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Judith M. Kubicki

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How Firm a Foundation

The Theology of *Sing to the Lord*: *Music in Divine Worship*



In *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, the bishops point out that music “mediates our relationship with God and spiritual realities, especially love.”

Judith M. Kubicki, CSSF, PHD

Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship (STL) (2007) is the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops’ most recent statement on music sung in Catholic liturgy in the United States. It supersedes *Music in Catholic Worship* (1972) and its supplement, *Liturgical Music Today* (1982). The document builds on previous statements issued on many levels, including conciliar documents and curial instructions.

When a new Church document is first released, the typical focus is often on changes in the rubrics. In other words, we look to see what has changed regarding what or when some ritual action (in this case singing) is performed or who performs it. Questions regarding why a change is made do not usually delve

much below the surface. Rather, concern usually focuses on whether there is a change in what is considered “liturgically correct.” To get to deeper levels of understanding “why,” one needs to move into the realm of theology.

In the case of *Sing to the Lord*, the theology is both traditional and radical. It is traditional because it embodies the ancient faith of the Church in new circumstances of time and place. It is radical because its directives take their inspiration from the most fundamental principles of that faith. These theological principles resonate with what we, as Catholics, already believe about creation, Jesus Christ, human nature, sacraments (especially Baptism), God, and the Church. This is not to say that the document is a theological tome. Rather, its theology is like a gentle but steady undercurrent from which its assertions

and directives flow. Much of it is implicit rather than explicit. Nevertheless, its presence is important to acknowledge for many reasons, not the least of which is to answer the question of “why.”

CREATION, JESUS CHRIST, AND HUMAN NATURE

The very first article of STL is a profound statement about how song fits into our relationship with God. It states:

God bestowed upon his people the gift of song. God dwells within each human person, in the place where music takes its source. Indeed, God, the giver of song, is present whenever his people sing his praises.

This statement focuses on the mystery of creation and God’s presence within it. God as Creator is the source of both our song and our human bodies. In addition, this same creative God is present in a particular way when our bodies serve as instruments of his praise. Genesis 1:31 tells us that God looked upon all that he created and declared it very good. This includes all of material creation, including our human bodies with their natural gifts for music-making.

Thus, our faith affirms that all of God’s creation is very good. It also tells us that this loving Creator chose to reveal God-self to us by taking on human flesh in history. The theological term for this is the Incarnation. Christians believe that the Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, became human in order to show us the Father, to reveal to us who God is. He did this through the bodiliness of Jesus who took on human flesh in a particular culture, speaking a particular language, in a particular time in history. One way in which theologians speak about the Incarnation is to describe Jesus Christ as primordial sacrament. Because of this, the material world of every time and place has the potential to mediate the holy. This is especially the case with our human bodiliness. In other words, if we believe that God chose the material world and the human body as the way to communicate with us, then this is the case, not only during the historical life of Jesus, but throughout the history of humankind. This belief in the goodness of creation and in the revelation of God through the humanity of Jesus Christ is the basis of our belief in the sacraments and sacramental rites.

SACRAMENTALITY

The Church’s radical belief in sacramental rituals flows out of its belief in the sacramentality of creation and in the Incarnation. This is the basis of the notion of sacramentality. Those who live life from the perspective of a sacramental imagination have their eyes and ears attuned to God’s invitation to enter into a transforming relationship. Such a life stance requires an openness to being surprised by the presence of God in the mundane, in the everydayness of human existence. Having a sacramental imagination enables us to view the world as the place where God reveals God-self to us and where we respond to that revelation (Kubicki, *Presence of Christ*, p. 16). The theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet insists that we do not simply have a human body, but



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are human body (*Symbol and Sacrament*, p. 149). Because of this, the only way we can experience both God’s action and our response is through activities that are profoundly temporal and spatial (Osborne, *Christian Sacraments*, pp. 70–72). So we need rituals or sacramental celebrations that are embedded in a particular time and place, culture, and people. And we need our bodies in order to celebrate these sacraments and experience them as meaningful.

