Singing a Song of the Lord in a Foreign Land

Issues of Catholic Identity and Catholic Liturgical Music

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Thinking about the Catholic identity and Catholic liturgical music raises two distinct but related questions: Is there a type of liturgical music that is inherently Catholic? Is music capable of mediating Catholic identity? The essay answers “yes” to both questions and suggests why and how this is the case.

Whether and how contemporary liturgical music enables a worshiping assembly to appropriate a Catholic identity, either corporately or individually, is a question not easily answered. Several issues, on many levels and from varying perspectives, are at play in even asking the question. Nevertheless, it is an important one, if only because it is raised again and again in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways in the daily decisions Catholics make when buying a new hymnal, planning a liturgy, or deciding where to go to celebrate Sunday Eucharist.

In fact, two separate questions emerge when we consider the relationship between Catholic identity and Catholic liturgical music. On the one hand, we can ask whether there is a type of liturgical music that is inherently Catholic. On the other hand, we can ask whether there is music that is capable of mediating...
Catholic identity. While the focus of this article is on the second question—music’s ability to mediate Catholic identity—it will be useful to briefly consider the first question since its concerns have implications for the broader issue of Catholic identity.

**Is There an Inherently Catholic Liturgical Music?**

Neither the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 1963) nor the two key documents on music published by the United States Catholic Conference, *Music in Catholic Worship* (1972, 1983) and *Liturgical Music Today* (1982), speak directly about “Catholic” music as such. Chapter 6 of the Constitution highlights two characteristics of music it calls “sacred” when it describes it as music that is bound to sacred texts—either scriptural or liturgical—and bound to the liturgical rite. Using this as a guide, we might describe Catholic liturgical music as that music that is intimately tied to the texts and the rites of Catholic worship. Furthermore, because Catholic liturgical music has been so intimately involved in sacramental celebrations, and because the active participation of the assembly in the rites is considered normative, its typically “Catholic” posture has evolved into an acclamatory and dialogic style rather than the more hymn-like or strophic style associated with Protestant worship. (There is, of course, an entire area of Catholic devotions that has witnessed the flourishing of popular hymnody, but in terms of being “liturgical,” hymnody has traditionally taken second place to the acclamations.) Catholic liturgical music, then, could further be described as that music which enables worshipers to actively participate in Catholic liturgical rites.

*The Snowbird Statement on Catholic Liturgical Music* (1995), a document written by professional musicians meeting in Snowbird, Utah, refers to a characteristic “Catholic ethos” in regard to church music, even though it admits that it is hard to define. Instead, article 8 points out where such a Catholic ethos might be discernible, as “for instance, in music that elaborates the sacramental mysteries in a manner attentive to the public, cosmic, and transcendent character of religion, rather than in styles of music that are overly personalized, introverted or privatized.” This description does not actually define “Catholic ethos” but rather associates “Catholic” music with a transcendent rather than an immanent experience of the divine.

Another aspect of the question whether contemporary liturgical music can mediate Catholic identity is the meaning of the word “contemporary.” Since the reforms of Vatican II and the emergence of vernacular liturgy, there has been a growing concern to preserve our rich heritage of traditional sacred music, usually identified as Gregorian chant and classic polyphony. Two recently published hymnals, *The Adoremus Hymnal* (Ignatius Press, 1997) and Paul Ford’s *By Flowing
Waters (The Liturgical Press, 1999), take two very different approaches to this task. The Adoremus Hymnal provides traditional Gregorian Chant in original chant notation with Latin texts. By Flowing Waters, on the other hand, offers adapted chant melodies with English texts, using the usual modern adaptation of original Gregorian chant notation.

