

CAPTURING LENT THROUGH MUSIC

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For Lent, I give up playing music at the end of Mass. The priest celebrant proclaims: “The Mass is ended, go in peace”; the rest of the liturgical assembly responds: “Thanks be to God”; and nothing else audible happens, except the sound of the procession walking out. No closing hymn. No postlude. The silence is deafening. Everyone is quiet, and no one leaves until the ministers are out of sight. It feels like Lent!

It is also effective catechesis about the season. A teacher in our parish school, who is not a parishioner at our cathedral parish, was planning the weekly school liturgy with her fourth grade class last Lent. She asked for suggestions for the closing hymn. One of the students raised his hand and said: “We don’t sing closing hymns during Lent!”

During my first year as music director at St. Thomas More, after we had experienced such silence at the end of Lenten Masses for several weeks, our liturgy team met to plan the Triduum liturgies. Someone read from the *Sacramentary* that, on Good Friday, “all leave in silence.” Our rector announced: “Well, we’ve been practicing that a lot lately!”

During Lent, perhaps less is more. But more is also more: Less music, more silence. The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) certainly knows how profound silence can be. And the community at St. Thomas More Cathedral is learning that same lesson. On Easter Sunday, when our congregation joins in announcing through song that indeed “Christ Is Risen from the Dead” at the end of Mass, it is obvious that the penitential season of Lent is over and the joy-filled season of Easter has begun.

MUSIC CAPTURES THE SEASON

Music has the power of capturing the spirit of a liturgical season in a profound way. When we hear the traditional chant “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” the song “feels” like Advent. Marty Haugen’s “My Soul In Stillness Waits,” a contemporary Advent composition, can capture the feel of Advent in a similar way. And nothing brings back childhood memories of Christmas like our favorite carol. Although there is new Christmas music being written all the time, the traditional carols like “Silent Night” and “O Come, All Ye Faithful” are still closest to people’s hearts.

Sometimes we forget that the traditional carols don’t always correspond to people’s experience. When people can connect with the experience described in the carol, though, then this traditional song takes on new and richer meaning. Several years ago, a friend who was born and raised in Florida came to Washington, DC, for NPM’s annual winter colloquium, which usually takes place sometime in February. Living in Florida her entire life, my friend had never experienced snow. During her visit, however, there was a snowfall, and she was literally out dancing and rolling in this foreign powdery white substance. Her experience with the snow evoked in me a contrasting memory from one of my childhood Christmases—our family’s struggle getting to our parish church for Christmas Midnight Mass one year because the snowfall in Pittsburgh was so deep. Certainly, now, “The Snow Lay on the Ground,” “In The Bleak Midwinter,” or any carol that mentions snow has a new, deeper, and richer meaning for my friend from Florida!

There are times, however, when our selections for musical worship may seem to be “out of season” for some people. I love to cook, and I enjoy preparing seasonal food. Living on the East Coast of the United States, I look forward to the change of season, because certain foods—for many years—have only been available “in season.” In this part of the world, until recently, pumpkin and cranberries belonged in the fall, and strawberries and melons were only available in the spring. So it seems odd, now that some foods are available year round, to find items in the supermarket which are clearly “out of season” in my experience.

If we are not careful, musical worship may be jarring to people if we use selections that are—at least in their experience—“out of season.” Pastoral musicians all know the struggle to keep Christmas carols out of Advent and to make sure that no “*Alleluia*” creeps into the fourth verse of a hymn that we have planned to use in Lent, but there may be more subtle seasonal markers as well, and we should be attentive to them.

There are many resources available, even within the liturgical rites, to help those who choose music to respect and evoke the feeling of the season. Selecting seasonal acclamations and litanies in addition to appropriate hymns and songs can help us to “sing” the seasons. For example, Richard Proulx’s *Missa Emmanuel* can be sung during the weeks of Advent, and James Chepponis’s *Christmastime Alleluia* can be sung as the Gospel Acclamation during the Christmas Season. Lent, when the *Gloria* and *Alleluia* are omitted, might be a good time to emphasize the act of penitence (formerly the penitential rite) by singing a simple “Lord have mercy” or even a congregational setting of the Greek “*Kyrie eleison*.”

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* specifically points out that the organ and other instruments should be used “with a moderation that is consistent with the season’s character” during Advent and should be used only “to support

the singing” of the assembly during Lent (no. 313). Parish communities should still sing the parts of the Mass that call for singing in these seasons, but perhaps you can use simpler settings. Our assembly, for example, loves to sing the simple chant “*Agnus Dei*” during Lent. This ritual song evokes the season for us, and Lent seems like an appropriate time to preserve our heritage of chant and the use of the Latin (and, in the case of the *Kyrie*, Greek) language.

Even our physical appearance can evoke the season. If you are in full view of your congregation, for example, you will want to pay attention to the colors of each liturgical season when choosing what you wear. Many funeral homes provide calendars for parishes: Keep one handy as a resource for determine correct liturgical colors. (Often the date of each weekday is printed in the proper liturgical color on such calendars.) But be prepared to be challenged: Many people are still surprised to learn that red *is* the appropriate color for Palm Sunday of the Lord’s Passion!

PREPARING FOR THE SEASONS

As a leader of sung prayer, there are several concrete things you can do to prepare for each liturgical season.

First and foremost, become familiar with what the Catholic Church teaches about the liturgical year by reading the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar* (1969). Also consult the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for descriptions of the seasons (nos. 1163–1178), and descriptions in other liturgical documents like the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* and the *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours*. The knowledge in these texts is just not for the clergy; those of us who serve in any leadership capacity at liturgy have a responsibility to familiarize ourselves with this information.

Make sure you have access to the Scripture readings to be proclaimed at Mass each week. If your parish purchases a book with the Scripture selections for your lectors to take home and practice, ask if the cantors and other appropriate music ministers can receive a copy as well. One excellent resource is *Magnificat*, a monthly publication that includes texts for the Mass and morning and evening prayer for each day (see ordering information below). Once you have familiarized yourself with the Scripture texts for a particular Sunday or feast, be sure to take time during the week to read over the texts of hymns and songs to be sung at the liturgy.

Since singing the responsorial psalm is one of the most important functions you have as cantor or psalmist, you might want to join a Bible study to learn more about those texts you are proclaiming.

If your parish has a membership in NPM, ask if you can be added to the parish membership list. In addition to sponsoring national and regional conventions and liturgy and cantor institutes which you could attend at the members’ discount, NPM publishes a wonderful journal which has articles that can serve as a means of continuing education for those who serve in any music ministry.

Most importantly, you cannot lead sung prayer if you are not a person of prayer. Take time each day, even while taking a shower or driving from point A to point B, to pray. As each new day, week, month, year, and season unfold, we continue to celebrate the Paschal Mystery—the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. What a gift!

The publication *Magnificat* is available from PO Box 91, Spencerville, MD 20868-9978. Web: www.magnificat.net.