The bishops articulate this clearly when they say, “In Liturgy, we use words, gestures, signs, and symbols to proclaim Christ’s presence and to reply with our worship and praise” (6). We need bodies to do this. Furthermore, they point out, music “mediates our relationship with God and spiritual realities, especially love (2). Music can do this because it truly is one of the symbols of the liturgy. Furthermore, music is part of that material world created by God (1). The only way music can exist is within a particular cultural context. That is why *Sing to the Lord* expresses an openness to the potential use of music of all cultures in the liturgy. STL, 81, asserts that “In every age, the Church has called upon creative artists to give new voice to praise and prayer.” Thus, while the Church acknowledges its treasury of sacred music, it welcomes a variety of expressions (81). The Church does so because it believes that every culture can and must mediate the action of God in our lives and our response to that action. It is true that the document encourages the fostering of Latin and Gregorian chant, especially at international gatherings (61–62). However, it does not designate these as the best or only choice for every time and place. Rather, every age, every culture, every place, has the potential to serve as a means for worshipping God and receiving grace. This is clearly expressed in the section on diverse cultures and languages. In this section, the acknowledgment of the rich heritage of Western European tradition is followed by the exhortation also to acknowledge the rich cultural and ethnic heritage of a culturally pluralistic

America (57). This openness to the cultural diversity of the Church in the United States is not simply an expression of hospitality or good manners. Rather, it is the authentic response of a sacramental Church that believes that this is the way God has chosen to enter into a loving relationship with all humankind.

THE GATHERED ASSEMBLY

Throughout *Sing to the Lord* are many references to the gathered assembly. The first of these highlights the action of gathering week by week (5). But the invitation of Christ is not simply to gather, but to participate in the sacred mysteries (23), a point reiterated many times in the document. Indeed, since the promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy at the Second Vatican Council, the full, conscious, and active participation by all the people has been identified as “the aim to be considered before all else, for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit” (CSL, 14). Naturally, there must be an internal dimension to this participation that is signaled and promoted by an external demeanor. Both are necessary so that, as the gathered assembly, we might enter into song in a way that enables us to rise above our self-preoccupation and give ourselves over to participating in Christ’s Paschal Mystery (12–14). This connection between exterior and interior again highlights the sacramental nature of the singing to which Christ invites us (13, 14).

But there is another important dimension to the role of the assembly as primary music-maker in its very designation as “gathered.” Both the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (2002) and the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy emphasize that the assembly gathers in order to form one body. *Sing to the Lord* echoes this emphasis on unity (see 25, 27, 67, 72, 73, 142, 189, 191, 192). Such repetition of an idea signals that deep theological principles are at work in this insistent call to unity. These principles include an understanding of the gathered assembly as an instance of the presence of Christ and an understanding of the assembly as participating in the life and love of the Trinity.

The Gospel according to Matthew (18: 20) records Christ promising his disciples that “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I in their midst.” At the Last Supper Jesus prayed “May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me” (John 17:21). These scripture passages root the Church’s conviction that unity is both a sign of the presence of Christ and an imitation of the life of the Triune God. For when we gather, or more precisely, when, by the power of the Spirit we are gathered, Christ is present in the Church in order to incorporate us more fully into his Paschal Mystery (Kubicki, 38). The more fully we become incorporated into that mystery, the more fully we, as gathered assembly, become the one body of Christ. This is what it means to be Church.

Singing the liturgy, therefore, plays a critical role as a unifying activity. This happens when song selections are made with the makeup of the assembly in mind. It is promoted when music leadership understands its role as service to the assembly’s song. It also occurs when the assembly participates wholeheartedly to



Sing to the Lord points to the transformative nature of music, stating that music is holy when it mediates the holiness of God, forming the people of God more fully into communion with each other in Christ.

the invitation to sing its prayer. When such dynamics exist, singing assists not only in uniting the assembly in the worship of God, but also in giving it a tangible experience of being one. This unity, however, does not eliminate the need for diverse musical expression. In fact, it presupposes it. As STL, 30, explains, both the treasury of sacred music and the music of various cultures are welcomed. This diversity of musical expression requires that the assembly learns to respect and to enter into styles and genres of music that may be unfamiliar. Doing so may involve letting go of personal preferences and reaching out in hospitality to an increasingly diverse local community. This is part of what is meant by the transformative effect of communal music-making. STL, 10, sums it up well when it quotes Saint Paul: “We, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another” (Romans 12:5–6).