In addition to these two efforts to preserve or reinvigorate the tradition, there have been impressive efforts to compose new liturgical music in contemporary idioms. Composers, publishers, and liturgists seriously committed to promoting the composition of contemporary music appropriate to the needs of the reformed liturgy and the contemporary Church, have produced an enormous corpus of music—with admittedly varying degrees of success. After almost forty years of liturgical renewal, local churches, by and large, have developed programs of liturgical music that incorporate both traditional and contemporary elements into their Sunday worship. This blending of the old and new is strikingly evident in many of the latest editions of hymnals or other durable worship aids available through such publishers as G.I.A. Publications, Oregon Catholic Press, and World Library Publications. In this article, the term “contemporary” is used to designate more than the music composed after Vatican II. Rather, “contemporary” refers to today’s fairly widespread practice of including both new compositions and adapted versions of traditional music in a comprehensive music program.

**Music and Identity**

Identifying traditional chant and polyphony as examples of the rich heritage of Catholic music, however, still does not address the issue of whether and how a particular music can mediate Catholic identity. Something else in the nature of music or in the way that it is performed or experienced seems to hold the key to answering the question of identity. What that something is may become clearer through the following brief anecdote.

Before the first clouds of smoke and dust had even begun to settle after the World Trade Center disaster, Americans instinctively began to create and participate in rituals of lament and solidarity as a way of expressing unspeakable sorrow and loss. Almost without exception, two songs were chosen to give voice to our search for faith and courage as an American people: “Amazing Grace” and “God Bless America.” In the context of prayer vigils and public gatherings, the two familiar tunes enabled us to express our faith and our grief, not simply as individuals but more specifically as Americans. Singing “Amazing Grace” and “God Bless America” mediated a sense of identity and a sense of belonging—at a time when both were “under siege”—because both songs were recognized as expressive of certain dimensions of us as Americans.
Perhaps the search for a repertoire of liturgical music that can truly express a sense of Catholic identity springs from a similar impulse to clarify who we are and how we are connected—both to members of our own Church and to those who stand outside it. The question could be expressed this way: Is there a power innate to ritual music, or more accurately, to ritual music-making, that enables music-makers to come to a clearer understanding of their identity in the “doing of the music”? More specifically, is there a corpus of liturgical music that can be said to mediate a Catholic identity in a way comparable, for example, to the national identity mediated by patriotic songs or hymns?

A Theology of Symbol

In his *Symbol and Sacrament*, Louis-Marie Chauvet explains that symbols mediate reality by negotiating connections. These connections, he explains, allow human persons both as members of a social group and as individuals to make sense of their world and to find their identity by discovering relationships (Chauvet, 84–85). This is the dynamic that was present in the singing of “Amazing Grace” and “God Bless America.” Singing this music enabled Americans to recognize themselves as part of a grieving nation and to integrate their former experiences and memories of these two songs into the present moment of prayer and remembrance. In other words, the music-making functioned as symbolizing activity that was capable of negotiating identity, relationships, and our place in a world shaken by unspeakable horror. The music was capable of mediating this experience of recognition because it was operating symbolically within the context of ritual activity—in the case related above—services of remembrance.

A similar dynamic occurs in liturgical celebrations. The sacred liturgy, like all ritual activity, is composed of a complexus of symbols. These symbols interact with each other in order to mediate meaning. Michael Lawler, another sacramental theologian, underscores the role of the human person as subject in the symbolic activity that we call liturgy. Lawler explains that it is the symbolizing activity of the human person that makes possible the transformation of a mere sensible reality (water, fire, oil, etc.) into a symbol that embodies meaning (Lawler, 11). In other words, the symbol receives its meaning from human symbolizers. There is no inherent meaning embedded arbitrarily in the symbol independent of the human user.

From all this we can conclude that a symbol is a mediation of recognition that evokes participation and allows individuals or social groups to orient themselves so that they can discover their identity and their place within their world (Kubicki). Catholics have long demonstrated an instinctive understanding of the power of symbols and symbolizing activity in the way they have cherished and celebrated many of their faith symbols: eating bread and drinking wine,
reverencing the crucifix and altar, being signed with ashes, carrying palms, kneeling, genuflecting, processing, etc. When we engage in these symbolic actions, we recognize ourselves as Catholics, that is, as people who have a particular way of expressing faith in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, when we perform these actions within a group or congregation, we experience ourselves as connected to all the others who are likewise engaged in this particular symbolic activity. This sense of identity and of being connected enables us to make sense of our faith world and negotiate our place within it. Chauvet’s theology helps us understand how symbols and symbolic activity operate and why symbols touch us where we are most sensitive and vulnerable—at the heart of our individual and corporate identity.

