

# Music, Liturgy and Religious Formation

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## I. Learning from a mistaken approach to liturgy, youth and music

'How do you feel about celebrating at a Mass that really *rocks*?' The director of the music ministry for the Life Teen Mass smugly posed the question into his hand-held microphone, the type used on the confrontation-style talk shows popular on American television at the time. He then thrust the microphone at my mouth, casting a conspiratorial glance towards the hundreds of young people seated before us. Although I cannot recall now the exact words I said in reply on that Sunday evening seven years ago, I do remember thinking to myself, 'How did I ever end up in this unfortunate position?' Standing at the back of the church ready to form the entrance procession together with the teenage lectors, eucharistic ministers, and acolytes, I found myself being called forward by the music leader before the Mass started. I felt awkward walking alone in silence down the aisle, fully vested in alb, stole and chasuble. When I had first arrived at the church that evening the youth minister, a man in his thirties who also served as music director for the Life Teen Mass, had asked me if I would mind being interviewed so that the people could get to know me better before we celebrated together. I was, indeed, a stranger to the assembled community. A Jesuit priest pursuing a doctorate in systematic and liturgical theology at Emory University, I travelled around greater Atlanta helping in parishes on weekends, as needed. At that time several of the parishes in that Roman Catholic archdiocese had adopted the Life Teen method for celebrating the Mass.

Perhaps the greatest irony in the pre-Mass interview I underwent that evening was that such minimal autobiographical information was all the music director/youth minister cared to learn about me. He was much more interested, instead, in telling me about how radically different their Mass was from what one normally expects and then asking me how I *felt* about *that*. Feeling defensive I tensely replied that it was a privilege for me to serve

that evening as presider and that I was sure they missed their associate pastor, who had warmly shared with me how much he enjoys celebrating with the youth of the parish. Grinning, the minister looked out at his audience while remarking to me, 'Did anybody ever tell you that you remind them of Jerry Seinfeld?' A boy, sitting among the mere five or six in the otherwise empty front rows, called out, 'More like George Castanza!' (Seinfeld's short, bald sidekick on the popular television comedy show, whose physical characteristics are not unlike my own). Nobody laughed.

Not surprisingly, I felt uncomfortable throughout that Mass. Not only had I felt embarrassed standing in liturgical vestments to be interviewed as if on a television talk show, not only had I felt humiliated by the pastoral minister's questions and then the teenager's wisecrack, but I was left to walk again in silence to the back of the church, no longer confident of what we were about to do together as an assembly and its ministers. The purpose of Sunday worship is to experience the glory of God revealed in the salvation of people. Members of Christ's body by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians share in word and sacrament a felt-knowledge of God's merciful love for us, drawing us into God's salvific desire for the world. How could such a shallow fixation on the type of music being performed (I use the word advisedly – the assembly did not join audibly in the singing throughout that Mass), along with juvenile banter, lead us into the celebration of the paschal mystery? I am quite sure that my discomfort in the situation was shared, albeit for different reasons and in various ways, by many in the liturgical assembly as well. The music director had set a tone for the Mass that did not bode well for forming those young people in the faith, that is, for expecting to hear a Word of salvation that we could never come up with on our own and to realize that Word as the life-giving pattern for us in the Breaking of the Bread.

Rather than helping foster the relationship between the presiding minister, the assembly, and other ministers for that Lord's Day service, the music minister's questions communicated that some added entertainment was needed to make the Mass attractive to those youth. I am not questioning his good intentions. Indeed, I can only assume that this man thought his alternative opening rite served to make the otherwise staid and incomprehensible Mass of the Roman Rite attractive and enjoyable for the teenagers. Such an approach, however, presumes that teens are socially and personally at ease when poking fun at adults. It assumes, moreover, that the only ways youth are able and willing to communicate are by means of the dominant culture around them, a culture of constantly changing images, elaborate spectacle, titillation and scandal, shocking words, conspicuous consumption, athletic

domination, bodily competition, and rhetorical confrontation. One of the characteristics of such a 'culture of hype', to use a phrase coined by liturgical theologian Don Saliers, is the rapid, successive generating of 'high' emotions. Young people can get all of that they want, any time they want and, indeed, more than they want. They do not need the church to offer them even more of the same, done in a derivative and, most often, contrived way. I believe that is why rather than provoking a room full of laughter, the youth minister/music director's attempt at comedy resulted in dead silence. What the traditions of Christian liturgy have to offer, in contrast, are patterns of praying, listening, singing, invoking, lamenting, and thanksgiving that form participants' deepest affections.<sup>1</sup> For this our young people are yearning, even if during their teenage years their outward behaviour or their own surface emotions would often indicate otherwise.

