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Southeastern Liturgical Music Symposium

Our Lady of the Assumption Parish

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It's now that time of year when students everywhere are busily purchasing textbooks for their classes for the new school term. I can vividly recall my own first book sale as a freshman in the high school seminary in 1961 back in Chicago. Among the mountain of books that I was required to purchase was a little pamphlet entitled: *Musicae sacra disciplina* a letter that had been issued in December, 1955 by the then Pope Pius XII. It was addressed to the entire Catholic world regarding the

importance of and the place of music in the Sacred Liturgy. It should have served me as an early but very clear indication that the issue of music and worship would follow me throughout my life as a priest – even if I did not recognize that fact then as a high school freshman!

The issues that continue to confront the Church even today nearly 50 years after the beginning of the Second Vatican Council reflect the important balance of preserving the Church's musical heritage as an irreplaceable treasure for our contemporary liturgical life as well as to encourage and support the composition of new musical compositions that reflect the genius of

our own age, while also wisely choosing from the multi-cultural musical heritages of the many people of the Church, and the needs of the contemporary life of the Church. In other words, we still struggle to keep what is ancient, promote what is new, and prudently welcome some of the musical treasures of the many people who comprise our parish communities – all of these gifts must be used in conformity with the liturgical life of the Church today.

This tri-fold responsibility and challenge is, in a special way, the task of all those of you who serve in our parishes and diocesan offices in the music ministry. You are challenged always to

choose the best from our past, to support and encourage the composition of new musical selections that reflect our own moment in history, and finally to welcome the musical pieces that represent the best of the heritages of the many people who are the Church today. It is unacceptable to choose to do only one of these functions in isolation – even when you may have a personal preference for one over the other two.

The Liturgy calls for music that compliments and enhances the very fabric of worship. Music is not simply something that is imposed upon the Liturgy – the finest examples of liturgical music functions in concert with the

proclamation of the Word and the Sacramental signs that comprise all Catholic ritual. Music is not a background or peripheral addition to the work of praise. Liturgical music is not *muzack* that simply fills the empty spaces of our worship. The music that fits the Liturgy should be a constitutive component of the sacred texts and actions in so far as music intensifies the spiritual reception of the Mystery that we proclaim. Conversely, Liturgy that is completely devoid of music lacks a component that allows it to achieve its full force in the life of the assembly and all worshippers.

From the earliest moments of our history as a Church, Catholics in every era have wrestled with the tensions that are inevitable between the Mystery of God as the Transcendent One and yet the Imminent One – God’s closeness to us and His complete *otherness*. This tension must be maintained because it is the reality of the way that we mere mortals encounter the All-Holy God who freely chooses to be close to us and yet is always beyond our wildest imaginings. This is the same God who chose to be born as a man in a stable and yet later was magnificently transfigured before His Disciples. The same God who is symbolized in the Ark of the Covenant and daily traveled in the desert with His chosen

people, also wreathed Mount Sinai in smoke, and fire and lightening as He conversed with His servant Moses.

The Mystery of God always entails these two dimensions of being close to us and yet always existing in a realm far beyond our mere mortal imaging. Such a tension also exists in our worship of the Sovereign God with human elements of mere bread and wine, Word and Song, movements and gestures that seek to bring us into the presence of the All Holy God. We use ordinary elements in our sacramental praise of the God who is far above all of His

creatures and yet chooses to come close to us out of Love for us.

There are those who believe that Liturgy demands that we use only the extraordinary and enduring elements at our disposal while others suggest that our customary possessions are the appropriate things for worship. This same tension is found in those who would eschew the building of great ornate houses for worship and those who emphasize the humble beginnings of the Church. Both attitudes and opinions have points worthy of genuine consideration. When we reflect on the music of the Liturgy those same dichotomies also exist. Some people

believe that only the classical forms of music are worthy of the Liturgy while others believe that the music that reflects contemporary and folk examples of music are more than worthy of the Church's worship.

The music that we use in the Liturgy ought to reflect only the finest examples and expressions of our art as should every other element we choose for the praise of God. Yet there are vast differences of opinion regarding what the finest expressions of the musical art actually are. The same is true in reference to all of the other artistic elements chosen for the Liturgy.

Liturgical music is almost always a composite of melody, rhythm and texts. We probably all have a personal bias for or against a particular category of music and those biases predispose us to prefer one type of music over another. However we must all be more increasingly concerned about and attentive to the texts of liturgical music.

Following the guiding principle *Lex orandi lex credendi*, we must pay particular consideration to the words that we sing at the Liturgy. I speak here not only of the poetic quality of the text or the issues of gender inclusion that so often spark our interest and engender controversy. I

am more concerned here about the theological and doctrinal content of the texts of our music.

Obviously, whenever the texts of the Liturgy itself are set to melody, there is little matter for concern. Whenever the words of Sacred Scripture are embellished with song, there is little need for worry. But when a text has an obvious theological position to propose apart from the ritual or biblical texts of worship, then we need to be conscious of what we are singing or asking the Assembly of the Faithful to sing.

