



# Catholic Generations

## Singing Is Believing: The Role of Music in Faith Formation

My father once recalled how he would listen to his mother sing familiar religious Polish songs while she sewed. At the time, we were discussing the importance of music and faith, a topic that fascinated him. He remembered fondly how his mother's simple, devotional singing stirred his love of those songs, and also the faith they expressed. It was as if she had memorized a catechism and taught it to him note by note. In one sense, my grandmother's singing was a locus of my dad's early catechesis.

I never had the opportunity to tell my father that singing in the parish choir with him when I was a young boy had a similar influence on me. Each Sunday as we sang with the choir and rehearsed the songs in Latin, some emerging in English, I learned more than the music: those songs captured my religious imagination, gave language to my nascent beliefs, and set me on a lifelong path of using music within my pastoral ministry. In a similar way, my father's invitation, the choir, and its role in leading the parish singing all served as part of my earliest catechesis.

There is a common saying among religious educators that faith is caught, not taught. Catechists understand that we need to provide regular and systematic opportunities for people of all ages to learn the principles and practices of our Catholic faith tradition. But we also know that our actions speak much louder than our words. A community's life, regardless of the shape it takes, is always proclaiming its common beliefs more by what its members do than by what they say.

What are our words and actions telling others about what we believe? As we begin to tackle answering that question, we're likely to start seeing that religious formation takes place not only in Sunday school, but through the community's life during the remainder of the week. The behavior of the group's most visible members is constantly teaching others what matters, what is important, and what it believes. We may provide formal catechesis for different age groups, but all are also catechized by a community's living witness.

As a youth minister, pastoral musician, and lifelong religious educator, I have had the grace and privilege to witness persons at different stages of life reach what is described as an "aha" moment, that is, discovering their belief in God. These are moments of owned faith when the individual assents to beliefs by which he or she was raised. Some of these moments have occurred on retreats or during leadership weeks. Others took place over time through a series of discoveries, but each instance was no less amazing and miraculous.

### GRACED MOMENTS

Faith is always a gift of the Holy Spirit. As we know from accounts of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles, God uses our imperfect witness to open hardened hearts (Acts 2:37). Faith happens, or emerges, through the intentional (and sometimes unintentional) ways we are placed in near occasions of grace. Our response to the love and mercy of God becomes conviction. The realization of God's presence in our lives seeks a language, and music is frequently the way that faith is expressed.

Fast forward many years and I am standing in front of a diocesan youth rally leading music for prayer. It was very soon after the horrible tragedy at Columbine High School in Colorado, and memories of those innocent deaths were still very much on the minds of the group members gathered as we sang "Come to the Lord" (BB 339): "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Children, do not fear. / Though you suffer as I suffered, I am always near. / I will never leave you orphans; you are not alone. / I have made your place in heaven, in my father's home."

When Steve Angrisano and I collaborated to write that song, we wanted to place the spiritual questions and raw emotions evoked by the deaths of the Columbine students in the light of the Eucharist. How else could we make sense of these events? Though I have had various opportunities to teach that

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central tenet of our Catholic faith in a classroom environment, in that moment, in that community, the sung prayer stirred hearts and allowed us to reach out to one another and believe it in new ways.

## FINDING COMMON GROUND

In the first article of this series on Catholic generations, Ken Canedo presented some of the general differences in the beliefs and religious behaviors among the World War II generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and the Millennial generation. Ken ended his commentary with a call to find a common ground for the generations. I propose that music is the language of that common ground. Here are my reasons:

- Music communicates. Music expresses ideas, feelings, and energy in a way that we can't always name or describe with mere words. Music communicates powerfully, emotionally, simply, personally, rhythmically, universally. Music transcends verbal language's limitations: A peaceful song in one language will sound peaceful to us even if we don't know what the words mean. The sound itself communicates.
- Songs and other musical forms communicate through words. Thoughts or expressions we would never say in normal conversation can often be sung or listened to, and these allow us to communicate with others. There is power in the words but also in setting those words to music.
- Music motivates. We choose music to match or accompany activities in which we're engaged. The beat, pace, and sound of music communicates and contributes its energy to a situation. We also choose music to match our feelings or thoughts.
- Music communicates subconsciously. If you have ever found yourself humming a radio or TV jingle, you know exactly how music can subliminally affect you. In fact, we rarely just listen to music without doing something else at the same time. Retail stores and restaurants spend a fair amount of time and attention creating a musical environment that will encourage customers to buy. I would like to believe that if music has the power to motivate us in that way, it could also be used intentionally to motivate us for living the Gospel.

## FROM SONG TO PRAYER TO BELIEF

Because of its multifaceted means of communicating, music is able to move fluidly among the generations—and does. For music to be the common language across generations, we need to use it intention-

ally and with some understanding of the functions it can perform. Let me illustrate.

