

Lyrics for Liturgy I: Liturgical Song

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In the first of a two part series on *Thinking Faith* looking at musical traditions in the Church, Frances Novillo describes the function of liturgical song in uniting a congregation. How do the music and text of a hymn, when properly chosen, enable us to worship as a community?

The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as a combination of sacred music and words, it forms a necessary or integral part of solemn liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 112, quoted in *Catechism* 1156).

The introduction of hymns to the Mass muddied the waters of liturgical music, creating slots where it seemed any texts might be sung, as long as they weren't radically heretical. It is easy to understand what to sing and why when there is a set text provided within the Mass such as the Gloria, Gospel Acclamation or Eucharistic Acclamations, but the liturgical purpose of hymns is less well-defined. When we sing them regardless, without justification save 'it's what we've always done', that is building a slippery slope towards singing any text (even secular) in these slots, because we have no good reason not to. To the average worshipper, a hierarchy of music and texts for singing in the Mass is not apparent (nor should it be), but to those who are choosing, an awareness of what is essential, what is optional, and why, is invaluable.

The Church provides Entrance and Communion antiphons as suggested texts for singing. These are model texts which can be replaced by other appropriate songs. So a thorough appreciation of what defines an appropriate song is necessary in order to make a judicious choice which will support the liturgy and enable the 'fully conscious and active participation' of 'all the faithful' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14).



Liturgical song unites the congregation as one body, moving each individual participant into the worshipping life of the community. It should therefore express a common sentiment. We worship in the broad contexts of the universal Church and the communion of saints so the lyrics we sing must express these wider dimensions. In practice, we should ensure that communal sentiment predominates our texts for singing, with less emphasis on 'me and

Jesus' and a greater focus on the whole body of Christ. A lyric may be born out of personal faith experience, but must possess wider relevance to function well as a congregational song. Nobody should be excluded. We cannot deny our particularity but we must not impose this on our congregations as if it was a universal experience. Different people need to truly relate to the text of the hymn as their own, applicable to them and expressive of their relationship with God (even in the aspirational sense). The text must enable a diverse group of individuals to be bound together as one worshipping community, while exercising caution that our expression of identity in song is welcoming and does not express a false superiority of one group over others.

The text must be comprehensible and meaningful. We are not singing merely to recall comforting memories from early childhood. Liturgical lyric does not serve the same purpose as nursery rhyme, but seeks rather to nurture mature faith. The language of well-known and even well-loved hymns may now appear archaic or exclusive. Modern scientific and

technological developments have enabled us to articulate more than Biblical authors could imagine. Older hymns about creation may promote taming or domination, whereas our current concern is care for the environment. Hymns which sent many faithful soldiers out to the mission fields now appear embarrassingly racist and imperialist, and it is not common now for the word 'man' to be understood as meaning 'all people'. Thus alterations or omissions become necessary, in accordance with the historical tradition of hymnody. John Wesley amended and updated the hymn-texts of Isaac Watts, and his brother Charles's *Hark! how all the welkin rings* became the much more comprehensible *Hark! the herald angels sing*. Accessibility also extends to the melodies chosen to accompany hymn lyrics.

If the musical language seems alien, many inexperienced singers in the assembly may be reluctant to join in singing. Liturgists need to be aware of the prevailing culture: Irish and Scottish worshippers familiar with folk music may take easily to singing a modal tune such as John L. Bell's *I will always bless the Lord*, but this may be less effective when introduced to worshippers whose ipods are full of hip-hop. The musical diet need not remain restricted, and can be expanded, especially with the employment of fusion styles, such as Gregorian chant sung to a trance beat, or a Taizé chant segued into Baroque organ variations. The average congregation is receptive to new musical styles when these are performed well and introduced with an enthusiastic and sincere justification. Similarly, we do not always need to sing in the vernacular: wherever Catholics worship, there is often a smattering of Hebrew, Latin, Aramaic and Greek; or it may be appropriate to sing in the language of a significant migrant group present in our parish, or in the language spoken in a country in particular need of our prayer, so that our worship might be relational and truly universal. However, where this occurs, translations into the majority language should be provided.

To carry meaning, liturgical lyrics must express with authenticity who we are and who God is. In order to distinguish a hymn text from a talent show song, or a ditty at a pub singalong, Christian theological content is essential. Thus hymn-writers look to the Bible and liturgical texts as primary sources. The Psalms offer the richest source of words to sing, since they are

essentially the Bible's hymnbook. Psalms and Biblical canticles also offer a variety of structural models for contemporary sung prayer. The Church's selection and connection of texts in the Lectionary (between Old Testament reading, Psalm and Gospel) suggest means of linking more than one Biblical passage: the connection may take the form of a direct quotation, narrative on a single event, or development of the theme. Scripture, too, relates later passages to earlier texts, such as the prophet Isaiah quoted by Jesus in the Gospel of St. Luke (4:16-21), or the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) echoing Hannah's song (1 Samuel 2:1-10).