## II. Ministering from and to the heart

During the several years since that thought-provoking experience, I have had the privilege of teaching in a university-based institute for ministry. One of the joys of my work comes from the rich interchange of my historical and theological research on sacramental liturgy with the wealth of practical knowledge my students and colleagues (pastoral ministers and religious educators) share with me. For the remainder of this short article I shall convey three crucial insights I have learned from some of those students and colleagues, substantiating these with insights from scholarly literature in religious education and liturgical ministry.

'You must start with the heart.' Such is the fundamental premise for forming people's faith through liturgical music for Denise Morency Gannon, a veteran pastoral musician and composer currently directing liturgical music at a Catholic undergraduate college. A powerful sense of responsibility comes in the pastoral musician's recognition that one's intention in making liturgical music bears tangible outcomes in the children one is leading: 'What you are doing is what they are learning.' Whereas in her earliest years as a pastoral musician Gannon had as her primary goal the development of the technically finest children's choir in the diocese, over time she came to realize that her pastoral mission is to help form children and adults together as a community of prayer. This entails the recognition that music is an emotional activity. Therein lies liturgical music's power to shape the character of people, incrementally and often imperceptibly, in the patterns of divine call and human response that comprise Christian worship. 'Too

often we forget that we are emotional beings, not just rational and thinking ones. The heart will come into its own.'

Gannon's practical conviction about the positive, if not essential role of emotion in the way music in liturgy helps form people's values and beliefs finds scholarly support in the work of Fred Edie, a professor of religious education and youth ministry. Surveying the research of such scientific disciplines as anthropology, neurobiology, sociobiology, and cognitive psychology Edie demonstrates how the hegemony of Cartesian dualism – valuing rationality to the detriment of affectivity – in theories of religious education and moral formation has reached its end. Research in numerous scientific fields demonstrates the fundamental role of emotion in the thought, volition, and self-consciousness of people, all of which activity is done in relational contexts. 'Emotion is at the heart of our humanity. If this is the case, then liturgy, often characterized as "excessively emotional" or "so much play acting" must be reconfigured as a central context for formation of Christian character precisely because of these insinuations.'<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein Charles Foster sees an intrinsic connection between thought and feeling in religious formation. 'Meaning involves the interplay of cognitive and affective activity. In other words, our knowing and doing is intensified by our feeling and, conversely, our feelings are illuminated by our knowing. Their interdependence is a necessary condition for the commitment that gives impetus to our actions.'<sup>3</sup> In Foster's theory of event-based education, believers grow in a lived-knowledge of faith in the context of Christian community through the mutually informing activities of worshipping God and serving humanity.<sup>4</sup>

Music is especially suited to serve the humanly sanctifying purpose of Christian worship. To the growing body of literature on music's essential role in liturgy,<sup>5</sup> John Witvliet has made a recent contribution: 'Aside from text, music is a significant language in its own right. It is more than a shell for the text. The music we sing shapes the affections of our souls. It gives emotional content to the texts. It interprets them. Each of music's building blocks has power and force: melody, rhythm, harmony.'<sup>6</sup> This points to the importance of musical style and selection. Poor music can deplete the power of a prayer text. This is the problem with using rock-style music in liturgy. Research into the bodily-neurological impact of the strong, relentless rhythms of rock music has found it to have a numbing effect on the cortical function of the ear and, thereby, on the vestibular system in the body. For people inundated with such music, thought 'shuts down'. Melodic music, rich in overtones, on the other hand, 'charges' the brain and heightens bodily and

reflective awareness.<sup>7</sup> Coupled with a text from scripture (e.g., the Taizé chant, 'Jesus, Remember Me') or poetry grounded in a great spiritual tradition (e.g., the Shaker hymn, 'How Can I Keep From Singing?'), the music of a good hymn entrains the members of a liturgical assembly together through a bodily habituation of sound that facilitates their appropriating the text's meaning for their lives. Hence the validity of Gannon's valuing of emotion and intention in liturgical music, as well as her further conviction about the importance of building up a repertoire that children and adults in a community of faith can share over time. Familiar music is invaluable to a liturgy celebrating a crisis in the community or a life-passage for a member. Only music, by entraining bodies in common vibration and elevating minds through harmonic tones, can unite the individuals in a large assembly as one body in the Lord.<sup>8</sup> 'Community', Gannon concludes, 'is the key.'

