



Music and the Proclamation of God's Word

Words and music belong together. Sometimes an association between words and music is so strong that we find it difficult to say the words without singing the tune—or to hear the melody without also thinking of the words.

Try saying the words of the “Star-Spangled Banner” without the melody. If you’re like most people, you’re probably stumbling a bit. Now try it with the tune. Makes a big difference, right? Some texts just don’t seem right without music. Have you ever tried gathering around a cake ablaze with candles and just saying the words of “Happy Birthday”? Have you ever attended a football game where the crowd only recites the words of the school fight song?

Music has long played an important role in the life of the Church, especially in proclaiming, praying, and responding to the Word of God. The bishops who gathered at the Second Vatican Council recognized the intimate connection between word and music, declaring that the Church’s musical tradition is of preeminent value because “as a combination of sacred music and words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy” (Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* [*Sacrosanctum Concilium*], no. 112, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, new rev. ed., ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996]).

Music Proclaims the Word

Music provides a powerful vehicle for the proclamation of the Word of God, particularly in the celebration of the liturgy. Although it is not currently a common practice in the Roman rite, a long-standing tradition in Churches of both East and West has deacons and lectors sing the

Gospel and other scriptural readings of the liturgy.

Most Catholics today are accustomed to hearing the verses of the Responsorial Psalm proclaimed in song. Official liturgical documents regard the singing of the Responsorial Psalm as being so important that it should normally be sung from the ambo—the place from which the other biblical texts are proclaimed—by a specially designated psalmist.

Musical proclamation of God’s Word is by no means restricted to the liturgy. One of the best known examples of sung proclamation of biblical texts is George Frideric Handel’s beloved oratorio, *Messiah*—written not for the Church but for the concert hall. The words of the prophet Isaiah in the King James Bible, “For unto us a child is born” (Is 9:5), evoke for many English-speaking Christians Handel’s exuberant musical setting of these words. Isaiah’s words have become unforgettable to many of us, thanks to the composer’s skillful use of musical language that draws particular attention to the words: “Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace” (Is 9:6, KJV).

The works of Handel and other composers who have set biblical texts to music are marvelous examples of music’s power to evangelize. Music can open ears and hearts to the Good News of God’s presence, action, and love for the human race. Even today many composers are creating musical settings of scriptural texts through which listeners can meet the living God in fresh expressions of the Word.

The preparatory document for the 2008 Synod of Bishops on “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church” urged contemporary believers to use every means at their disposal to

proclaim the Gospel, including “radio, TV, theatre, cinema, music and songs, including the more recent media, such as CDs, DVDs, Internet, etc.” (*Lineamenta* for the Synod on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, no. 26, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20070427_lineamenta-xii-assembly_en.html). Composers and musicians have an important part to play in this work of announcing God’s Word both inside and outside the walls of the Church.

Music in Praying God’s Word

Music is a powerful language for the proclamation of the Word of God, but it is also a potent form of expression for the community to pray from the Scriptures. During his visit to France in September 2008, Pope Benedict XVI noted that “for prayer that issues from the word of God, speech is not enough: music is required” (www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080912_parigi-cultura_en.html).

Christians often pray God’s Word through the singing of psalms and other biblical canticles, such as Mary’s song, the *Magnificat*. These scriptural songs form the basis for the daily prayer of the Church—the Liturgy of the Hours—and are used frequently during the celebration of the Mass, sacraments, and other rites.

The singing of psalms has long been used to accompany liturgical processions: for example, the entrance and Communion processions at Mass. In the fifth century, St. Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, recalled for newly initiated Christians the psalm that was sung as they and the other members of the liturgical assembly came forward to receive Communion: “After this you hear the cantor inviting you in sacred song to participate in the holy mysteries. His words are: ‘Taste, and see that the Lord is good’ (Ps 34:9)” (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Baptismal Homily 5*, in *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, 2nd ed., trans. Edward Yarnold, SJ [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994], no. 20).

The Church’s official liturgical documents continue to recommend the traditional practice of singing a psalm and antiphon at the entrance,

at the preparation of the gifts, and during Communion, even providing proper scriptural texts for each Mass. Those preparing music for the Mass, however, may choose other appropriate psalms and hymns to be sung at these times.

In addition to psalms and canticles, the community sings other biblical texts during the liturgy. The priest and people sing together texts from God’s Word at the very heart of the Mass—during the Eucharistic Prayer—as they join the saints and angels in the great song of praise drawn chiefly from the vision of Isaiah: “Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory” (see Is 6:3).

Catechesis, Music, and the Word of God

Because music is such an important element in proclaiming and praying the Word of God, it is likewise an integral component of effective catechesis.

Catechesis should help the community to *listen actively* to the Word of God as it is proclaimed in the music of the liturgy. Good catechesis can help to open the minds and hearts of worshipers to hear and reflect on God’s Word as it is proclaimed by the psalmist in the verses of the Responsorial Psalm or in a text from the New Testament that is sung by the choir during the preparation of the gifts. These sung proclamations, of course, have a catechetical value of their own, because they help the assembly to become more and more familiar with the riches of God’s Word. The music can amplify the meaning of the text in such a way that it deepens the experience of hearing the Word.

Catechesis must also play a role in preparing the community to *take an active part in singing the Word*. St. Paul directed that when they assembled, Christians should be “singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in [their] hearts to God” (Col 3:16). Catechetical programs should help to instill in believers the notion that singing is a normal part of Christian gatherings.

Catholic schools should regard instruction in music and the arts as an integral part of catechet-

ical formation, providing students with the skills they need to take an active part in the liturgy. Solid liturgical catechesis requires that members of the assembly be prepared for music that they will be invited to sing, so that they can participate with confidence and conviction.

Mystagogical reflection on the sung parts of the Mass and other rites can also help to deepen the assembly's encounter with Christ in the Word that they have heard and prayed. When catechumens are dismissed from the Sunday Liturgy of the Word, for example, they may join in singing the refrain of the Responsorial Psalm as they reflect on the Scripture readings and other elements of the celebration. This same practice may be followed by other groups that gather to reflect on the Sunday readings.

Encountering the Living Word of God

Whether it is used for proclamation or prayer, music joined to the Word of God is meant to draw people into an encounter with the living Word of God, who is Christ. The Second Vatican Council declared that in the liturgy the presence of Christ is revealed in many ways—in the person of the ordained minister, in the proclamation of God's Word, in the eucharistic

species, and lastly "when the Church prays and sings" (Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no. 7).

Music is a gift of God that opens for us a glimpse of God's glory. Through beauty, music and other arts reveal dimensions of truth that words alone cannot convey. Pope John Paul II noted that "on countless occasions the biblical word has become image, music and poetry, evoking the mystery of 'the Word made flesh' in the language of art" (*Letter to Artists*, no. 5, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_23041999_artists_en.html).

"A cry from deep within our being, music is a way for God to lead us to the realm of higher things" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, Pastoral Liturgy Series 4 [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2007], no. 2). Whether we are singing or listening, music has the power to bring us into an experience beyond the words—to a personal encounter with Christ himself, the Word made flesh.

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