. Assemblies are less likely to become quite so excited by those aspects of worship which are not subject to change (i.e., the Ordinariness of the Mass), or are not so subject to the influence of individual choice (i.e., the Lectionary 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. 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.

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*
Feedback

Conferences and special programming are important in helping people engage in the conversation. It is necessary to connect with others who share similar interests and to have their feedback. The importance of discussion and the exchange of ideas cannot be overstated.

Shaping the Experience with your Conferences

Music

The number of people attending conferences and actively participating in them is growing. This is due to the increasing number of people who are interested in new ideas and are eager to learn.

To Maintain or Improve?
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 Law to36 volunteers 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
grip 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, STIL 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.’

In the case of liturgical musicians, STIL 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.’ 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,
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
referred to as GIRM3) Variatates Legitima in
Origins 23:43 (April 14, 1994): 745, 747-756; and
Redemptionis Sacramentum in Origins 33:47 (May 6,
4. SC §10, The Liturgy Documents, 12
5. See GIRM3, §352.
Prayer,” Introduction to The Pastures of the Assembly
During the Eucharistic Prayer, John K. Leonard and
Nathan D. Mitchell, editors (Chicago: Liturgy
Training Publications, 1994) 7
7. ibid, 5
8. Judith M Kubicki, The Presence of Christ in the
Gathered Assembly. (New York: Continuum, 2006)
45.
9. The Instrumentum Laboris is 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’).
10. 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 elicite 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 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.

14 STIL §128 Synod, §37

15 The II. 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 STIL §5 STIL §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." STIL §86

20 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=120908 (internet accessed July, 2008)

21 STIL §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."

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

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5 The Malta Report, N.4

6 The Common Declaration, ibid, 118

7 ARCIC 1 and 11, An Anglican Perspective' Talk given to the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin March 7, 1998: 6


9 ibid, 34.

16 ibid, 36


12 ibid, 16


13b Anglican Orders op cit, 10

14 ibid, 333

15 ibid, 334

16 ibid, 16

17 Baptist, 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