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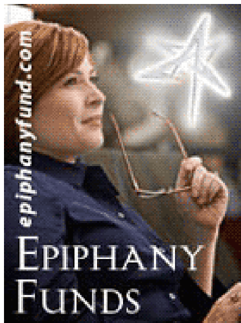

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CATHOLIC QUOTES

"If you should acknowledge and love Christ you would give up not only all the treasures of this life, but even the glory of your crown itself to win eternal life."

-- Saints Crispin and Crispinian, to Emperor Maximianus after he had used threats and bribes in an attempt to persuade them to renounce their faith; their martyrdom gained them heaven; Maximianus, after losing his crown, killed himself in despair.

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Pop Goes the Mass

The Curse of Bad Liturgical Music (Part One)

By Anthony Esolen

A few years ago we followed our pastor to his new assignment at an old Italian parish. There, on his inaugural Sunday, he followed Mass with Exposition and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. A lover of traditional hymnody, and blessed with an excellent tenor voice, Father led the congregation in singing one of the most theologically profound and humanly moving hymns ever written, *Pange Lingua* by Thomas Aquinas. I say he led the congregation, but he, the organist, and my family were the only ones singing. It was clear to me that these Catholics, most of whom had attended that church all their lives, had not heard the *Pange Lingua* in decades, and perhaps not the rite of Benediction, either. Some of the younger people might never have heard them at all.

They knelt, stunned; they really seemed impressed by the beauty of it. But what was most unusual about that moment was that my wife, Debra, was singing. She is not Catholic, but she had heard the hymn many times before, at our former parish. From it, from other great eucharistic hymns, and from Father's frank preaching she had learned a deeper appreciation of the mystery of Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist. Such hymns have brought good news to her. That's what sacred music does. Yet most Catholics are deprived of it in their parish life.

Whenever I complain about the vanity of our contemporary church music, someone replies that it's only a matter of taste, or that whatever uplifts the hearts of the congregation must be good. But is that so? Though beauty is experienced subjectively, it does exist objectively—whatever a snob or a philistine may say. And though hearts may be "uplifted," shouldn't we be asking: uplifted where? Uplifted in whom? Uplifted for what purpose? Prayer is sometimes exciting, but it doesn't follow that all excitations of the nerves, even when set to lyrics with "God" in them, are fit for liturgical prayer.

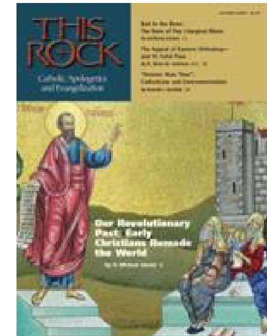
In this two-part article, I shall examine *Glory and Praise* (1997), a popular hymnal in the United States and Canada. What I say, however, can apply to other hymnals, too. My purpose is to do more than give the bad hymns a cuffing. I wish to examine why—musically, poetically, and theologically—they are bad food for the congregation and a lost opportunity for evangelization.

The Myth of "Folk" Music

Let me expose one fraud right away. Our new hymns are not folk music, although they are promoted and defended as such. It is not a question of "the people's music" versus elitist sensibilities. So we can set aside the question of the appropriateness of folk music for the liturgy, because what we are hearing is not folk music at all.

Granted, a few of the earlier songs, written when the rhythms of protest music still hovered in the air, do have an American folk style: "They'll Know We Are Christians," with its straightforward melody and accentuated repetitions, is one. But in general the music has blithely departed from folk tradition.

You don't have to be a musicologist to see—or hear—that this is so. Folk music arises from folk traditions and experience: Think of a Saxon bard strumming the lyre and recounting the bold deeds of Beowulf. Seldom is it "composed" by a solitary man at his piano or desk. Whether or not it is



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eventually written down, because it must be sung or played by and among many people (who will be drunk at a wedding, pounding the floor of a barn, or running after children), and because it has to be passed down through the generations, folk music possesses certain reliable features:

