

The Spiritual Life and Music Ministry: The Glue That Holds It All Together

BY DANIEL GIRARDOT

Pastoral musicians are called to be leaders, planners, coordinators, skilled musicians, and people of faith and prayer. At times we are asked to do things that we think are impossible or, at least, unlikely. When I was a young music minister, in the midst of an animated conversation about spirituality and prayer, I had a “that’s impossible” (or, at least, unlikely) moment. A spiritual companion asked if I would consider going on a silent retreat. The innocent request struck fear in the heart of this extrovert. I immediately wondered if it was my personality or our conversation that inspired this question. My concern about being silent for several days eventually gave way, under God’s nudging, to making a commitment to go on this retreat. With friends and colleagues interceding in prayer on my behalf, the experience began a wonderful chapter in my spiritual development. I discovered a new inner world of prayer and spirituality. God’s voice, through the urging of this friend, called me to a deeper relationship. Until I took the leap and plunged into the silence of that retreat, I had no idea how much I longed for the experience of resting in God’s loving embrace.

As busy pastoral musicians, we yearn for a spiritual center in our lives, a spiritual focus for the challenges and blessings of a life in ministry. Music ministers in every kind of pastoral setting know and believe that the spiritual core of our life is Jesus Christ’s abiding love for us. Though we believe this, some of us find it hard to live in a way that deepens and enriches that core belief; some of us doubt that we can find a spiritual renewal that will bring joy and balance into our life and ministry. But with inspiration and guidance, we can put our relationship with Christ at the top of our “to do” list as we try to balance the details of ministry that demand our attention.

With some work and trust, we can find intimacy with God in the midst of the challenges of ministry and everyday life, we can discover prayer that will help us find that intimacy, and we can develop activities and attitudes that will bring us closer to God and closer to our spiritual family in music ministry. Some people can find these attitudes and tools in their own hearts and through their own effort (guided by the Spirit, of course), but most of us need help. We at least need ideas, processes, and examples to examine so that we can discover spiritual ideas that truly work, planted by God, waiting to be unveiled. When we find these tools and release these spiritual gifts, an exciting conversion and renewal of our hearts takes place. This renewal of heart can transform our spiritual lives and revitalize our ministry as pastoral musicians.

Some years ago, at a national meeting of diocesan liturgy directors, a one-act play spoofed parish liturgical ministers preparing for Sunday worship.¹ Sadly enough, the parody of last minute changes, missing volunteers, sick cantors, and unexpected challenges in ministry struck a familiar chord for the appreciative audience. The opening chorus in one scene began with all the ministers singing: “Busy, busy, busy, we’re all so very busy!” When we stopped laughing, many of us wondered: Is this what we do to ourselves? The parody gave us pause and made many of us reflect on the busyness of our own lives and ministries. It was a reminder that many people involved in pastoral liturgy—not least among them, pastoral musicians—have lives filled with details and demands that often distract from personal and communal prayer and Sabbath rest. What is the “glue” that joins and holds all the parts of our life together and allows us to trust enough to let go?



The Glue: Intimacy with God

The search for this “glue” is a continuing process for each of us. The whole history of Christian spirituality (and our Jewish foundations as well) tells us that the glue that holds us together is an active and effective spiritual life of prayer, activity, and Sabbath rest. It molds and holds together our emotional, personal, professional, and sacral life—every aspect of our daily living. The U.S. Catholic bishops’ document *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* gives pastoral musicians and other lay ecclesial ministers an understanding of what a spiritual formation for ministry can provide: “Spiritual formation aims to arouse and animate true hunger for holiness, desire for union with the Father through Christ in the Spirit, daily growing in love of God and neighbor in life and ministry, and the practices of prayer and spirituality that foster these attitudes and dispositions.”² Pastoral musicians need spiritual touchstones that will provide integration and balance as we face everyday challenges with all their imperfections, gifts, and enriching relationships. We long for and need a life dependent on God’s love. Whether our lives are harried or hurried, calm or filled with crisis, the spiritual touchstones we seek will give us God’s healing love and grace.