Music-Making as Symbolic Activity

However, while most of us can readily identify the obvious examples of liturgical symbols—altar, crucifix, bread, wine—other liturgical symbols are just as significant in mediating meaning. These include music, silence, color, texture, architecture, gestures, and postures. Music-making is a key symbolizing activity within the context of liturgy. It is a powerful means for negotiating identity and relationships because of its inherent ability to so completely involve the whole person, not only physically but also spiritually and emotionally. So, for example, when we sing such chant melodies as “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” “Pange Lingua,” or “Salve Regina,” or such contemporary tunes as “On Eagle’s Wings,” “Gift of Finest Wheat,” and “I Am the Bread of Life,” we express who we are as people of faith, both individually and as Church. Furthermore, when we recognize it as our music, it connects us and our personal histories to the larger group and its history. If, on the other hand, the music is unfamiliar, inaccessible, or alienating in some way, we do not recognize the music as ours and, consequently, we do not recognize ourselves in the music. Such music can make us feel more like outsiders or audience rather than participants in the liturgical event.

Issues of Catholic Identity

Given music’s power to connect us to God, to one another, to the liturgical celebration, and to clarify our own understanding of ourselves as “Catholic,” it becomes even more important that our music-making truly reflects who we are and who we want to become as people of faith and members of the Church. At first glance this might appear to be a fairly straightforward task. However, significant factors in the life of the Church and the life of the wider culture have...
contributed to a general feeling of ambiguity in regards to issues of identity. Indeed, the very progress we have experienced as a result of the reforms of Vatican II have also contributed to the “dis-ease” of many Catholics regarding their identity as members of the Church. How can this be? For one thing, the progress that has been made regarding ecumenical relations with other churches has left some people unsure of the real distinctions between Catholicism and the various forms of Protestantism. And this comes at a time when many of the traditional symbols of Catholic identity, such as abstaining from meat on Friday and worshiping in Latin, have all but disappeared from the Catholic landscape.

Nevertheless, the council fathers were clear when, in the very first sentence of the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1964) they stated that “the restoration of unity among all Christians” was one of the chief concerns of the council. Some Catholics are threatened by the fact that Christians hold so much in common. They would like to see clearer distinctions drawn between themselves and other Christians. In order to negotiate their identity as Catholics and their relationship with members of the Catholic Church alone, they seek musical symbols that will include Catholics and exclude those who are not. On the other hand, there are many who welcome recent successes in ecumenical dialogue and the improved relations and depth of respect that has resulted among the Christian Churches. Such people view the sharing of musical repertoire and opportunities to worship together as signs of progress rather than as threats to their identity.

**Defining “Catholic” and “Catholicism”**

Perhaps one step toward solving this dilemma can be found in once more recalling what the words “catholic” and “Catholicism” really mean. The word “catholic” is derived from the Greek *katholikos*, which means universal, general, or all-inclusive. In his landmark work entitled *Catholicism*, Richard McBrien captures the particularly Roman Catholic understanding of universal or all-inclusive when he explains that “Catholicism is characterized by a radical openness to all truth and to every value. It is *comprehensive* and *all-embracing* toward the totality of Christian experience and tradition, in all the theological, doctrinal, spiritual, liturgical, canonical, institutional, and social richness and diversity of that experience and tradition.” McBrien goes on to say that Catholicism is not “inextricably linked with the culture of a particular nation or region of the world. Catholicism is, in principle, as Asian as it is European, as Slavic as it is Latin, as Mexican or Nigerian as it is Irish or Polish” (McBrien, 1173).