Some liturgical music is designed to be a doxological tribute to the Trinity with either

three stanzas or four that portray the honor and glory to be paid to the Triune God. When such songs are sung, it is always necessary to allow the doxology to be completed. Often the Holy Spirit is neglected because the procession is over, the parking lot has to be cleared, or the assembly is departing. In those cases, I believe that we ought to remind the community that the entire song is making a statement and should be offering a total prayer. The Holy Spirit is no less worthy of praise than the other two Divine Persons who may happen to have the good fortune to have been honored and recognized before the celebrant exits the Church.

During the past fifty years, the Liturgy has borrowed many wonderful hymns and anthems from other Christian traditions. The glorious music that other Christian denominations have produced is indeed a treasure and a beautiful artistic gift. Some of those songs however proclaim theological positions that run counter to Catholic Faith. Some anthems may in fact have been composed in order to challenge or to refute Catholic teaching. It is of vital and critical importance that we use only those hymns of other Christian traditions and with a careful eye to the theology they might espouse that do not reject or challenge the Faith that we profess.

The great spirituals of the African-American community are among some of the most moving and inspiring songs of Faith that have been produced in our nation. Since a great many of these hymns were inspired by biblical texts, they normally do not pose a doctrinal concern. However those same hymns and spirituals may not be appropriate for the liturgical moment in which they are inserted.

Many wonderful spirituals may not be appropriate for the responsorial chant or the hymn for Communion while they might make a wonderful hymn for reflection or during the presentation of the gifts. Again, the location

within Catholic Liturgy will either accommodate or clash with the music to be chosen. When the liturgical moment calls for an antiphonal musical setting, a song that is designed for solo performance usually does not fit the occasion.

There is little doubt that at the beginning of the renewal processes that the Second Vatican Council engendered, there was a spirit of excessive exuberance that resulted in sometimes ill-conceived ritual selections that only succeeded in diminishing the spirit of reverence and mystery that belong by nature to the worship of God. The initial musical compositions in those early years of the renewal

were too often banal, crude, and lacking in the spiritual dignity that the Liturgy demands. This sad state of affairs was only intensified when the new musical compositions were compared to the artistically sophisticated works that had adorned the Liturgy prior to the Council. There was no comparison.

That sad state of affairs led many people to have a less than a generous and positive understanding of what the liturgical renewal was attempting to achieve. Many people identified the renewal itself with the widespread poor quality of music that was often associated with

the new ritual – unfortunately a few people actually still continue to maintain that opinion.

If those opening years of the renewal lacked a sufficient repertoire of truly beautiful liturgical music, fifty years later we have undoubtedly supplied for that initial deficiency. Nearly a half century after the Second Vatican Council, we can look with more than a little pride upon the quality of the compositions that contemporary composers have produced.

The compositions of many modern musicians are not only the result of their God-given talents, but a reflection of the experience that they have

garnered in understanding the ebb and flow of the renewed Liturgy. They have come to appreciate the intricate relationship between Word and Sacrament, the desire and capacity of the assembly to learn new music, the need for a variety of musical settings that reflect the multicultural nature of most American parishes. In other words, today's composers have lived the Liturgy for these fifty years and they have come to understand its dynamics and thus their compositions reflect their own genius as well as the capacity and the lofty expectations of the People of God at prayer. Our liturgical music today is of a higher quality because of the experience of the Church and the maturity of the

skills of those who compose this music. From the perspective of a bishop of a highly diverse community, I am particularly grateful for the music that has been composed in multiple languages so that the sung praise of the Assembly also reminds the Church of the diversity of those who worship the same Father.

*The laborer is worthy of his hire.* That scriptural citation must permeate the way that local parishes and diocesan offices look upon the issue of the just compensation of Church musicians. In all candor, that has not always been the case. Unfortunately the long history of Christianity is punctuated with examples of

artists who composed music for the Church but were not adequately compensated. Some lived near poverty as they were creating some of the best examples of sacred music that we have in our ecclesial archives.

It is a matter of priority that faces every parish community that in too many cases as the expenses of a local church mount, where does the cost of Liturgy fit into the equation? Parishes have limited resources and in times of economic downturn such as we are currently experiencing, it is not always easy to balance the budget and to face the question of what expenses must be trimmed.

Yet every truly successful pastor will be able to testify that the quality of their worship is directly related to the material resources that they have at their disposal and then choose to invest in the Church's Sunday worship. Inevitably the truly flourishing parishes are those with great music. They have the choirs, the cantors, the musical instruments, the sound systems that represent real quality. People seek out such parishes and the revenue invested in these musical programs is always returned many times over. This is especially true where good music is accompanied by excellent preaching, a sense of decorum and beauty in furnishings and vestments, and rounded off by an obvious spirit

of hospitality and welcome. All of those elements are universally found in the truly successful parishes in any diocese. These are the parishes where people are willing to travel great distances to join in the Sunday celebration. Inevitably the music of worship plays no small part in making these communities the successes that they are.

I thank all of you for your devotion to the Church's worship and for placing your own talents at the service of the People of God. We have made significant progress in developing music of our own time, combined with the rich legacy of music from the Church's past so that

today's songs of praise are reflective of who we are and how we are related to those who have gone before us and share the same love of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit ever worthy of our praise and thanksgiving.