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"God pardon you and make a Paul of your Saul. I heartily forgive you."

-- [Swithin Wells](#): Venerable, English Martyr; his last words pardoning his persecutor, Topcliffe, just before he was hanged at Gray's Inn Lane, London, opposite his own home

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## SPECIAL OFFERS



## Feature Article

## Bad Poetry, Bad Theology: The Curse of Bad Liturgical Music (Part Two)

By Anthony Esolen

In the October issue, I made the case that the sort of performance music we often hear at parish Masses does not fit well with the liturgy. I am working from *Glory and Praise* (1997), a popular hymnal in the United States and Canada. What I say, however, can apply to other hymnals, too. My purpose is to do more than give the bad hymns a cuffing. Last time I examined why these hymns are bad *musically*—trite and ugly melodies that are difficult for a congregation to sing. This time I will examine why they are bad *poetically* and *theologically*: why they are bad food for the congregation and a lost opportunity for evangelization.

These bad hymns, as I've said, do not fit well with the liturgy. They do, however, fit astonishingly well with the narcissistic lyrics of the songs themselves. This is first of all because our lyricists often write their own poems, and these typically highlight the feelings and wonderfulness of the people who are supposed to be singing them. I grant that many of the lyrics are taken from the Psalms and the prophets. Certainly no one can object to the Scripture! But sometimes the lyricists adapt rather than cite Scripture, and that gives them leeway for mischief (see "Why Hymns Are at the Bottom of the List" page 15). "On Eagle's Wings" saps the refreshingly martial confidence of Isaiah 40:31, "they shall mount up with wings as eagles," leaving us instead the limp and Hallmark-like "[I shall] bear you on the breath of dawn."

Secondly, sometimes the choice of Scripture is odd, in terms of what is included and what is shut out. You can scan all of *Glory and Praise* and never find the frank admission of responsibility in Robert Bridges' lyric, "O Holy Jesus": "I it was denied thee / I crucified thee."

Finally, and most importantly, even when the lyricists limit themselves to Scripture, they fail to read the verses with the theological and doctrinal depth that Scripture displays and demands. Instead, leaning towards a primitivism that the authors of the New Testament would have found absurd, they take the Psalms or prophets simply as they are, without christological application. But if you are reading the Psalms and not thinking about the meaning of Christ's mission and passion and death, then you are not reading the Psalms with the heart of the Church.

### You Are Not "Child of the Universe"

Let us return to the myth of Narcissus. The lad staring at his lovely locks in the pool of water, careless of the maiden in love with him, is unnervingly effeminate. Failing to couple with himself, he should no doubt like to couple with one as like to himself as he can find. Granted, there are plenty of cases of hyper-masculine narcissism (samurai Japan comes to mind), idolizing muscle and ruthless will. But that's not the primary narcissism of our day, nor is it the narcissism of the performance music of our songs. Over and over, the lyricists write verses that a man cannot sing without blushing. (Not that many women are not blushing too.)

Sometimes he must sing the pleas of a weakling who still wants to see himself on stage at the center of everything—evincing a false humility, and casting God in the role of indulgent mother. In "You Are Child," he must adopt both roles at once:

You are child of the universe,  
you are no less than the trees and the stars.



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You are child of the Lord of Light,  
be still and know that I am God, you are child.

But he is *not* child of the universe, nor even a *child* of the universe. Note the mincing baby-talk, without precedent in Scripture (though it does mimic the offensive Injun-speak of old Hollywood movies: "He heap big Chief, you papoose"). Note too the weird parallelism between "universe" and "Lord of Light," as if the two were one. Scripture clearly condemns the fertility cults natural to the human imagination, cults that see the material world as an endlessly fecund mother, giving birth to all things. The more accurate thing to say is that we are dust, and that, by the grace of Christ, this same dust may become sons and heirs, sitting in judgment upon angels.