Thus as you are attentive to each scene captured in the Lectionary at a Mass on one particular day, be aware, too, of the overall drama which connects this to previous and forthcoming Sunday or weekday readings, feasts and liturgical seasons. The carefully crafted cohesive efforts of Isaac Watts in his 'Christianised' psalms (such as *Jesus shall reign where'er the sun*) and effective lyrical connections between Scripture and contemporary life in Fred Pratt Green's *When in our music* and Shirley Erena Murray's *Because you came*, demonstrate how Biblical inspiration may evolve to encompass a wider viewpoint.

Not every Biblically-inspired hymn is suitable as a liturgical lyric. Some sacred texts express personal sentiment, and would be better used in devotional services than at Mass. Many of our sacred texts are honoured by followers of different religions, so Catholic hymn texts are duty-bound to reflect and reinforce the message of the Christian gospel. Biblical texts may be quoted, paraphrased or adapted to incorporate elements of reflection or relevant personal experience, but some texts appear to contain an inconsistent random collection of quotes which lack coherence and these are unsuitable. In the Music Resource Project established by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in response to *Liturgiam Authenticam* 'hymns which had stitched together various scriptural texts without proper regard for theological focus were rejected' (Jenny O'Brien in Australian publication *Liturgy News*, September 2008). Our songs must contain nothing contrary to the teaching of the Church, and nothing which distorts the faith, but rather remains true to the whole catechism. It is not necessary for that catechism in its completeness to be quoted nor summarised in every

hymn, but the richness of the faith may be embraced through the employment of different musical and textual forms from a variety of composers.

Since words sung to music embed themselves in the memory more firmly than those merely recited, our hymns are valuable catechetical tools. They form part of an oral tradition passed on from generation to generation so that 'my Spirit with which I endowed you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, will not leave your mouth, or the mouths of your children, or the mouths of your children's children, says the Lord, henceforth and for ever.' (Isaiah 59:21). Via hymns, 'the word is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to put into practice' (Deuteronomy 30:14). Some hymn texts tell the story of our faith in the same tradition as Psalms 105 and 106, and are creedal, reinforced by doxological form or conclusions, as demonstrated by Mrs Cecil Frances Alexander, who was inspired by the Apostles' Creed to write hymns such as *All things bright and beautiful* and *There is a green hill far away* to explain the faith to children. Complex theological philosophies are summarised nicely in hymns such as *Praise to the Holiest in the height* which alludes to the second Adam concept of 1 Corinthians 15:21-22. However, they may be more referential than explanatory since they serve a different purpose from the direct proclamation of the Word or the Homily.

The liturgy guides us, indicating which texts to sing when. The meaning of the words we sing is shaped as we incorporate our singing into liturgical action. A good hymn highlights, affirms, describes, explains or alludes to the liturgical action; less effective hymns obscure, over-emphasise, create too narrow a focus or distract. So a hymn which requires the reading of many words may not appropriately accompany a procession, in which people participate more easily without carrying a hymnal, and might rather sing a simple repetitive chant from memory.

Liturgy allows for a range of expression (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4), not only praise, to be held safely within the framework of community worship. So the canon of hymnody encompasses the totality of human experience in relation to God. In this sense, liturgical lyrics serve a pastoral function, as channels through which the whole life of each worshipper may be offered to God in the liturgy. We sing of our past,

present and future, in songs which give voice to our memories, experiences and aspirations. If the words we sing seem irrelevant, we are unlikely to pay heed to them in everyday life. So we start from what is known, safe and familiar, like St Paul who becomes all things to all people in order to secure their salvation (1 Corinthians 9:22), yet leads them on so that something unknown becomes known (Acts 17:23); dormant faith is awakened. For ours is a transformative belief system, and lyrics for liturgy ought to enhance, not restrict this, allowing for its power and challenge to take full effect.

Assembly liturgy calls me to celebrate myself and who I am and what I do *in medio ecclesiae*, in the midst of the assembly, where I experience that Christ is in me and I am in Christ. Assembly liturgy cannot be planned around the lowest common denominator. When that happens, we get into the pattern of commemorating the past, canonizing the values of our parents' generation, and singing the good old hymns. Many of those hymns are good indeed, and many of our parents' values are excellent. But assembly liturgy has to be something more. (Tad Guzie, 'The Art of Assembly-ing' in *The Singing Assembly*, The Pastoral Press: Washington DC, 1991, p.31)