### III. Communities of faith, not programmes for 'needs'

In advancing his thesis that the faith community is the context and its mission of worship and service the impetus for religious education, Foster explicitly rejects the needs-based, 'enrichment' approach that has seriously flawed Christian religious education in recent decades. Pushing aside the corporate memory and biblical content of tradition, enrichment education focusses on the 'needs' of learners, which are 'defined primarily in psychological categories' and 'sometimes disguised by religious language'. Publicity campaigns are launched to attract church members to classes promising to meet their wants and needs. In so doing, enrichment education 'moves closer to the dynamics of entertainment than to the transformation of life. Its concern is to promote a momentary sense of well-being and self-esteem in the student.'<sup>9</sup> The ironic result tends to be further isolation in self-identity and decision making amidst an already fragmented culture, rather than the freeing surrender to the wisdom of a tradition critically and intimately shared with others over time.

Michael Corso, Ph.D., a long-time religious education director in a thriving Boston parish, testifies to the failure of that formational model. Several years ago the parish instituted a monthly Sunday evening Mass exclusively for the teenagers. Music was symphonic, performed by an ensemble of teens who were studying various instruments. After a couple years the programme had to be scrapped. The infrequency of this special Mass, as well as the disconnection of its musical repertoire from that of the wider church, failed to build a community of faith among its targeted constituency. In its place the

parish now has a family Mass every Sunday evening, with the teenagers taking responsibility for the liturgical ministries, worshipping with their families, and coming to 'own' a solid range of contemporary and traditional music in one of the better American Catholic hymnals.

For more than a decade Corso has also been responsible for the Sunday morning Mass celebrated by families with pre-school and grammar school-aged children. More than three hundred parents and children crowd weekly into the church's basement chapel. Corso understands the mission of that liturgy singularly in terms of building community. When I pressed him on just what he means by community and why it is so important, he explained: 'With so many little children present, it can get pretty chaotic down there. But I have observed how over the years my two daughters have come to realize that the community of faith is where and how we meet God. They have come to know that praying, singing, and having communion together are what we do weekly to be with God and to expect that God goes with us into our week.'

The intrinsic relationship between divine worship, human salvation, and the biblical justice proclaimed as good news for the poor 'comes home' for the family members as Corso and his fellow ministers construct seasonal events within the Sunday Mass. He recounts how last year during Lent large bags of rice and beans were placed in the sanctuary. Each Sunday children and their parents came forward to collect as much of each as they would need for a simple supper on the coming Friday evening. The ritualized experience of actually having to collect the staples from the church, Corso notes, was crucial to the exercise. If the families merely promised to eat only rice and beans, which they would have bought at the supermarket, they would lack the symbolic but real experience of depending on getting their food from a communal source or charitable organization, just as so many of the world's poor themselves do. Families are encouraged to donate the money they would have spent on Friday dinner to the poor through any number of hunger agencies. In this stellar example of what Foster means by event-based education, mutual dependence on God 'comes home' for these children in a way that a class on world poverty and a reading assignment about the Bible and charity in themselves could never accomplish.<sup>10</sup>

### IV. Singing with the saints

Corso admits that a recurrent concern among some parishioners and staff members over the years has been the awareness that the Sunday morning



Mass for families with children does indeed separate those generations from the wider parish community. The fortunate problem the parish wrestles with, however, is an ever-increasing membership and, thus, overflow crowds in the main church space. Concurrent Masses in the lower chapel have become not only a choice but a necessity. To help parish members meet across generational and other social lines, the staff has organized faith sharing groups of eight to twelve people, meeting during the week at various times. People join groups according to their personal schedules. A good amount of mixing among generations, genders, etc., has resulted. Beyond this synchronic concern, however, Corso hopes the participants in the family Masses will grow in a deep and abiding knowledge that they are part of the communion of saints, not only the saints that comprise the community and the wider world around them now, but also all the faithful who have gone before them to rest in Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Liturgical music is particularly suited to forming believers in their awareness of what a gift and responsibility the tradition of faith is. Andrea Goodrich, another veteran pastoral musician, has found that young people of all ages respond with great enthusiasm when, in introducing her choir to an ancient chant or traditional hymn, she teaches them about the historical origins of the piece and invites them to reflect on the fact that believers have been singing this music, in some cases, for many centuries. Fundamental to her work with her children's choir is that the music they do in liturgy is prayerful and that the choir's ministry is to lead the entire community in the prayerful act of worship. Goodrich finds the children enthused by the notion that they can be leaders to their siblings, parents, teachers, and other adults. The key is to dispel any notions that their mission is to provide entertainment. She has found over the years, in fact, that this misguided notion of the children's choir often resides more in the thoughts of parents than in their children.