### Love Me Tender

Sometimes the congregation must woo a bisexual god, a Venus Hermaphroditus in Christian garb. This god does not *by being the Father* comprehend the human masculine and feminine. Instead it is ambiguous, ambivalent, still mired in the sexual cycle of birth and death. Such a god, because it is not transcendent, can help us to celebrate *ourselves*, as in Dan Schutte's "Lover of Us All":

I am maker of mountains; I am God of the earth.  
Like a mother in labor I bring all to birth . . .  
With sun and moon we dance for joy!  
We are your work of art, the glory of your hand, the children of your loving.

More of that baby twaddle, and more of that god who is *mater et materia*: "In the womb of my wisdom," she says, "I fashioned every star, I formed you in wonder, and loved you from afar!" Really? Was God then not only declaring us to be good, but gaping in wonder *upon us*? And what can loving from "afar" mean to God? Or is she co-temporal with the universe, a pagan mother-god wondering at the big boys and girls we will grow up to become?

But the lyricists sometimes tire of the great Mother. Then it is the Boyfriend Jesus they want, the carpenter's son who has shoulders broad enough to keep the toughs away, but who is also tender enough to make a girl feel really appreciated:

Here I am, standing right beside you.  
Here I am; do not be afraid.  
Here I am, waiting like a lover.  
I am here, here I am . . .  
I am here in every warm embrace.  
I am here with tenderness and mercy . . .  
I am here when pardoning your brother.  
Here I am, I am here. ("Here I Am")

The dangling gerund "pardoning" gives the game away. Who is pardoning your brother? It is both God and "you"—or either, or does it make a grammatical or theological difference? I am, you are . . . what's a little pronoun and a copula, between lovers?

This is *not* the bridal imagery of God and Israel used in the Song of Songs and Hosea, and *not* the extension of that imagery to refer to Christ as Bridegroom of the Church. It is the language of ancient mystery cult, of the moon goddess Diana gazing upon the sleek limbs of the lad Endymion sleeping on the hillside. But that shift reflects the strange singing of God's part by the congregation, and the attribution of man's words to God: "Here I am," said Samuel to the Lord, but "Here I am," says the Lord to the timid beloved, like a Boy Scout of the pagans, always prepared.

Narcissism, then, explains the beardless puerility of so many of the lyrics. Can anyone imagine a group of grown men who had any choice in the matter singing, or even making sense of, this coquettish address to almighty God?

Laughter, joy and presence:  
The only gifts you are!  
Have you time?  
I'd like to be with you. ("All I Ask of You")

God is the giver of *all good things*, not only laughter (although, in the Psalms, God laughs to deride the pretensions of men), joy, and the ungrammatical "presence." The lyricist is apparently imagining a tryst with the Lord, with all the heady giggling of being together—if the Lord can squeeze him in.

### How Great I AM

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The same narcissism, we have seen, also explains the shocking arrogation of God's words and his point of view to oneself. It characterizes some 45 of the songs in *Glory and Praise*. Perhaps the best known of such songs, and among the earliest, is "I Am the Bread of Life." The text of this otherwise innocuous show-tune is simply the words of Christ in the Gospel of John:

And I shall raise him up, and I shall raise him up, and I shall raise him up on the last day.

But it's a short step from singing "I am the bread of life" *in persona Christi*, to singing it *in persona propria*. Many of the eucharistic songs cheerfully take that step. They no longer celebrate Christ, who comes to us sinners as sustenance for our souls; they celebrate ourselves, who become sustenance to others. We hug ourselves as givers of the Eucharist, not receivers:

I myself am the bread of life.  
You and I are the bread of life,  
taken and blessed, broken and shared by Christ  
that the world might live. ("Bread of Life")

To be your bread now, be your wine now, Lord,  
come change us to be a sign of your love.  
Blest and broken, poured and flowing,  
gift that you gave us, to be your body once again. ("To Be Your Bread")

As we remember, we are becoming,  
what we have broken, we hope to be. ("As We Remember")

Allow me to translate. "O Lord, this publican here is not worthy to receive me, but only say the word and his soul shall be healed."

Eventually we forget that our union is possible only in Christ, and instead we celebrate our union, willed by ourselves, that happens to be a union *about* Christ, sort of. Again, it's hard to tell, when we slur the distinction between sinner and Savior:

Come to me, come to us, pilgrim or stranger,  
looking for change, or challenge, or light.  
We are the people whose calling is care,  
bearers of mercy, nourished in prayer.