Spiritual Touchstones

It may be hard to find the spiritual touchstones that we need, especially if we’re looking for them in what Joseph Tetlow calls a “desert of busyness.”³ Like the children of Israel wandering in the desert, we need to find daily manna and water for refreshment. The “manna” we seek is intimacy with God, which feeds our hunger and quenches our thirst for meaning and love. We find this spiritual food when we spend time exploring intimacy with God. Through experiences that help us discover that intimacy, we



recognize the wonder of spiritual surprise and joy. When we risk new experiences (like a young pastoral musician choosing to attend a silent retreat), God’s surprises can occur when we least expect them. In my case, the fear of silence and contemplative prayer on a quiet retreat was displaced by the gentle touch of God’s love in the quiet places of my heart.

When we “stay awake, keep watch, and make ourselves ready,” the flame of the Spirit can create powerful and poignant

surprises that enlighten life’s shadows! The Spirit’s fire, burning in our heart, may be as wild and unpredictable as the Celtic depiction of the Holy Spirit as a wild goose. If our lives seem static and somewhat normal, this “wild goose” of the Spirit may break in and turn things upside down, leading to a new way of life. If you think your life is a mess, filled with clashing needs and expectations, that same “wild goose” may create peace, tranquility, and a new “normality”! God’s surprises come in big packages as well as in small whispers. If we are to see them and respond to them, they require our awareness and readiness—they require expectation. This awareness and expectation are created when we make time and space for God’s presence and relationship. Surprising actions and events may seem insignificant at first, but they grow in meaning, and we grow in understanding when we reflect on them in prayer and are open to the significance of their spiritual power.

God uses transformative moments to teach us about letting go of the outcomes in ministry. What might appear to be a difficult situation or an obstacle in our lives may also be a moment for the inbreaking of the Holy Spirit, especially if our hearts and our humor are open to that. God breaks into our lives in intimate ways when we least expect it. When we make emotional and spiritual space in our lives, a deeper



relationship with God develops and grows. It is in that spiritual space that we begin to recognize the wonders of our God.

Our Spiritual Toolkit

Creating emotional and spiritual space for experiences of intimacy with God is the first step toward applying the “glue” of spiritual growth and formation to our lives. A second step toward efficacious prayer is assembling a spiritual “toolkit” of Scripture and prayer methods drawn from the Church’s spiritual traditions. Pastoral musicians begin to assemble this kit by learning the primary and most fundamental process available: praying the liturgy. We pray in community with the gathered Body of Christ and as individuals when we use the prayers of the liturgy for meditation and reflection. Since our communal prayer at the Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith, let us use these texts in our personal prayer as well. The petitions of the penitential act, the affirmative profession of faith, the transformative Eucharistic Prayer, and the “collect” prayers are powerful and timeless. Meditation and reflection on them will unlock God’s intimate relationship with us through Christ’s saving act of redeeming sacrifice and offering. This mediation may lead us to a transcendent experience of God’s action in our lives as well as a renewed awareness of these texts when we pray them in the community of faith.



A second form of liturgical prayer is the Church’s daily liturgy of the hours, built around the two “hinges” of morning prayer and evening prayer. This prayer of the Church should be the foundation of all Christian daily prayer. Praying the psalms, hymns, and canticles of morning and evening prayer is like spiritual breakfast and dinner, nourishing our souls every day. Praying this divine office fills our lives and daily work with the images and inspiration of Scripture, especially through the psalms and canticles. These images and phrases quickly become our “language” for interpreting everyday life.

Meditation, Contemplation, and Journaling

Other prayer methods that belong in our spiritual toolkit include meditation, contemplation, and journaling with Gospel stories. Meditation slows down our thoughts, awakens imagination as a spiritual tool, and leads to prayer, especially to the “silent” prayer of contemplation. Walking the journey of faith with Jesus through meditation and prayer brings understanding, new meaning, and transformation in our spiritual lives. Since the Gospel is at the heart of our faith, when we meditate on the life of Jesus, we begin to understand the radical nature of his message and the call to live in a completely new way. Journaling—recording thoughts and images from our meditation and our conversation with God by writing our reflections after meditation on the Word and prayer—is an important adjunct to prayer. We discover new insights as we journal. Journaling inspires recorded thoughts, poems, and meditations that we can return to for deeper meditation. Journal writing that includes reflection on everyday circumstances through the lens of Scripture can often result in “Aha” moments that reorient and redirect our decisions and responses with refreshing new insight.