THE HOLY OR SACRED

In addition to the transformation or holiness of the assembly, there is also the question of the holiness of the music. In the 1963 Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (112), the Council Fathers explain: “Therefore sacred music is to be considered the more holy, the more closely connected it is with the liturgical action, whether making prayer more pleasing, promoting unity of minds, or conferring greater solemnity upon the sacred rites.” The 1972 *Music in Catholic Worship* develops this idea further when it connects the notion of sacred music as symbolic and integral by saying: “Among the many signs and symbols used by the church to celebrate its faith, music is of preeminent importance. As sacred song united to words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy” (MCW, 23). The Constitution ties the holiness of music to its connection with the ritual action. *Music in Catholic Worship* ties the holiness of music to its connection with texts. *Sing to the Lord* asserts something even more

profound. It says that “Sacred music is holy when it mediates the holiness of God and forms the Holy People of God more fully into communion with each other in Christ” (69). The focus here is on the transformation of the assembly into Christ and the mediation of relationships within the community and the community with God. This kind of theological thinking reflects the theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet. He speaks of symbolizing activity as mediating identity and relationships. The liturgy and its music-making are symbolizing activity. This articulation of the role of music reaffirms previous claims that music is integral to worship and that it has the potential to promote the ongoing conversion and transformation of the assembly into the one body of Christ. This is what makes music liturgical or sacred. This is why liturgical music-making is an awesome task.

In speaking of the Liturgy of the Hours, STL, 230, describes the role of daily prayer as “sanctifying time.” This traditional language has been used in such documents as the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours* and *Laudis Canticum*. However, if we take seriously the creation narrative in Genesis, we might argue that God sanctifies time, not human beings. What we can do is consecrate time by dedicating it to the praise and worship of God. This word also appears in Church documents and may be more theologically precise. If we use the word “sanctifying,” we are acknowledging that time, as part of fallen creation, is in need of redemption. If we use the word “consecrating,” we are acknowledging that time is a gift of our Creator God who made all things very good. By setting aside time to worship, we are consecrating it to the praise of God and our transformation into Christ.

ROOTED IN BAPTISM

Time is a dimension, not only of the Liturgy of the Hours, but also of the Eucharist. We observe the periodicity of time when we gather at regular intervals, whether weekly or daily. The Christian impulse to gather on the Lord’s Day is our response to an invitation that God extends to each of us through our Baptism. Baptism plunges us into the Paschal Mystery and enables us to respond to God’s self gift through our self gift. Because we are baptized, we are “authorized” to do Eucharist, that is, to respond to Christ’s mandate to “do this in memory of me.” It is ultimately Baptism, therefore, that gathers us into the one body of Christ and enables us to participate in the life of the Trinity through our life in the Church.

All ministry in the Church, including music ministry, is rooted in Baptism. Its context is grace. Understanding it this way signals a return to the New Testament notion of *diakonia* (service). This notion of service or ministry is grounded in the community and is performed for the sake of building up the kingdom of God. It applies to all aspects of music ministry, including that of cantor, psalmist, choir, instrumentalist, director of music ministries, organist, singing presider or deacon, and

the singing assembly. Nevertheless, despite this differentiation of roles, all liturgical ministers belong first to the assembly. Called forth from the assembly, music ministers are invited to offer their gifts at the service of the community’s prayer, not to flaunt personal talent.

CONCLUSION

Much food for theological reflection is in *Sing to the Lord*. It offers all those involved in liturgy, but particularly those involved in music ministries, the opportunity to ponder more deeply the faith dimension of their vocation. It also provides an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the meaning of our music-making within the context of liturgy. Possibilities for such reflection include focusing on the mystery of creation, Incarnation, redemption, sacramentality, and ministry. Most especially it includes our participation in living out, through our music-making, the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ!

QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever had a tangible experience of the bodiliness of singing the liturgy as a means of communing with God? In what way did the music enable this experience?
2. What specific guidance does *Sing to the Lord* offer you for enabling the assembly to see itself as the body of Christ through communal music-making?
3. How can our weekly and yearly musical planning enhance the assembly’s experience of unity?
4. What one new approach to music ministry can you implement now to heighten both the assembly’s and your awareness of the sacramentality of music-making?
5. Will knowing the theology behind the directives in *Sing to the Lord* make a difference in the way you approach your liturgical ministry?
6. Which point(s) made in this essay do you believe is (are) most important to share with your local assembly? Why?
7. Do you see your life and ministry as a participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ? What does that mean in the concrete? ♦

JUDITH KUBICKI, CSSF, PHD, is an associate professor in the Theology Department at Fordham University, where she teaches systematic, sacramental, and liturgical theology. Her doctorate in liturgical studies is from The Catholic University of America. She is the author of *The Presence of God in the Gathered Assembly* © 2006 Continuum.