Does this text touch the heart of worshippers and minister to them in their daily life, providing food for the journey (1 Kings 19:7)? Are these lyrics true to the faith of the Church? Does this hymn fit the liturgical purpose for which it is intended, highlighting and not obscuring liturgical action? Do these words express a sentiment which can be held in common by the whole group? Are they true to the words, imagery and revelation of the Scriptures? Is this text inclusive of the whole body of Christ, worldwide and diverse? If so, then we must ensure that such appropriate words are given suitable musical accompaniment. Historically, many settings of the Mass were composed not for public worship, but rather for concert performances. Despite the allusion of the title, Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* is not liturgical. James MacMillan is a classical composer, practising Catholic and writer of some beautiful pieces for liturgical use such as the St. Anne's Mass, but also a man who uses liturgical texts beyond their conventional setting; his *Busqueda* blends poetry by the mothers of the Disappeared in South and Central America with the Latin texts of the Mass. So scrutiny of the musical form, setting and style is necessary

before we approve a text for singing in liturgy. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal reminds us that clergy, choir, cantor and congregation have distinct musical roles in liturgy (GIRM 95-96,102-104, 109) and inasmuch as we enable these to be properly fulfilled, we shape our liturgical identity. So we seek out music which promotes appropriate liturgical diversity, employing various forms such as dialogues, litanies, chants alongside metrical hymns with stanzas and refrains. Repetition is a common theme in Roman Catholic liturgy, allowing us to measure our personal growth as we return time and time again to the same rites, discovering new levels of understanding. Chants, litanies and similar musical forms echo this liturgical theme, although we are advised to seek clarity and simplicity in all our ritual texts, whether spoken or sung, ensuring these are 'unencumbered by useless repetition' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 34).

A hymn is neither poetry nor prose, but a distinct textual form. Linguistically, poetry can be described as being of its time, whereas hymns must be accessible and relevant to contemporary worshippers, regardless of when the lyrics were originally written. A text for singing demands rhythm and rhyme in order to be successfully wedded to a melody; however, unlike a poem, it need not stand alone without its music. Composing a text for singing is not an excuse for poor writing, but does allow for the addition of syllables such as 'O' which may feel awkward in spoken prayer. All the techniques of poetry may be incorporated into a text for singing, but these techniques ought not to appear artificial, and the truth of the prose must not be sacrificed to the tyranny of the rhyme as has unfortunately occurred in *Once in Royal David's city* where Mary is rendered 'mild' by the need to rhyme with 'child', and in *Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us* where Jesus is described as 'dreary' because it rhymes with 'weary'. Neither description is Biblically nor theologically sound. Poetic stanzas in hymnody may develop a theme in 'bite-sized chunks', as seen in hymns such as *When I survey* and *Lord of all hopefulness*. Communal song can offer space for individual prayer, especially when interspersed with instrumental interludes, or leading into silence. Music changes the way we engage with worship, setting a mood for prayer, which may be joyful, angry, solemn, sad, confident, shocking, calming, and so on. Music also

opens the ears, the mind and the heart to be more receptive to what follows it. In liturgy, therefore, we must be aware of what precedes and follows each song, and the impact the music we choose may have on neighbouring elements of the liturgy.

Lyrics for liturgy are not dry doctrinal documents, but allow for the expression of the truths of our faith with spirit, with emotion (cf John 4:23). St Augustine recorded that 'the tears flowed from me when I heard your hymns and canticles, for the sweet singing of your Church moved me deeply. The music surged in my ears, truth seeped into my heart, and my feelings of devotion overflowed, so that the tears streamed down ... tears of gladness' (St Augustine, *Confessions* IX, 6, p.190 Penguin Classics: London, 1961). Since hymnody is bound up with identity, it should not be surprising that these texts stir the emotions. But theological integrity provides counter-weight criteria by which we judge the value of a hymn beyond how it makes us feel; for 'not every spirit is to be trusted, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God' (1 John 4:1).

Since the process of singing and the words we sing in liturgy are so significant in expressing who we are and who God is, in binding us together as a community and in giving voice to prayer, it is imperative that liturgy is well-prepared, showing the high esteem in which it is held. We value the worshipping assembly's past, present and future when we share with them treasures old and new (Matthew 13:52) to enhance our liturgy. Liturgists are neither museum archivists, with preservation our priority, nor are we purely innovators, but people who recognise the richness of our heritage and simultaneously embody a Word made Flesh: not a static sacred text set in stone, but a living Word which evolves through our own lives and experiences. As we are exhorted to do by the prophets (Isaiah 29:13), evangelists (Mark 7:6) and Church hierarchy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 11), so we honour God not only with our lips but in our hearts. More than words which we hear, we make our own the words we sing. These are placed on our lips, memorised and absorbed into our bodies. We internalise these texts to nourish us so that we might share them with others with integrity and conviction. Liturgical song draws us together as the body of Christ, and sends us out to build His Kingdom.

NOTES:

1: It has become common-place also to sing during the Presentation of the Gifts and at the close of Mass. Liturgical documents do not generally support this practice. Silence and instrumental music may enable better participation in the offertory rites. A final song is alien to the Roman Rite, which in fact ends as indicated in the priest's dismissal: *The Mass is ended, go ...* An instrumental voluntary may accompany the exit procession of the priest and servers.

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