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Neil Xavier O'Donoghue

Redeemably Awful: Music

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Throughout this series of articles, I have attempted to point out the uncomfortable truth that when it comes to the manner that the liturgy is often celebrated in the Sunday parish context the Emperor has no clothes. In this article I plan to lose any faithful friends I still might have. Plainly put I want to make the point that the musical standard at most Sunday celebrations of the Eucharist is terrible. From my experience of celebrating and attending liturgies in different parts of the island, I would say that over half of the Sunday celebrations have no music whatsoever (and here I am speaking about the situation before the current COVID-19 restrictions). This is a far cry from the ideal expressed in number 40 of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* which informs us that:

‘Great importance should therefore be attached to the use of singing in the celebration of the Mass, with due consideration for the culture of the people and abilities of each liturgical assembly. Although it is not always necessary (e.g., in weekday Masses) to sing all the texts that are of themselves meant to be sung, every care should be taken that singing by the ministers and the people is not absent in celebrations that occur on Sundays and on holy days of obligation.’

This lack of music in Irish churches is surprising. It's not as if we are a people who dislike music. Music and song are of great value in Irish culture in general. If a group of Irish people begin to sing at a party or in a pub, they can stay at it for hours. Our musicians are famous the world over. But this does not normally extend to our churches. Music is often seen as at best a trimming for the Eucharistic celebration and not really considered to be important in itself. Most parishes are hard put to keep one choir going with every member a precious commodity. Some very talented musicians minister at funerals and weddings. But all too often these are treated as paid professionals, people enjoy their music, but they are the only ones singing. It is very rare for an assembly to *join* with the choir or cantor.

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When there is music at a celebration, it is often considered to be almost apart from the liturgical action. It often seems that the music has been outsourced to the musicians and the clergy don't really care what these do, so long as they don't get in the way. The height of cooperation is one of the musicians leaving a sheet of paper for the priest in the sacristy, with a list of what they are singing. The need for *coordinated* planning for the celebration is simply ignored. The fact that the priest's choices among the various options for the celebration can affect which music is chosen is simply not dealt with. It is also not unheard of for choices of secular music to be sung during liturgies, which can have lyrics and associations that are often anti-Christian in motivation. The famous example that many of us have heard in one liturgy or another is John Lennon's *Imagine* which proposes an atheistic world view whereby we are asked to "Imagine there's no heaven ... no hell below us, above us only sky ... no religion too." Undoubtedly the song has merits, but it has no place in Christian liturgy.

Thomas Day, chairman of the Music Department at Salve Regina University, Newport, Rhode Island, wrote a hard-hitting book entitled *Why Catholics Can't Sing*. There he lays the blame for the poor church music in the United States clearly at the feet of the Irish. His theory is that during Penal Times, when any act of religion or devotion by Catholics was forbidden by law, people met in secret at the Mass rocks. Obviously singing was the last thing they would do as they gathered illegally to celebrate. By the time of Catholic Emancipation, the tradition of singing in church was all but dead. When the churches opened again, music was even regarded with some suspicion. Day tells a story about how this Irish attitude even crossed the Atlantic to the shores of the United States:

'When Cardinal Spellman processed into St. Patrick's Cathedral, he probably did not care what music was used, as long as it was unmemorable. During his years as Cardinal of New York, visitors from Continental Europe were shocked by the paleness of the vocal music in St. Patrick's, a building located in the cultural capital of the United States [...].

The famous conductor Joseph Krips was one of the many foreign visitors who could not comprehend the timid, second-rate vocal music he heard in St. Patrick's nor could he understand why a tremendous potential was not being realized. Krips resolved to do something about this, he told me in a letter. During his lunch with Cardinal Spellman in 1959, Krips made a bold suggestion: he (Krips) would conduct a suitable Mass by Palestrina or Mozart or Bruckner in the cathedral, free of charge;

after all, this kind of music, Krips explained, could be heard at the High Mass in many of Europe's great Catholic cathedrals. Firmly, the cardinal declined the maestro's offer, and I suspect that the suggestion of using robust, confident choral music at a Mass horrified him. Such things were done in St. Patrick's years ago, but not during his efficient administration.

Cardinal Spellman's line of reasoning for rejecting Maestro Krip's offer was probably based on a whole set of assumptions that every 'Irish-American' Catholic [...] took for granted: 'Contraception had ruined France; the decadent French just collapsed in two world wars; the church in that country only survived at Lourdes ... The Italians were anticlerical and pagan ... Slavic Catholics got carried away with their emotions ... The Spanish shot their bishops and priests during revolutions ... The Germans and the Austrians started two world wars ...' The list continued in similar fashion until you reached the conclusion that only the Irish and their American relatives had maintained Catholic orthodoxy in faith and music. Did the Irish in Ireland ever ask a prominent conductor to amuse them with great music during Mass? Of course not, and their churches were full.¹

Obviously, this is written with tongue in cheek, nonetheless the distrust of music in a liturgical context is still widespread. When we do find music, all too often it isn't properly integrated into the celebration. The idea is not *to have* singing at the liturgy, but to *sing* the liturgy. All too often, the music is reduced to few hymns (entrance, preparation of the altar, communion and recessional) and it is very rare to sing the responses and even rarer to hear the preface being chanted or some other part of the celebration.

Why, one might ask, is this a cause for concern? *Sacrosanctum Concilium* tells us that "to promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes" (30). The experience of the last two millennia has been that music has been one of the best ways to bring people into the celebrations. Music speaks to us on a different level and it most definitely "worth the effort." When we sing, we participate here below in the heavenly liturgy. St. Augustine famously preaches on the need to sing *alleluia* in this world:

'So, then, my brothers, let us sing now, not in order to enjoy a life of leisure, but in order to lighten our labours. You should sing as wayfarers do – sing, but continue your journey. Do not

1 Thomas Day, *Why Catholics Can't Sing: The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 24-25.

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be lazy, but sing to make your journey more enjoyable. Sing, but keep going. What do I mean by keep going? Keep on making progress. This progress, however, must be in virtue; for there are some, the Apostle warns, whose only progress is in vice. If you make progress, you will be continuing your journey, but be sure that your progress is in virtue, true faith and right living. Sing then, but keep going.²

For our music programmes we don't have to reinvent the wheel. We simply need to pay attention to what we are doing, to make liturgical music a priority. It can't be simply good enough, we need to aim for excellence.³

- 2 Augustine *sermo* 256, 1.3.4; PL 38, 1191-1193. The reading can be found in the second reading of the Office of Readings on the Saturday after Christ the King, the last day of the liturgical year.
- 3 Those interested in more on this subject are recommended to consult, National Centre for Liturgy, *Singing the Mystery of Faith: A Guide to Church Music* (Dublin: Veritas, 2015).

Arrow Prayer. In my salad days when I was green in judgment I paid very little attention to the interior life, except perhaps as something to be avoided for fear of what might come up out of the depths. But there was one barely noticeable mental habit – hardly more than a tic of the mind – that survived from religious formation that I had received as a teenager. I had been taught it as an “arrow prayer” and, although I didn't pray, sometimes the words would repeat themselves in my mind: “Dwell in me and I in thee”. It is an extraordinary grace and gift of God that somehow He got me back. Maybe, just maybe, it was those words that let Him in.

– LUKE BELL OSB. *Staying Tender, contemplation, pathway to compassion.* (New York: Angelico Press) p.xi.