

Praying in the Third Millennium: An End to the Liturgy Wars?

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"Nothing is better than music . . . It has lit up the sweetness of our hours of happiness by effacing the pettinesses that diminish us, bringing us back pure and new to what was, what will be and what music has created for us."

--Nadia Boulanger(1)

There are many reasons why assemblies are dissatisfied with or disillusioned by the quality and style of the liturgical prayer they experience when they gather for worship each week.(2) One of the major factors that hinders worship in our time and leads to disillusionment is, I believe, the loss of our focus on God as the center of our worship.

In her book *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, Marva Dawn suggests that "many factors, both internal and external, contribute to the loss of God as the subject and object of worship. Among the internal forces is the failure to educate well, to teach those in the Church what we do and why when we worship . . . The division or even fragmentation of parishes by worship wars prevents thorough discussion of the goal of the worship over which we fight."(3) Diversity in understanding the goal of worship will lead only to the division, rather than the unity, of the celebrating community.

It is extremely unfortunate when we find disagreements concerning the purpose of liturgy among those who prepare and preside at liturgy. Differences regarding styles of presiding, interpretation of the *General Instruction to the Roman Missal*, understanding sacraments, perspective on the church or its mission, and tastes in music can be magnified when a parish staff comes together for Sunday liturgy. Since we, as musicians, interact with *all* of the parish staff, organizations, and committees, it is not unusual that we find ourselves entrenched in the battlegrounds of the "liturgy wars."

Sometimes our own perspective on (read "preferences for") music in the liturgy (contemporary vs. traditional, Latin vs. vernacular, hymnody vs. ritual music, organ vs. synthesizers vs. guitars vs. piano) will only add to the tensions we experience. Such tensions left unresolved may grow into personal issues. Such tensions not only make it difficult for the assembly to pray, but can actually make it impossible for those who prepare and minister at liturgy to pray.

Dissension among those who minister at liturgy is often all too apparent to the rest of the praying assembly who then are distracted from prayer by the "wars" being waged during worship. Those not of one heart and mind will find it difficult to pray together. Jesus himself reproached the faithful in his day, "So then, if you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering" (Matthew 5:23-24). As pastoral musicians, we have the capacity and obligation to meet the challenge to be a balm that can soothe the wounds of these wars by what we do and how we do it.

Liturgy by Accidental

At the beginning of this article, I proposed that not seeing God as central to worship is a primary factor in creating poor liturgy. Approaches to preparing liturgy that are focused on the accidentals of worship create stumbling blocks to the prayer experience of the assembly. Ask yourself: Do I really believe in God? Can I pray with the psalmist "O Lord, you are the center of my life"? Do I earnestly try to embrace and live the message of Jesus in the Gospel? Am I holier today than I was five to ten years ago? Is my relationship with God deeper? Is prayer important in my personal life? If we cannot answer yes to these questions we will certainly fail, even though the music we make is flawless.

If we ourselves are not first and foremost people of prayer, then we should not, in all conscience, presume to take on the responsibility of preparing and leading any assembly in prayer, regardless of our particular ministry. Presiders fussing over presidential style; liturgists overemphasizing rubrics; DREs who approach liturgy as a purely catechetical moment; lectors laboring over enunciation and pronunciation without owning the Scriptures in their hearts; musicians obsessing over the latest tunes, particular styles, and instrumentations will only succeed in diverting the focus from praising God, thereby hindering the prayer of the assembly. Granted, we pastoral musicians must be musically well informed and trained and offer our best, but in our ministry, music-making is only one tool for assisting the assembly in prayer and not an end in itself (after all, the sum is greater than the parts). In *Gather Faithfully Together*, Cardinal Roger Mahony, Archbishop of Los Angeles, reminds us that "as parish leaders, whatever your own special expertise or interest might be, work together for such strength in the Sunday assemblies. Seek and discover how that assembly . . . can be about evangelization and catechesis, justice and outreach, the ministering to each other in the community. Implementation of [good liturgy] begins and continues when pastor, staff, council, and liturgy committee have a firm grasp of the way these aspects of being Catholic are related."(4)

More Than "Doin' the Tunes"

The object of this article has not been to resolve the musical, liturgical, theological, or stylistic issues we face (*quality* generally seems to prevail over *style*) but rather to look at who we are, what we do, and what we are committed to. As pastoral musicians, what we do is about more than just "doin' the tunes." Again, more questions: Do I serve the music? Or do I serve God with and through the music? Can or do I pray when performing my ministry? Does my style or performance get in the way of the prayer? Is my prayer reflected in my openness to the vision of the people with whom I work and for whom we together prepare the liturgy? Do I have the courage to forgive and grow?

When we are focused on God and when our efforts are primarily centered upon leading our assemblies in prayer, we can be efficacious instruments, ministers, and servants of God's grace. It is only then that we will have helped the rest of the assembly to pray, to be drawn closer to God, to embrace the teachings of the Gospel, and to have the courage to spread the Good News by work and word.

Notes

1. Quoted in Don G. Campbell, *Nadia Boulanger: Master Teacher* (Washington, DC: The Pastoral Press, 1984), 63.

2. This article concludes the series of Professional Concerns articles for the Millennium Year and introduces this year's series, which will focus on prayer and the liturgical leadership of the other members of the parish staff.

3. Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 82.

4. Cardinal Roger Mahony, *Gather Faithfully Together: Guide for the Assembly* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998), #119, page 38.