Goodrich approaches her goal, namely, leading the children in praying the music for and with the community, by making the rehearsal a time for the children to enter into the world of the musical text. This she does by having them consider how the words might touch their own lives ('Do we really want Jesus to come down to us? Why would we want him to do that?') and then getting them to imagine how communities of believers have prayed this very text for a thousand years (in this case, the Advent chant, 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel'). At the start of Lent she excites the children by informing them that they are going to learn some words in Greek that will join them with people across the ages and throughout the world. The

children respond with great enthusiasm to this teaching. The prayerfulness of their singing comes through in the liturgy.

While Goodrich sees a good but limited value for using music written specifically for young children in the Mass, over the years her primary purpose has become the formation of children and their parents in, as she puts it, the collective memory of the church, allowing the seasons of the church year to shape people through the stages of their lives.<sup>12</sup> While new compositions bring needed vitality to a parish's worship, children's songs must not lead to playing with the liturgy. For, in the end, liturgical music's purpose is to help the liturgy *play us*, forming us over time in the faith we enact for the life of the world.

#### Notes

1. See Don E. Saliers, 'Liturgy in a Culture of Hype: Notes on Restraint and Exuberance', *GIA Quarterly* (Fall 1995), pp. 8-10; and *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine*, Nashville: Abingdon Press 1994, pp. 37-38, 146-48.
2. Fred P. Edie, 'Liturgy, Emotion, and the Poetics of Being Human', *Religious Education* 96, Fall 2001, p. 484.
3. Charles R. Foster, *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education*, Nashville: Abingdon Press 1994, p. 89.
4. See *ibid.*, pp. 12, 49, 68.
5. For a review of some of that literature, see Bruce T. Morrill and Andrea Goodrich, 'Liturgical Music: Bodies Proclaiming and Responding to the Word of God' in *Bodies of Worship: Explorations in Theory and Practice*, ed. Bruce T. Morrill, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press 1999, pp. 159-62.
6. John D. Witvliet, 'Soul Food for the People of God: Ritual Song, Spiritual Nourishment, and the Communal Worship of God', *Liturgical Ministry* 10, Spring 2001, p. 103.
7. See Morrill and Goodrich (n. 5), pp. 162-64.
8. For an explanation of the concepts of entrainment and intentionality in music-making, see *ibid.*, pp. 165, 170-171.
9. Foster (n. 3), pp. 27-28.
10. See *ibid.*, pp. 38-46, 93-96.
11. 'Perhaps the most powerful of all gifts to the world found in the Christian heritage is its sense of community. Its promises confront the messages of fragmentation and violence dominating social relationships. It breaks through our finite distinctions of race, culture, age, class, gender, and ability to celebrate the necessary interdependence of all people. It confronts our human proclivity to argument and dissension in the affirmation that all of us are children of God. We therefore have 'a common ancestry'. We share 'a common heritage originating

in God's creativity and spilling across the ages and through the nations. We "have a common experience" – an insight increasingly real to those of us living into the twenty-first century.' *Ibid.*, p. 56.

12. See Edie (n. 2), pp. 485-87; Foster (n. 3), pp. 45, 62-64; Witvliet (n. 6), pp. 104-106.

## Some Notes Regarding Formation to Interreligious Dialogue

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### Un urgent task

The fundamental role of both education and formation is to prepare/help the human person to interact in a positive, constructive, way with the physical and social environment, so as to grow harmoniously in it, and with it, for a mutual enrichment. In other words, education and formation entail an essential relation with the environment in general, and with the human environment in particular. We usually refer to the physical environment as 'nature', and to the human environment as 'culture'. Religion, besides being an inner spiritual experience, is also an essential part of this human environment or 'culture'.

To maintain a positive and constructive relationship with the environment, the human subject must learn how to adjust to changes taking place in it. To a change in the environment, there must respond a change in the way the subject reacts to it or interacts with it.

During the last few decades many deep changes have taken place in the social, or cultural, environment of a large part of humanity. Leaving aside other aspects of these deep, unprecedented, changes, I will focus here on the changes occurred in the religious milieu, or environment, most people on earth live in. These changes in the 'religious environment' have to be met by a process of adjustment to them, which, in turn, will require a new approach in the fields of education and formation, so that human beings can react to this new environment in a positive and fruitful way.

I am referring, here, to the deep changes which in recent times have modified the religious environment of many people by putting them face to face, in their daily lives, with people of other religions. Up to about fifty years ago, most people lived within a religious group quite strictly defined within its own social boundaries, with a rather strong consciousness of their own identity and of the difference separating them from people of other