For a number of years, I accompanied the Spanish-speaking community of parishes on Milwaukee's south side for the *Via Crucis* on Good Friday. As the procession wound its way through the neighborhoods to each station, the people would sing well-known religious songs. No song sheets were needed because even most newcomers had quickly memorized all the song prayers.

Both the songs and the event were deeply imbedded in the community's life. As I experienced that annual devotion, the procession became a necessary part of how I marked the Triduum. The songs, people, and streets connected the liturgical rituals of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil. Each year, families would set the stations in their front yards and line the procession's route. I remember the elders who provided leadership for various logistics and the youth and young adults who prepared the drama. The whole community prepared and participated.

Music was the universal language that moved us in procession from station to station. Our little group of singers and musicians included children, youth, and adults. The music included traditional and devotional songs as well as liturgical and contemporary pieces. We sang primarily in Spanish, taking care to add English songs as an outreach to the larger community. Music served as a common expression of the community's prayer and proclamation. The entire event became a public witness of faith to the neighborhoods in the same way that St. Peter's words ring out in Acts 2:32: "God raised this Jesus; of this we are all witnesses."

The *Via Crucis* is a traditional devotion, but it's also a good example of what religious educators now refer to as "whole community catechesis." The approach to formation across the generations is not normative here in the US, but in many other countries and cultures the heart of the family and community remains the primary way to pass the faith from generation to generation. Bill Huebsch is one of the leading advocates for a return to this more holistic approach to faith formation. In his *Dreams and Visions: Pastoral Planning for Lifelong Faith Formation*, he says, "When we speak today about whole community catechesis, we mean that this echoing of the faith, this *catechesis*, is not meant only for children, but also for adults in the church. It's meant for the *whole community*" (10).

Our religious formation begins when we are young and never ends. In each stage of life, we are asked to renew our faith. Daily events challenge our beliefs, and each time we come to the Eucharist we are reminded of

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our need for conversion and renewal. Faith formation is not just about knowing our beliefs, but about believing what we know as truth. The community is prime in providing additional opportunities for us to explore, reflect upon, and live out those beliefs.

Music is frequently at the heart of this belief dynamic, serving as a catalyst for the encounter. Our sacred music tradition gives witness to those faith expressions through the ages as each generation adds to the story. In that sense, music plays a vital role in catechizing all generations. Regardless of age, music can shape our way of thinking and expressing our beliefs, both individually and in a community. In turn, the community's songs inspire, confirm, encourage, challenge, and celebrate faith.

In the years since the Second Vatican Council, we have expanded our sacred music repertoire in catechetical and liturgical settings. Ultimately, when music becomes prayer, there's a difference that can be heard. It's discernable, tangible, and real in people's voices. There is a quality in the singing that makes audible what is felt and known. The implicit becomes explicit and becomes a setting for catechesis.

## THREE PRIMARY FUNCTIONS AND ONE CHALLENGE

I suggest there are three main roles music plays in communicating matters of faith between generations. Here is a helpful way to remember these functions: form, norm, and perform.

### Form

Music gathers us and celebrates who we are as a community. The act of gathering in the Lord's name is part of understanding who we are and whose we are. Identity seeking is an important task of adolescence and young adulthood. Those tasks are an individual responsibility, but the defining happens in reference to groups. Songs and anthems can assist with this important life task. As we gather, young and old together, we have the ability to say things about what it means to be part of this faith community; we can state beliefs and realizations about ourselves in relationship to God.

Trevor and Vicky Thomson's song "We Belong to You" (BB 659) is a good example of how text and music draw people to this common ground. Their poetic text—"We belong to you, O Lord of our longing... / In our daily living, dying and rising, / We belong to you"—recognizes our common dependence on God's providence and our unity in Christ. Not only does the song serve to gather the community, but it also names our relationship to one another in the mystical body of Christ.

This song comes from the contemporary repertoire in *Spirit & Song* and has established a strong following among young people. Now it has made its way into OCP's missal program because its intuitive melody and straightforward lyrics are accessible to other generations. It's a great example of how the musical expression of one generation can become a way for the whole community to lift their voices in God's praise.

### Norm

Music inspires and teaches. Sacred songs from all ages continue to inspire us just as newly written songs teach us about how we must respond to the current world in which we live. Our sacred music treasury—both old and new—presents the essential tenets of faith and Catholic spirituality in memorable ways and offers insights into God's presence among us. Collectively, these songs provide a structure and soundtrack for our Christian lifestyle.