- The melodies are constructed from simple and recurring motifs. These give a particular folk music its signature or style. Consider the conclusion of a Gaelic air with three or four notes on the same pitch (*Slane*, which we know as "Be Thou My Vision"); or the many and long legato phrases, or lilting series of notes gently bound one to another, in the typical French carol (*Picardy*, which we know as "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence").
- The melodies are not necessarily simple (the Welsh tune *Ash Grove* is a spring of spilling eighth notes, up and down the scale), but they are memorable. That doesn't mean they are always good. Many memorable tunes are not: the draggy *Lourdes Hymn* (which we know as the venerable "Immaculate Mary"), at several points almost compels a chorus of slurred voices, including, alas, on the name "Maria." But a good folk song must be memorable, because otherwise it would not last to the next barn-raising. Its melody must be recognizable and internally coherent, with understandable deviations from the initial motif and understandable returns. If there's a refrain, it cannot overwhelm the verse.
- The song must be singable by nearly everyone. Men and women must sing it, basses and sopranos, old and young, people with smooth voices and people with gravel in their throats, people with perfect pitch and people whose sense of melody is limited to "up" and "down." That limits the range of the notes; more important, it limits what you can do with the notes. You cannot start high and leave them hanging there. Treble C is about the highest note you can hammer at the beginning of a song without losing the men (who would be singing middle C even at that, one octave below). For example, "Now Thank We All Our God" begins with B flat, moves up to treble C, and then comes back down, comfortably. High notes, too, had better be long rather than short, since it takes a split second to stretch the voice and find the D in the attic.
- If you want poor or diffident singers to sing, you cannot pepper the melody with unnatural intervals. You can't leap over a nine-note chasm, as in the refrain of "Dwelling Place." You can't make everybody go down an eight-note slide, as does the opening of the ubiquitous "On Eagle's Wings." If you want people with an uncertain sense of meter to sing, you cannot strew your song with the long lazy irregular ties (held notes) that jumble up an astonishing number of our "folk" hymns: ties of 2 1/4 beats in "Light of Christ," 3 1/2 beats in "Hail Mary: Gentle Woman," 4 3/4 beats in "Behold the Lamb of God." You surely cannot expect them to go from eighth-note pairs to a twelfth-note triplet with two flats, blues style ("The Lord is Near").
- The lyrics must assist the melody, and vice versa. Oral poetry uses strongly marked mnemonic devices: In English religious lyric, the most striking of these are simple rhythm and rhyme. Hence we have our well-known ballad meter, with alternating lines of eight and six beats, as in "Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee":

  Be known to us in breaking bread,
  But do not then depart:
  Savior, abide with us, and spread
  Thy table in our heart.

- The lines must "scan," as students of poetry say. The meter, or rhythmic plan, must be recognizable, with certain well-known and minor variations allowed; "power," for instance, will usually count as one syllable, though sometimes as two. Free verse (that is, verse without any meter at all) may make some fair poetry, but only a master can do without meter and write what the ear can remember. Our lyricists are not masters. Aside from the mixed metaphor and the redundancy, note the unraveling of a typical verse from "Table of Plenty":

  My bread will ever sustain you
  through days of sorrow and woe.
  My wine will flow like a sea of gladness to flood the depths of your soul.

  How far from the simple and sublime folk poetry of Isaac Watts:

  Come, let us join our cheerful songs
  With angels round the throne;
  Ten thousand thousand are their tongues,
  But all their joys are one.

A large percentage of the songs in *Glory and Praise* are composed by a small group of self-styled liturgical composers who were raised in the same generation and possess the typical left-ish university education. They are not deeply knowledgeable in the traditions of European folk music, and apparently haven't given much thought to what it might mean for American congregations to sing to the Lord. Why should we have expected that they would produce genuine folk hymns?

Well, they didn't. Taken as a group, their songs violate all of the prescriptions above. Indeed, it is hard to find

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one of the new tunes that does not violate at least two or three of them (those by the composer Timothy Dudley-Smith are exceptions). Here are three quick filters:

1. Set aside all songs that lack consistent meter or rhyme (e.g., "One Lord," "You Have Put on Christ," "As We Remember"). Most of the songs fall here.
2. From the rest, toss away all songs with changes in the time signature, with weird interruptive rests, or with ties that only a professional can understand on sight ("Companions on the Journey"; "Take, Lord, Receive"; "Earthen Vessels"). Very few songs survive the second filter.
3. Then remove all songs in which the melodies of the verses differ from one to the next—an astonishingly self-indulgent habit of our "composers," defying the memory ("People of Peace," "Without You," "On Eagle's Wings").