This ungrammatical string of infantile gabble, arrogantly titled not "Come to Me" but "Come to Us," shows us Narcissus at the inevitable end of his tale. He falls into the pool. We have replaced God; we are God. Anyone looking for "challenge"—more of that pidgin Sioux—can come to us mercy-bearers. Who's praying to whom, and nourishing whom?

## No Wretches Allowed

I know of no ancient hymn wherein the congregation applaud their goodness, even if acknowledged as a gift of God's grace. Unseemly it is, and unwise: Man needs no encouragement that way. Yet our hymns do this all the time. So likewise they dwell upon our feelings, or rather our sentiments. Narcissus may weep and sniffle, but his feelings are as shallow as the water whereupon he gazes. The psalmist finds words for every human longing, for exuberance, for quiet confidence, for weeping and rage, and the grief that walks nigh unto despair: "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5). But the last thing that Narcissus wants is to behold any blot upon his beauty. So, although the former slave trader John Newton, from the depths of his remorse and gratitude, writes:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,  
that saved a wretch like me!

But "wretches" is too hard a saying to tolerate in this limp hymnal, so they rewrite it. No matter what you think of the appropriateness of "Amazing Grace" for the liturgy, it can't be denied that its bowdlerization is embarrassing:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,  
that saved and set me free!

Genuine feelings are strong, and in the Psalms are often tersely, startlingly expressed:

- My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever (73:26);
- As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, my God (42:1);
- Be merciful unto me, O God, for man would swallow me up (56:1).

But sentiments—impostors of feeling—make up for their flimsiness by tricking themselves out in frills. See what happens to the majesty of the 23rd Psalm:

Lord, you are my shepherd, you are my friend.  
I want to follow you always, just to follow my friend.  
("Because the Lord Is My Shepherd")

Or note the greeting card imagery, and redundancy, of "Jesus, My Confidence":

You are no faraway God,  
distant, aloof and uncaring.  
You enter our hearts like the dawn, silently.  
Darkness gives way to you.

Now complete the circle, by attributing our shallow sentiments to God as he looks upon us:

The dreams we share today, O Lord,  
are only a shadow of your dreams for us. ("Only a Shadow")

Let's be clear here. God does not "dream." He ordains, and we follow his will—or resist it to our destruction. But even this sweet taming of God, making him a wise and pleasant pet, seems sane and healthy compared with the brazenness of people who dance in triumph when they have won exactly nothing:

Summoned by the God who made us,  
rich in our diversity,  
gathered in the name of Jesus,  
richer still in unity,  
Let us bring the gifts that differ,  
and in splendid, varied [sic] ways,  
sing a new Church into being,  
one in faith and love and praise. ("Sing a New Church")

Here the worshipers are like the mythological Amphion at his lyre, singing to raise the walls of Thebes from the earth.

Again, I'm not saying that the typical singers in our churches intend such nonsense! But the nonsense has to seep in, eventually. And note what it replaces: Jesus instructs us to say, when our work is done, that we have been worthless and unprofitable servants. Do any contemporary show tunes meditate upon *that* saying? It is instructive to note by contrast the last verse of "The Church's One Foundation," which in noble yet simple language gives us the true source and the end of our love:

Yet she on earth hath union  
With God, the Three in One,  
And mystic sweet communion  
With those whose rest is won:  
O happy ones and holy!  
Lord, give us grace that we,  
Like them, the meek and lowly,  
On high may dwell with thee.

### ***Hoc Signo Vinces***

Is there a single mark of the beast, a number on the forehead of a hymn? Any way to tell from the first sip that the cup is lethal? I don't know, but there is a sign—and the only sign—that marks out a song as certainly one of the Lord's. It is the one sign that might jolt Narcissus from his gazing. It is a stumbling stone to the Greeks, a scandal to the Jews, and a splash of cold clear reality to us. That sign is the cross.