One of the best-known forms of meditation is that outlined by St. Ignatius Loyola in the *Spiritual Exercises*.⁴ Pastoral musicians can look especially to the psalms and the biblical canticles as a rich resource for meditation and contemplative prayer. As psalmists, we learn from praying and singing Psalm

139 that God truly knows us, loves us, and is already more intimately united to us than we can imagine: “Lord, you have probed me and you know me . . . You know when I sit and when I stand. You formed my inmost being: you knit me in my mother’s womb. . . . My very self you knew.” In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius teaches us to experience how much God loves us by contemplating and reflecting on this psalm.⁵ Use his method of contemplation and prayer to reflect on God’s love for you in this way:

Find a quiet place to pray and set aside some time without interruption. Pray Psalm 139 aloud to yourself. Think about words or phrases that stay with you and write down what these express and mean to you and your life experience. Ask God for a loving heart and insight about these things. Thank God for your life, your gifts and weaknesses and all the things that God created in you. Remember that God continues “creating” you and has hopes and dreams for you. Reflect on and write about all these qualities that God gave you. Recite psalm 139 again. Praise God for your gifts and thank God for your life.⁶

Close your time of meditation with a conversation with God that is, in fact, prayer. Consider using a musical meditation with favorite musical texts: “I heard the voice of Jesus say, come unto me and rest. . . . I love you and you are mine Don’t be afraid, my love is stronger than your fear Be not afraid, I go before you always.” Allow the words from familiar hymns or songs to weave through your mind and heart or make up a new song as you finish your time of prayer. This type of prayer and contemplation can be used with a variety of sacred texts to create a space for God’s love and intimacy to grow in our spirits.

Don’t be worried if your time of prayer leads to silence. This is a deep form of prayer called contemplation—simply being in the presence of God, letting God’s presence fill you. There’s a famous story about an old villager who used to go every day into the village church. The parish priest, curious to know what he did, followed him one day and watched him go and stand, quite silently, before the great crucifix for twenty minutes and then leave. When the priest asked what prayers he prayed, the old man replied simply: “I looks at him, and he looks at me.”

Letting Go

Spending time with God in prayer gives us an awareness of God’s presence that can transform our perspective on the challenges and trials of life, but God can only transform those challenges and concerns into surprises and blessings when we turn our hearts to the “open” setting on our “everyday life meter.” Habits of prayer and spiritual awareness help us to move to this openness and to remain open.

Early in my ministry, when I was a young director of music ministries, I was worried and unsure how to balance good parenting with effective pastoral music ministry. During one particularly crowded Sunday morning liturgy, the nursery was closed and my three-year-old son and six-month-old daughter sat with my wife and me while we led the music. As we sat down for the first reading, my wife left for the back of church to comfort the baby. After the first reading I stood, revered the altar, approached the ambo, opened the book, and prepared to sing the psalm. I felt a tug on my sleeve. “Daddy! . . . Daddy!” I looked down and saw my son next to me with imploring eyes and a look on his face that said: “Where did you go? I want to come too!” My worries about distracting the assembly overrode the urge to give him fatherly discipline. I instinctively lifted him up, just in time to intone the refrain of the psalm. Fascinated by the people, the singing, and the gestures, he was caught up in the moment and started to sing along with me. By the end of the psalm he began to mimic my gestures to invite the assembly’s song. The pastoral musician and parent in me felt dismayed and concerned about distracting the people’s prayer, so I was surprised to see the eyes of the gathered faithful light up with unexpected joy and hear their fervent singing!

Despite my concerns and worries, something special happened that day. In the face of my self-consciousness and concern, the positive response from liturgical ministers and the rest of the assembly



during that liturgy surprised me. I began to see with new eyes how God can use a potential problem to bring about blessings in life. This “God surprise” challenged me to learn more about letting go of outcomes in ministry. God is like that: Difficult situations or obstacles can be moments of the inbreaking Holy Spirit, especially if our hearts, our spirits, and our sense of humor are open to God’s action.

Faith Sharing

Faith sharing with a spiritual partner or a small group is another effective tool for transformative prayer and spiritual growth. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who broke open their story to a stranger, our “breaking open” the story of our lives to others is a beautiful and powerful way to experience God’s grace. Like those disciples on a journey of faith, we walk with Christ along with the rest of the Body of Christ. If we reflect with others on how *his* story intersects *our* story, our Lord can surprise us with the wonders of how much we are loved. Like the disciples who recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread, we recognize Christ in one another when we break open our story. Sharing our story allows us to give witness to the power of Christ’s grace and presence in our lives. This kind of dialogue is sacred. Like the two disciples who returned to Jerusalem to give witness to the eleven in the upper room, telling how they met Jesus on the road, we feel and know Christ’s presence and understanding.