My count from *Glory and Praise* suggests that about two dozen songs written after 1960 are left standing. Only a few of these ("Whatsoever You Do") are recognizably "folk." The rest are attempts to write in a "traditional" style, often for a feast such as Christmas, Easter, or Pentecost. Alas, these songs, wherein the lyricists are most glaringly thrown back upon their own poetic and theological resources, are among the worst in the hymnal, both banal and politically tendentious ("Sing a New Church").

Clap! It's a Performance

If they're not folk songs, and they're not traditional hymns, what are they? Look to the quirks. They are performances, more akin to a lollygagging aria in an opera (a very bad opera) than to the ordering rhythms of *Pange Lingua*. A glance at the scores shows that the composers are not thinking of a coherent piece of music that can be sung by many people together. Rather, they compose the music by singing it alone to the keyboard or, more probably, the guitar, and then they transcribe what they have sung, with all the idiosyncratic lilts, shifts in meter, pauses, sultry dragging, and strange intervals. When you see the written music, you are not looking at what anybody can sing, but at what somebody in particular has sung.

The difference is critical. In an operatic aria, if the ear cannot predict where the melody is going, or when it is going to pause, or how long a hold should be, or what the next verse is going to sound like, that may be quite all right. A professional is singing it, lending it coherence by adapting it to the scene he is acting out on stage. But when that is the case with a hymn, you are left with no hymn at all. The congregation must depend upon the performance of a cantor or a choir to lead them.

It doesn't help at all if the songs are accompanied by guitar and not organ. The organ plays an audible melody line; the guitarist, unless he is Segovia, picks a chord. The organ notes are full of complex overtones, dominants and subdominants, octaves above and below; the strings of the guitar chord are all too often muddled in the caverns of a church. If the cantor and choir are miked up, their voices (especially if the cantor is a soprano) will crowd out other possibilities from the ear. What should be the full-hearted song of a congregation in praise of God becomes an awkward attempt, by a few people here and there, to follow the performance. That's why the choir must be seen as well as heard: How else can you follow the unpredictable? Hence the placement of choirs near the sanctuary, overpowering in their numbers and their sense of importance the solitary priest at the altar.

It becomes the music of self-advertisement for the choristers and cantors. Now I am not suggesting that all choristers and cantors intend to advertise themselves. Many of them only want to assist their fellow parishioners in their worship of the Lord. But that doesn't alter the nature of what they are being asked to perform. If you take a job at a hotel, you wear what the hotel tells you to wear, so a shy porter may be blushing behind a loud uniform. But his shyness doesn't tone down the blare of those Bermuda shorts. A bridesmaid may, against her native modesty, wear the revealing item the bride has assigned her to wear. But all her good intentions will not add one centimeter to the hem. Worse still, she may eventually grow comfortable with such dress.

Narcissus Arises

The Church has more than once had to protect the Mass from degenerating into an aesthetic spectacle. I don't claim that all music written for worship before 1960 was good or appropriate for the liturgy. If you look at an old revivalist hymnal you will find many a catchy melody that you wish you could throw back again. But there's a difference.

Ours, said Christopher Lasch in his book by that name, is a Culture of Narcissism. He didn't mean that we indulge our vanity in dress and makeup. He meant that we had elevated the self to the standard by which all questions of good and evil were decided—a self turned inward, analyzing its feelings, picking its scabs, whining about its needs, fearing the frankness of open conflict, suspicious of the claims of reason, severed from tradition, relieving the emptiness of modernity by imagining itself as the central character in a great psychodrama. It is an arrested infantilism. Our economy depends upon it, and our major cultural institutions (most obviously the schools, but also the arts, the family, and the churches) have followed tamely, while preening themselves for daring to advance the standards of "progress."

