

Singing Children of the Third Millennium

By Michael Wustrow

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Children need to be an integral part of every parish music ministry program if we are serious about having a singing church in the third millennium. The amount of time we spend enabling today's children to sing (in the congregational part of the assembly or as a choir) is crucial if tomorrow's worship leaders are going to embrace the use of sacred song in the liturgy.

No parish should be without a program that encourages singing during a child's formative years. Many music directors are more than happy to speak about the adult choir or describe the beautiful pipe organ at church, but they rarely mention the existence of a children's choir. Most do not consider this aspect of the program to be vital or crucial, but it is!

Recently I was checking e-mail at 1:00 am after a very long day at church. An "instant message" came flashing on the screen with a screen name I did not recognize . . . It turned out to be a someone from one of my very first children's choirs! After our online conversation I realized that this student, now a junior in college, has a vision of "church" that was significantly shaped by his ministry as a young chorister in grades 3-8. His spot in the children's choir gave him not only a window onto a fuller understanding of the Scripture being broken open and of God's love shared in bread and wine but also a chance to experience more fully his role as a part of the assembly and a sense of what it means to evangelize. More important than the fact that he still sings quite well is the fact that his understanding of being "Catholic" was shaped by his early experience of ministry.

The Ideal Time

A person's formative years (the childhood years) is the ideal time to introduce someone to the concept of ministry. You know: discerning gifts, sharing the gifts God has given you with those around you, not hiding your talents under a bushel basket. Children are also infinitely easier to train as singers and musicians than adults; they not only lack the baggage most of us adults have about what we can and cannot do, but they learn new skills (algebra, foreign languages, even music) on a daily basis and pick up new skills much easier than an adult would. Just ask someone who has tried to learn to play the piano at forty!

By incorporating as many children as possible into your music ministry program, you are giving all those children the tools they need to have a productive and engaging life in the church for the rest of their lives. This way of looking at organizing a children's choir goes far beyond the idea of having something "nice" for the people at the 10:30 Sunday Mass; it is about engaging children at an age at which they can be shaped and formed in the way of Christian service within the community of believers and beyond it.

Training singing children for the third millennium of Christian history is perhaps our best way to influence tomorrow's liturgical celebrations. Giving children ownership of liturgy is best done by getting them as actively involved as possible. One of the best ways to do that is through a children's choir program. Directors of music ministries need to educate themselves so they feel comfortable and confident in front of children, and they need to learn the educational processes that enable children to learn music with greater speed and flexibility than adults!

Learning the Basics

My degree in music education continues to be an invaluable tool in working with any age group, but especially with children. Any adult who can have the patience and take the time to direct an adult choir will be amazed at how much easier it is to train children once you know some teaching basics!

Children rarely sing in any environment other than church. The role of "patron of the arts" that the church demonstrated so significantly at other periods in history is once again important: If the church does not teach its children to sing, who will? We need to teach children that "music helps us express what words alone cannot."

Nothing brings this point home more clearly than thinking about the last birthday party you attended. Usually there are friends and family members who have not seen each other in some time, and people are busy celebrating. Suddenly, the lights go in the room go out and everyone instinctively grows quiet. From one corner of the room a door opens, and everyone looks to see what is happening. Someone comes through the door carrying a birthday cake with candles ablaze. Immediately there is a rousing rendition of "Happy Birthday" sung by all - the old, the young, those who can sing and those who can't. Can you imagine a group of people *reciting* "Happy Birthday" instead of singing it? Would someone say at this moment, "Oh, I can't sing well, so I will just sit here and listen"? We sing because we want to be part of the celebration. We just do it.

Children need to sing music rich in ethnic diversity as well as music from many different periods in the church's history. Dr. Fred Moleck describes how going into a museum and spending time looking at a work of art shapes and informs us, how that experience helps shape our knowledge of the past, of a given race, or perhaps of the values of a given civilization. The same is true of sacred music: By preparing your children's choir to sing a setting of the *Regina coeli* at Easter or preparing Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" with some background about the composer and the composition, you are giving young singers additional information about the past that they can use in shaping their future.

At What Age?

At what age did you get involved in music ministry? Did you wait until you had graduated from college with degrees in music to discover your vocation? No! Most of us began our ministry in the church sometime after first communion but long before high school graduation. It was during those formative years that the first sparks of vocation began to flicker inside us. Maybe you were in eighth grade, and a school teacher knew you had taken piano lessons for several years, so you were asked to play for a school Mass.

Look around at the children in your parish. They are the church of the third millennium. You are crucial to their ability to be a singing church!