If you are comfortable in sharing your story with a group of believers and pilgrims, form a group, or join an existing group to engage others in this kind of dialogue. When others hear your story of faith, they will also understand the presence of Christ in a new way through you! In telling our story, we can experience how the disciples felt their “hearts burning” within them as they walked along the road. Use a faith sharing group to deepen and enrich your spiritual understanding of the events in your life.

Spiritual Direction

Some people are not comfortable sharing in a group and prefer guidance from a spiritual director or sharing with a spiritual companion. (Even those who share in a group should have a spiritual director.) Sharing and reflecting on our spiritual life with a director or spiritual companion can help us see the hand of God in our lives.

A spiritual director is a prayerful voice of wisdom who reflects back to us in presence and prayer the importance of our story and how God’s grace is present to us. This dialogue, reflection, and accountability to another can reveal new vistas and invite us to have a listening heart. This relationship helps us understand our own limitations and discover a clearer sense of the spiritual possibilities in our lives and ministry.

With the demands of ministry and the need for confidentiality, finding and choosing a spiritual director can be a challenging task. Diocesan offices and retreat centers are good resources for seeking advice on finding a director. Ask for a recommended list of directors and the best process for contacting them. Ideas about seeking direction and how to work with a spiritual director can be found online⁷ and at centers for spirituality and renewal.

Examining Habits of Prayer

Like water for the thirsty or manna for the hungry, prayer and intimacy with God nourish the pastoral musician’s soul and serve as the glue that holds our lives together. Examine your prayer life by reflecting on your own habits of prayer: What works and what does not work for you? What helps you to pray? What prayer styles and methods aid your prayer? What are the obstacles to prayer in your life? There are many methods of prayer and spiritual traditions in the rich history of the Church that address the needs of all personality types, according to Chester Michael’s and Marie Norrisey’s *Prayer and Temperament: Different Prayer Forms for Different Personality Types*.⁸



So what method (or methods) of prayer suits you and your personality type? The spiritual traditions and methods developed through history have enough diversity to fit the wide variety of human personalities. Life circumstances may also call for a particular style of prayer. For instance, it is fruitful to have extended periods of quiet time listening to God, but when you're faced with a sudden emergency, the best prayer may be: "Lord! Please help!"

Each person is God's unique creation, but there are enough different ways of praying that at least one method will suit each of us. Michael's and Norrissey's theory about prayer and temperament helps us understand categories, types, and schools of prayer that can guide us to find a method of prayer that fits us. We may also try many types of prayer in order to find the most effective one for us. When we find our favorite style of prayer, we have greater ease and joy in prayer, and this comfort overflows into our relationship with God. But then we need to take time to notice if this ease and joy increase our desire to continue consistent habits of prayer and presence with God, leading us deeper into union.

With the ideas suggested here, you can recover familiar forms of prayer or explore new spiritual practices that will energize your spiritual life in ministry as a pastoral musician. It is amazing to see the result of new spiritual energy, intimacy, and a deeper relationship with your best friend—the God of love and compassion. Renewal of spirit also gives us a basis on which to address challenges and obstacles that stand in the way of fulfillment in ministry and a deeper spiritual life.

Sabbath Making

Examine your spiritual life and patterns of prayer in the midst of your daily busyness. In his apostolic letter *Dies Domini*, Pope John Paul II called us to keep the Lord's Day holy. He said that keeping Sabbath "will require a genuine spiritual maturity, which will enable Christians to 'be what they are,' in full accordance with the gift of faith, always ready to give an account of the hope which is in them

(cf. 1 Pt 3:15)."⁹ Consider how "God time" can fit into your current schedule, then reflect on how changes and choices in your schedule could help you make more room for Sabbath time, prayer time, and rest time—time to renew and refresh your emotional and spiritual life.¹⁰ Let God's words of welcome and comfort be your mantra as you pray over your weekly calendar: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

If God loves you just the way you are, then you are called to love and accept the beautiful self that God created. Give yourself time simply to *be*. Allow yourself to be a human "*be-ing*" rather than a human "*do-ing*." *Be* with God in prayer and *be* with family and friends, taking time together for joy and fellowship.