The old hymns were written in the shadow of the cross *and* in the light of Easter morning. You cannot have one without the other:

In the cross of Christ I glory,  
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;  
All the light of sacred story  
Gathers round its head sublime. ("In the Cross of Christ I Glory")

Jesus, keep me near the cross,  
There a precious fountain  
Free to all, a healing stream,  
Flows from Calvary's mountain. ("Near the Cross")

Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!

E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me. ("Nearer, My God, to Thee")

Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes;  
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies:  
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee:  
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me. ("Abide With Me")

So engrained is this habit that even when the composers are not writing explicitly about the cross, they still dwell upon that great intersection of time and eternity. Hence the mighty Advent hymn "Lo, He Comes," linking the Nativity with the Passion and the Second Coming and Final Judgment:

Every eye shall then behold him  
Robed in glorious majesty;  
Those who set at naught and sold him,  
Pierced, and nailed him to the tree,  
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply wailing,  
Shall the true Messiah see.

The Psalms, too, look forward to Christ and his redemptive suffering. The old lyricists understood that. Their poetry might be simple, their adaptations of the Psalms slight, hardly noticeable, but still they delivered lessons in how to read the word of God. So in Henry Baker's famous poetic paraphrase of the 23rd Psalm we are reminded that in the sign of the cross alone shall we conquer:

Where streams of living waters flow  
My ransomed soul he leadeth,  
And where the verdant pastures grow,  
With food celestial feedeth. ("The King of Love My Shepherd Is")

Here *ransomed* and *food celestial* are deft additions to the psalm, with Baker justly interpreting the verses in the light of Christ. The soul is ransomed by Christ's Passion and Resurrection, and the celestial food is the Eucharist, the broken body of Christ, now raised to glory.

If we prefer an ancient Catholic hymn, we can go to the eucharistic poem of Thomas Aquinas, *Adoro Te*. Here follows my translation of one of the verses:

Godhood alone was hidden on the cross,  
But here humanity is hidden too.  
Believing and confessing both, I seek  
What the repenting thief then sought from you.

No self-celebration from the Angelic Doctor. No uppity "We are Companions on the Journey," no advertisement of ourselves as "a fam'ly of believers, disciples of the Lord" ("One Spirit, One Church"). You are preparing to receive the Eucharist? Prepare to stand at the foot of the cross, and know that every sin you have ever committed, and even those rags you are pleased to call your virtues, have nailed your Lord to the tree. Narcissus may dance in imagination around his reflection. Brother Thomas, who knows better, longs for the grace to be at least as worthy as the thief crucified at the side of Jesus, who in the last moments of his life awoke to the truth.

## **We Croon Past the Graveyard**

No cross, no Christ; no victory over death. Let Narcissus and Narcissa sing all they want; it's crooning past the graveyard. Only by flinging ourselves away into the death and resurrection of Christ do we become ourselves. Nor do we focus on ourselves, but on our Captain and on those great souls who have gone before us:

O blest communion, fellowship divine!  
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine,  
Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine. ("For All the Saints")

For narcissism kills: The boy feeds upon a vain image of himself and finally becomes that vain image, a flower drooping its head at the margin of a puddle. The narcissism of our hymns is a slow but deadly poison, coated with a little sickly sweetness, compounded into pills with some bleached and powdered Scripture.

I hate it, because I hate its falsehood. I hate its sapping of the vigor of a Christian soul. I hate its turn away from Christ and towards myself and princes like me, in whom it is stupid and vain to trust. I hate it as I hate death. Bring me instead the cross, strap it to my shoulder if I won't take it, and tell me again the old, old story of the life and death of Christ. Let me praise the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation. Let me stand on that green hill far away, where the dear Lord was crucified. Let me feel that there is power in the blood. Thine is the glory, risen, conquering Son! And I who need you every hour, I beg the grace to march onward under the banner of your cross, till all the world adore your sacred Name. May my crowning joy be to praise you evermore:

Oh, that with yonder sacred throng

We at his feet may fall,  
To join the everlasting song  
And crown him Lord of all!  
To join the everlasting song  
And crown him Lord of all!

---

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