Nevertheless, in response to the Reformation, the Council of Trent (1545–1563) chose to define many aspects of Catholicism by emphasizing what was different from Protestantism. The differences were particularly dramatic in the areas of
liturgy and liturgical music. For example, while the music of Reformation worship was hymnody sung to vernacular texts, the music of the Catholic Counter-Reformation was Gregorian chant and classical polyphony sung to Latin texts. Such clear distinctions served both sides well until Vatican II (1962–1965). That council signaled a renewed effort on the part of the Catholic Church to be more truly “catholic” or universal in its vision, mission, and reality. The first article of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium, 1964) defines the Church as “a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race. . . .” In even more eloquent language, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes, 1965) expresses the Church’s commitment to its universal mission:

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of people united in Christ and guided by the holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the Father’s kingdom, bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity. That is why they cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history (n. 1).

With these two powerful statements, the council renewed the Church’s commitment to working toward unity and universality. Both documents have serious implications for the way we celebrate our sung liturgy since the Church itself is the reality which is being mediated in liturgical celebrations. Therefore, the songs the Church sings are part of that process whereby it both expresses who it is and becomes more of who it is through the music-making.

More than a decade after the close of the council, Karl Rahner offered an interpretation of the important shift that had taken place in the Roman Catholic Church’s understanding of itself as “catholic.” As Rahner saw it, Vatican II was the first major official event in which the Church actualized itself as a world church. That is, the council marked a transition in the history of the Church from operating as a religion of Europe with its international annexes to seeing itself as a truly global religion (Rahner, 717). What Rahner saw in the council father’s vision of the Church, as articulated both in the documents and in the conciliar process itself, has slowly become a reality in this country and across the globe. Indeed, as John Savant has pointed out, Catholics “have come in this half century gradually to accept a sense of ‘Catholic’ that does not envision a uniquely Western European culture expressing a common faith, but rather one faith expressing itself out of a multitude of cultural traditions” (Savant, 19).

It seems that we have a clear mandate from the Second Vatican Council. If the word “catholic” means universal and all-embracing, if symbols negotiate identity and relationships, and if liturgical music-making is symbolizing activity,
then the music with which we Catholics celebrate liturgy needs to be universal and all-embracing. That is, it must mediate identity and relationship for all who profess the Catholic faith and celebrate that faith in the liturgy.

**Creative Tensions between Local and Universal**

One of the challenges of developing a repertoire of music that is truly “catholic,” that is, universal and all-embracing, is understanding the nature of the Church as both local and universal. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church expresses this relationship:

> The character of universality which adorns the People of God is the gift of the Lord himself, by which the catholic Church effectively and constantly seeks to recapitulate the whole of humanity with all its goods under the Headship of Christ, in the unity of the Spirit. In virtue of this catholicity, the several parts bring their own gifts to one another and to the whole Church, so that the whole and its several parts grow by the mutual sharing of all and by a common effort towards the fullness of unity (n. 13).

In other words, “catholic” is not an abstract, but a concrete universal. Joseph Komonchak identifies two underlying theological assertions governing the council’s statements about the local church. The first is that the Church is realized in local churches, and the second is that it is in the distinctive social and cultural conditions of local churches that the Church’s catholicity is concretely realized.

If indeed, the universal can only be expressed in the particular, while particular or local expressions truly become expressions of the universal Church, this observation has important implications for the possibility of developing a repertoire of truly Catholic liturgical music. In fact, this attentiveness to the relationship between the local church and the universal Church is part of the serious task of inculturating the Gospel. Too often the presumption is that this task belongs only to non-Western cultures. But even in those places where the Church is well established—as for example, the typical local American parish where several subcultures coexist—issues of inculturation need to be addressed. The musical expression of the people becomes one of the key areas of concern.

**Developing a Repertoire of “Catholic” Liturgical Music**

In light of Chauvet’s theology of symbol and Vatican II’s ecclesiology of the local church, several pastoral goals and strategies can be identified for developing
truly Catholic liturgical music programs. The first goal is to work toward greater inclusivity. The task is to create liturgical music repertoires that are expressive of the diversity that exists in the Church both locally and globally. On the local level, that means assuring that the music chosen for worship gives voice not only to the ethnic diversity of the parish, but to even broader and deeper diversity. Increasingly, Catholic parishes are diverse in terms of racial or national background, cultural expression, language, and social and economic status. Young and old, rich and poor, the educated and the uneducated stand side by side professing their faith and singing their songs of praise and thanks. However, even in those cases where a local church might be more homogeneous in its makeup, its music program needs to acknowledge a vital relationship with the diversity that exists within the universal Church, at least in some small but significant ways.