The challenge of giving yourself time to "*be*" calls busy pastoral musicians to be intentional and single-minded about finding balance. As you assess your life and your habits, determine what you need to take care of your physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. In the midst of the busyness of music ministry make it a priority to find Sabbath time and prayer time to refresh and renew your soul. Consider how the absence of these things affects you. Allow God and community to minister to you when you are "spent" in ministry and need to find relief. Care for your body, soul, and spirit with time in prayer and contemplation of the Word and reflection on music



that inspires you.

This habit will support and sustain you through times of transition, change, and struggle. Frustrations, fear, and feelings of powerlessness in pastoral ministry can be transformed by grace and sacrament, love and truth, and through spiritual abandonment to God. Your life and your ministry can be a vessel of renewal and blessing in the service of the Church when you embrace the process of letting go and allow God to take care of you. Live the sacrament that you receive by becoming one with Christ who is blessed, broken, and poured out for all who hunger and thirst for God's love.

The Last Step

The last step in the process of filling your spiritual toolbox is to jot down a list of new ideas and understandings developed from prayerful reflection on the issues presented here, then list those that you would like to see in your life. Note new ideas as well as areas of the spiritual life that you would like to learn more about. Imagine one activity or one goal that you can see yourself accomplishing in your spiritual life. Visualize yourself realizing that goal. Is your goal a renewal of personal prayer, or an activity with others, or meeting with a group for prayer, or renewal of spiritual habits with your family members? Write your goal down and say it out loud to yourself. Identify what are you called to do tomorrow, next week, and next month to accomplish this goal. Imagine what it looks and feels like to accomplish it! Ask yourself what obstacles need to be overcome to do this. Write your goal in one sentence and share it with another person in your life. Ask that person to listen to your goal, encourage you, make a commitment to pray for you, and hold you accountable.

These ideas about the spiritual life may help you identify important areas for spiritual development or new insights to explore with a spiritual director or spiritual companion. The experience of this process of spiritual growth is a blessing from God that can benefit others as well. As you exercise your ministry in pastoral music, share with others the tools and methods that help you pray more effectively and find intimacy with God. Your insights and ideas will give inspiration to others as you grow in the process of renewal and transformation.

With the help of a spiritual director, a spiritual companion, and the community of faith you can find ways to overcome obstacles to a deeper relationship with God. Then as you walk the journey of faith, growing closer to God and the Body of Christ, notice how you become more open to renewal and the spiritual enlightenment that comes from God's transforming love and grace. The "glue" of God's intimate love and grace in your spiritual "toolkit" will strengthen and energize your pastoral music ministry. Use the tools that allow God to build the heavenly kingdom here on earth through you and your ministry. When we allow this work of the Spirit to make us a vessel of God's love, Christ's hands will be our hands, and his song will be our song of praise and thanksgiving for the wonders of salvation.

Notes

1. "Sacristy Power," with a libretto by Fred Moleck and music by Andrew Witchger, was performed for the National Meeting of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions in Chicago, Illinois, in October 1990.

2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publications, 2005), 38–39.

3. Joseph A. Tetlow, SJ, *Manna for a Desert of Busyness: Praying Advent Sunday Scriptures* (Kansas City, Missouri: Sheed & Ward, 1988).

4. Inexpensive editions of this book are readily available, but it is often best to ask a spiritual director or spiritual companion familiar with the Ignatian method to guide your first use of the *Exercises*.

5. See Joseph A. Tetlow, SJ, *Choosing Christ in the World: Directing the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola according to Annotations Eighteen and Nineteen. Series IV: Studies on Jesuit Topics, Number 12*, second ed. (Saint Louis, Missouri: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000).

6. *Ibid.*, 119.

7. See resources at the Spiritual Directors International website, www.sdiworld.org, © 2005–2010 Spiritual Directors International.



8. Chester P. Michael and Marie C. Norrisey, *Prayer and Temperament: Different Prayer Forms for Different Personality Types*, revised ed. (Charlottesville, Virginia: The Open Door, Inc., 1991).

9. John Paul II, apostolic letter *Dies Domini* (May 31, 1998), 4.

10. These ideas were presented by Rev. Paul Colloton at the NPM-DMMD Music Ministers Retreat *Keeping the Sabbath Holy*, October 2007, in Racine, Wisconsin.

MR. DANIEL GIRARDOT is the director of liturgy and music at St. Theresa Church, Austin, Texas, a DMMD Board member, and chair of the DMMD Member Services Committee. The article is copyright © 2010 by Daniel Girardot and the National Association of Pastoral Musicians. For reprint information, contact npmedit@npm.org.