I remember singing "Ubi Caritas" in Latin as a young choir member. Though at the time the Latin words were more rote than realized, the song's chant-like melody inspired my awareness of the Eucharist as a call to charity. A few years later, I sang the newer English version during Communion at our elementary school Masses. I loved the simplicity and clarity of both music and text, qualities of liturgical music writing that I still admire. Though I have sung those versions on countless occasions, both continue to inspire my faith at new times in my life.

More recently, Bob Hurd, Pia Moriarty, and Jaime Cortez have provided a trilingual song based on that same "Ubi Caritas" text and that includes Spanish verses (BB 335). Their multilingual version teaches not only by its Eucharistic text, but also by the awareness it gives to the language and cultural diversity of the Church today.

### Perform

Music challenges us to live the Gospel not with songs, but with our lives. "The Great Commission" is not just the title of a song; it's our response to the catechesis, the living out of our faith and beliefs. With the Beatitudes as a model and the Eucharist as the source and summit, we are compelled to perform works of charity and justice and to make the world a better place.

The songs of our sacred music treasury that motivate us to make a difference with our lives can take the form of hymns, anthems, and other verse-and-response formats. The call to discipleship finds its expression in all musical genres. For example, Father Ricky Manalo's "We Are Sent Into the World" (BB 380); Jaime Cortez's "Vayan al Mundo" (BB 376);

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and Matt Maher's "Your Grace Is Enough" (BB 634) represent a spectrum of musical approaches but the same call to ministry.

## The Challenge

The great challenge in understanding how music develops faith is in accepting that every generation and culture has the right to hear and proclaim the Gospel in its own language. Music is an ally in meeting this challenge, not an adversary. Yes, we are often challenged by the music of younger generations, but not any more than our parents were by ours. The fact is, music has spoken to and spoken for generations—all generations.

A couple of years ago, a young woman introduced herself to me at a national convention and explained she had previously met me when she attended One Bread, One Cup, the youth liturgical leadership conference offered each year at St. Meinrad School of Theology in Indiana. One of the unique aspects of the program is that we invite teens to pray morning and night prayer in the monastic tradition using the well-known Meinrad chant tones for the psalms. We also incorporate a variety of genres throughout the program, including contemporary Catholic songs.

This young woman told me about the impact music had had on her life. She admitted that her interest in attending the conference had been mostly social. She had come with her parish group because she had wanted to meet new friends (hopefully many of them young men). But it was the music of our community prayer, particularly the chant, that changed her that week. She encountered a faith that was deep within her and that found new expression alongside the contemporary songs she already loved. When she returned home and began telling stories, her parents barely recognized the sassy child they had sent off to church camp. Best of all, the week had been a turning point that eventually led her to get a religious studies degree and become a youth minister. The power of music to form faith is real.

## PRACTICAL STEPS

What are some practical steps for assessing the role of music in forming faith within your community? Here are a few ideas, which I hope to explore in greater detail in future issues of *Today's Liturgy*.

- **Establish a music advisory team.** Our parishes and schools are diverse in many ways. For music to be most effective in forming the widest group of people possible, the music itself must be diverse. This is not a matter of choice; it's required by the diversity of the community. The purpose of the group is not to become a kind of legislative committee, but to represent people from different backgrounds and to provide insights.

- **Achieve a balanced musical repertoire.** The goal of a music advisory team is to recommend and foster a balanced repertoire of songs from multiple genres that the entire community can call its own. These are the songs that are used by all sub-groups with the community and for the big feasts and occasions. By nature, people are drawn to particular styles of music, so there is nothing wrong with admitting a preference. Still, the community's known repertoire should reflect more than just the musical tastes of one individual.
- **Introduce new music intentionally.** The method to achieve a balanced repertoire by genre and language is to systematically introduce new songs. The way to accomplish this will vary by community. Some groups adapt and learn easily while others may be more settled and find a new repertoire uncomfortable and stressful. A useful first step for learning new repertoire is to establish a plan to find out what the scope of the existing repertoire is. Again, the work of the advisory team is crucial to knowing the right approach.
- **Teach new songs through the religious education curriculum.** Regardless of your catechetical methodology, you can use the structures and system in place to introduce new songs to various parts of the community. New songs that are scheduled for liturgical seasons can be used for prayer in religious education sessions as well as parish meetings, council sessions, and other gatherings. They can then be incorporated in services that involve the entire community.
- **Use the parish bulletin.** The weekly parish bulletin or online newsletter is one way to highlight the texts of songs and the reasons for their use. Now that we have many of these songs available on the Web, you can point people to active links where they can listen and also read additional composer notes about text, tune, and function. Include information about why songs have been selected for your community, and be sure to point out scriptural references and other composer notes when possible.

Best of luck!

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### Work Cited

Huebsch, William. *Dreams and Visions: Pastoral Planning for Lifelong Faith Formation*. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2007.

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