This inclusivity, furthermore, needs to embrace not only cultures across the globe but also cultures across time. If we call ourselves Catholic, then our music-making cannot be limited to singing the songs composed at the end of the twentieth century or the beginning of the twenty-first. Catholic song, if it is to be truly all-embracing, must somehow mediate connections with those who came before us in the faith and those who will follow. The faith we profess is not an achievement of our own time. Rather, this faith, passed on from one generation to the next, is the faith that inspired the creation of monophonic chant in the medieval period and polyphony in the Renaissance. It is the faith that now must express itself in the musical vocabulary of today’s cultures—jazz, folk ballads, gospel, polychords, African rhythms, and atonal harmonies, to name a few. As Catholics, our belief in the incarnation and in the sacramental nature of our life and worship poises us in a unique way to embrace all that is good in every culture and to harness its power to mediate God’s revelation and our response to it. Furthermore, incorporating such musical variety into our sung prayer ritualizes our relationship, as church, with our mothers and fathers of the past and our brothers and sisters around the world.

This concern for inclusivity, however, should not divert our attention from our second goal which is to work toward developing local traditions and common repertoire. The symbolizing power of ritual prayer depends on memory. The symbolizing power of ritual prayer depends on memory.
Christmases. Those memories are brought to bear on our present experience. Since symbols help to integrate our past experience with present reality, they allow us to make sense of our world and find our place. It is important, therefore, that local churches develop, over time, traditions of seasonal and festal music. Reinventing the Advent or Easter season each year by using completely new repertoires of music is counterproductive. Part of what it means to develop a Catholic repertoire of liturgical music is to create a common memory through shared music. To do this, we have to be willing to be stretched beyond our personal preferences and comfortable familiarity. There will never be a magic list of tunes or musical styles that will signal, for all people in all places and at all times, a so-called “Catholic ethos.” Creating a repertoire of contemporary Catholic liturgical music is ongoing hard work that needs to be kept as fresh as the newest member washed in the waters of baptism. This will not always mean using the newest piece of music, but it does mean being open to new ways of singing our worship.

So what strategies can be used to create repertoires that are both inclusive and common? The first responsibility falls on those who plan and lead sung prayer. These ministers need to be attentive to creating quality local music programs that not only reflect the rich diversity of their worshiping assemblies but are also versatile and wear well with repeated use. This may mean including a gospel piece for the gathering song, an unaccompanied chant for the penitential rite, and a Spanish refrain for the communion procession. It also requires a commitment to long-range planning and hiring qualified personnel. The second responsibility falls on every member of the assembly. All are invited to join wholeheartedly in the music-making with respect and appreciation for musical expressions which may not always suit their personal tastes but which allow diverse members to connect with the community through their unique cultural expressions. This does not require that every Sunday liturgy include some expression of every representative group within the parish. But it does mean that over time, the respectful care with which we seek to be inclusive and create a common repertoire will allow the community, both individually and corporately, to be “at home” and to recognize itself in the music-making.

Catholic identity, then, is closely bound up with the symbols we celebrate and how those symbols enable us to negotiate relationships and to find our place in

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the Church. A repertoire of contemporary Catholic liturgical music needs to reflect a Church that is made up of a diversity of members and built on a rich tradition of music. Perhaps it is not possible to “sing the song of the Lord” in a foreign land. We need music in which we can recognize ourselves and we need a musical tradition that shapes who we are called to be. However, if we join our voices in melodies and texts, rhythms and harmonies, that may at first seem foreign to us, our capacity to “sing a song of the Lord” in new ways expands even as our understanding of what is truly “catholic” deepens.

References