What are the symptoms of a culture of narcissism? The ancient myth can reveal a few: The lad Narcissus, who fell in love with his image in the pool, was callow and selfish, oblivious to the love of the nymph Echo who pined away for him. The narcissist, then, has a severely constricted range of observation, memory, and imaginative affection.

By this criterion, the Renaissance (to which our own age of Church "renewal" is sometimes incautiously compared) is not narcissistic. It is true that Donatello wanted to outdo the ancient Greek sculptors. But he revered them. He learned all he could about them. He emulated their techniques. He went to Rome and to other sites of ancient ruins to dig up copies of their work. That reverence for greatness in someone else, particularly in someone long past, and the sense that the predecessor exerts a claim upon one's allegiance, is deeply humble, even when united with a desire for preeminence.

But the narcissist of our day cultivates amnesia. He does not want to remember, he does not want to hear. What occurred before he was born is obsolete. Its sole uses are to satisfy an occasional taste for the antique, and to confirm the superiority of the current. Suspicious of tradition, scoffing and yet cowed by the greatness of his forebears, he pretends to reinvent cultural wheels; he has a weakness for primitivism (e.g., "Kumbaya"). Thus he is always talking about "renewing" things whose ancient state he knows little about. Yet in cutting himself off from tradition, he prevents himself from growing up. Instead of being childlike yet mature, he is childish, yet swaggers like a god.

Consider that many of the great chorales of Bach were adaptations of melodies he culled from earlier composers, such as Hans Leo Hassler and Johann Crueger. Then he would put his genius to work. He arranged melodic themes that were simplicity itself, easily sung. Then he harmonized them with parts of delicate complexity yet perfect fitness. Consider the absolute predictability of the melody in the last measures of "O Sacred Head Surrounded," harmonized with strange, haunting chords and discords clear across the scale, all ending exactly where they should end—on the simple tonic chord. Were it not for his humble study of his predecessors, and his rigorous subjection of his musical art to the requirements of the liturgy, he could not have written it.

Greatness from Outside Himself

As an artist at least (and probably as a man, too) Bach was no narcissist. Neither was Ralph Vaughan Williams, who used not just existing melodies but also existing lyrics. His genius was in arranging and harmonizing them. He combed England for folk melodies, doing the world a great service by saving many that otherwise might have been lost. He harmonized them for lyrics provided long before by Watts or the Wesleys or anyone else who knew Scripture and could turn a phrase. The results are among the finest hymns for English worship. My favorite may be the powerful D-minor *King's Lynn*, the setting for Chesterton's poem "O God of Earth and Altar." Vaughan Williams was ten times the composer that any of our liturgical impostors are, yet he spent most of his time listening for greatness that came from outside him.

Or maybe he was great because he listened. But our modern composers show little reverence for the tradition of their art. One could learn a lot from the noble simplicity of chant—indeed, that is exactly what the Church prescribes (see "The Church Has Spoken," page 14)—but chant allows for no showboating, no obvious performance. Not once that I know of has a single contemporary hymn writer done what Vaughan Williams commonly did: unite a new arrangement of an old and possibly perishing melody with an old and venerable poem.

If they were geniuses of the first rank, they might, even so self-hindered, produce a couple of excellent pieces now and then. But the narcissist underestimates the value of rigorous training and patient learning. He does not understand how deeply indebted the true geniuses are to the artists they painstakingly follow, as Beethoven was indebted to Mozart, Virgil to Homer, Dante to Virgil, and Milton to all three. The narcissist trades on his own modest stock of talent, but he will not admit that it is modest. The result is not originality but cheap tricks. Some of the flourishes of our bad hymns echo the television commercial—for instance, the furniture-polish ad to which we owe the music to "make you to shi-ine like the sun" in "On Eagle's Wings." Others sound like an arm-flinging finale to an off-Broadway musical. I think of the bathetic windup at the end of "Let There Be Peace on Earth." "And let it beginnn, with ME," sings St. Francis of La Mancha.

But enough with the bad music. In the next issue, I'll show how it is the perfect music for the bad theology of the lyrics.

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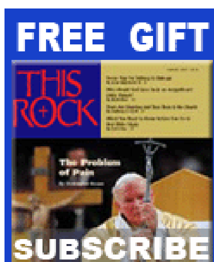

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