Wondrous Love: Music and Liturgy

Last Thursday the Choir of St. Ignatius Loyola performed for a rapt audience of 1,000 people at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis in St. Louis, Missouri. The music was a program we presented here in February, which is available as our new recording, *Wondrous Love.* This aesthetically rich recording brings together over 1,000 years of song, and plumbs the emotional depths and heights of our life's journey through faith. That mid-western Basilica rang with the very music we experience in liturgy at St. Ignatius Loyola, including choral music we are preparing for Holy Week. As we performed for over 700 choral conductors from around the nation and the additional citizens of St. Louis, we experienced that special bond which music can create. Over the next several days, we heard from many, including this University professor:

"I sit here alone, and for the life of me can't think of anything better to do than think of the exquisite beauty that surrounded my being at the Basilica in St. Louis last Thursday evening.
When you sang "Christus Vincit" it opened my heart so much that the infamous chill bumps, accompanied with the softest tears seeped from my body and heart. For whatever this means, Thank all of You for your hard work and song. It makes me work harder in my choir at the University even though I doubt I could ever replicate the beauty within the music you shared with all of us".

Indeed, we place a high value on the beauty of music at St. Ignatius, and not for reasons of snobbish appeal! As the Dominican Timothy Radcliffe states, "Beauty is not the icing on the liturgical cake, it is the essence". Similarly, great care is given to all aspects of our liturgical life, from the training of altar servers to the coaching of lectors and eucharistic ministers. And great care is given to congregational participation in this celebration of the heavenly feast.

Wisely, the Roman Church since Vatican II has promoted a clear set of standards and ideals relating to the celebration of the Eucharist. These serve as overarching guidelines which when followed, foster in every setting the dignity, reverence, joy and beauty of the heavenly banquet.

Among church musicians, the recent *General Instruction of the Roman Missal 2000* (GIRM) has stirred great interest. In the words of Michael Joncas, this publication "consistently highlights the importance of music in the Eucharistic celebration, offers guidelines for its proper employment, and exhorts both liturgical ministers and the assembly as a whole to manifest full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy by means of sung prayer at appropriate times".

Here at St. Ignatius we take these ideals seriously. There are no "four hymn masses" here because we believe that the first priority of music in worship is to support the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, namely in singing most of the Mass Ordinary (Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei) and more importantly the central acclamations surrounding the reading of the Word of God and the consecration of the Eucharist.

Indeed, we sing hymns too, but these are to accompany liturgical processions at the beginning of mass, at the offering of the gifts, at the reception of communion and at the end of the liturgy. In fact, at those times there is a great variety of options available to liturgical musicians. These include that "The song may be sung alternately between the congregation and choir (or cantor), or by all together, or by choir alone."
The GIRM goes so far as to suggest that at the end of mass, "If a closing song for the assembly does not serve as a truly communal act of praise, it may be best to choose another musical form. When music is used for the sending forth, it should express joyful praise of God as members of the assembly go out to take up the mission of Christ in the world."

But back to the Eucharist, "the center and summit of the entire celebration." Here we have three very key musical elements: the Sanctus (Holy, holy, holy), the Memorial Acclamation and the "Great" Amen (great meaning "most important" amen of the entire mass). When possible, the Presider intones the preface to the Sanctus, the invitation to the Memorial Acclamation and the concluding doxology, and unity is fostered through the musical responses of the community. It is in this part of the celebration that our participation should be most keenly attenuated! For the Sanctus expresses our unity with the host of heaven in praise of God's sacrifice; the Memorial Acclamation engages the entire assembly in responding to the narrative of Christ's sacrifice, and the Amen is our ratification of the entire Eucharistic Prayer.

After this we sing the Lord's Prayer and also its concluding doxology- a practice recommended but not followed in most parishes. We sing the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God) at the Fraction Rite, and during the distribution of communion we follow either of two general norms which are also suggested. As before, but in slightly different language, GIRM promotes that the song at communion may be sung "either by the choir alone or by the choir or cantor with the people." Frequently we engage in singing hymns of joy and praise which involve not just the liturgical musicians but also the congregation. At other times, and particularly at the Solemn Mass, the choir may sing during the distribution with the congregation joining after in a communion meditation; "If desired, a psalm or other canticle of praise or a hymn may also be sung by the entire congregation." This is the preferred mode for "communities where the Communion chant is sung by the choir alone."

Everything we do and everything we are as a parish radiates from our coming together as community to celebrate the Eucharist. Thank you for the sincerity and openness you bring to mass. This has been a continuous inspiration to me and to all the Music Ministers. Continue to raise your voice joyfully, whether you are an opera singer or even if you were told as a child that 'you can't carry a tune'. It doesn't matter how well you sing. True beauty happens when we all engage fully in that unique and special moment we have when we celebrate the Eucharist.

May God bless your Lenten journey,

Kent Tritle

Director of Music Ministries

March 15, 2006