

Station at the Cross

by Sean Stapleton

ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR of all the Church's popular devotions is the Lenten Way of the Cross or Stations of the Cross. Brought back to Europe by soldiers returning from the Crusades, this devotional practice was a way for people unable to travel to the Holy Land to participate like pilgrims in walking with Jesus on his final journey through Jerusalem to Calvary. The devotion took various shapes in Jerusalem and in Europe; the European practice, promoted by the Franciscans, finally identified fourteen "stations" or events that people were asked to remember and meditate on as they prayed this devotional prayer. Recent versions of the prayer and meditations to be used at each station have added a fifteenth station: The Resurrection. Texts for this final station are often prayed/sung before the Blessed Sacrament.

Traditionally, public celebrations of the Way of the Cross are accompanied by verses of the "Stabat Mater" ("At the Cross Her Station Keeping"), sung as the prayer leaders, accompanied by a processional cross and candles, move from one station to the next. The text of this Latin hymn was composed under Franciscan auspices in the late thirteenth century. It was thought for many years that the composer may have been Jacopone da Todi (1230-1306), a lawyer who became a Franciscan after the death of his wife. He was a composer of *laudi spirituali*, Franciscan songs in the form of popular songs. Historians now doubt this ascription.

This Franciscan *laude* was used by the church in its formal liturgy in several ways. Though composed as a popular devotional song, it was introduced into the Mass liturgy as a sequence (a long hymn before the Gospel reading) to be sung for a special Mass of Mary's Compassion. Though removed from the Roman missal by the liturgical reforms following the Council of Trent, this sequence was later (in 1727) re-introduced for use on September 15, the Memorial of Our Lady of Sorrows. Sections of the hymn were also adapted for use in the liturgy of the hours on the Friday after Passion Sunday, which was formerly celebrated as the feast of Mary's Seven Sorrows. (Since the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, this observance is no longer part of the liturgical calendar).

Originally, the hymn text was written in ten six-line verses. But when the text was set to chant as a sequence, the ten verses were broken into twenty verse of three lines each. This is the way the text was translated into German when it was included in the Mainz *Gesangbuch* in 1661. This book was a hymnal used in the Diocese of Mainz, a city which had a long history of music education and strong liturgical music. The tune associated with the text in this hymnal is probably a compilation of two older settings; it probably appeared in the liturgy of the hours for vespers on the Lenten feast of Mary's Seven Sorrows before it was included in the Mainz hymnal.

This tune came into use in English speaking churches when Anthony G. Petti (1932-1985) translated the "Stabat Mater" into English. Petti taught English and early music at several colleges and universities in England. In 1969 he moved to Canada, where he taught English at the University of Calgary until his sudden death in 1985.

USE IN EDUCATION

"At the Cross" may be used in the music classroom in several ways. Since the time signature for this tune is 4/4, it could be used to illustrate this tempo, often used for processional or marching music. It could also be used to illustrate differences between this tune, with its three-line verses, and more traditional "foursquare" church marching tunes like "Ein' Feste Burg." To illustrate the march potentials of "Ein' Feste Burg," if you have access to a recording of Meyerbeer's grand opera *Les Huguenots* (1836), play the orchestral prelude, which introduces and develops "Ein' Feste Burg" in varying tempos. In the opera itself, the tune is a major motive for the Protestants, and it is sung in Act One by Marcel, Raoul's servant.

To illustrate the various ways a particular text may be set over the course of music history, examine a few of the many polyphonic and orchestral/choral settings of the "Stabat Mater." You might want to have your students listen to an earlier polyphonic setting (Josquin des Prez or Palestrina) and a later one with larger forces (Liszt or Verdi). More recent settings include those by Penderecki (1962), which he incorporated into his *St. Luke Passion*, and others by Kodaly, Persichetti, and Virgil Thomson.

You could study the text (the first seven verses or so), apart from the music, as a poetic expression of a person's inner emotions. Are there any other songs that your students could name that try to do the same thing? Many contemporary secular songs express the singer's feelings over lost love, personal doubts, success at finding love, and so on. Is the music in those songs as expressive of the emotion as the "Stabat Mater" tune is in expressing Mary's feelings at the death of her son?

USE IN PRAYER

If you use "At the Cross" as the processional song between stations on the Way of the Cross, think about the best way to organize the procession. Working with the leader of this devotion (the parish priest, deacon, or a lay leader), try to construct appropriate movement for this start-and-stop procession. Is there room at the stations and between stations for more participants than the cross bearer, candle bearers, and prayer leader? If so, what would these extra people do? Could they use gestured prayer during the singing? Should they stand one station ahead, to welcome the procession as it moves toward that station, then quietly move ahead to the next station to repeat this welcome? Many of these decisions would be based on the shape of your church and the space available around or in front of each station--and on the amount of time you have for preparation. If you have outdoor stations, then you have to take weather into consideration.

One way to involve the whole community in a simple gesture would be to coordinate the end of each verse of "At the Cross" with the beginning of prayer at the station. As the music dies away, the prayer leader would say or sing: "We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you." While this is being sung/said, everyone would bow deeply toward the station (if the seating allows this) or toward the central cross. As everyone comes up from this bow, the community responds: "Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world." This dialogue-with-bow will take some practice, but it would help to involve the students physically in a form of prayer that can become boring, especially for young children.

Parishes with a large Spanish-speaking population might consider using the hymn "Madre Llena de Aflicción," which uses the "Stabat Mater" tune for the refrain, though the verses are set to different music.

AN ALTERNATIVE SONG

If you are looking for alternative music for use during the Way of the Cross instead of using the "Stabat Mater," consider Dan Schutte's "Behold the Wood." This option would be particularly useful if your parish is going to use this song during the veneration of the cross at the Good Friday Liturgy. Its use at the stations will make it familiar to the children, who will be able to support the congregation's song during the solemn liturgy on Good Friday. "Behold the Wood" is available in several hymnals, including Gather Comprehensive (GIA) #420; Glory & Praise, second edition (OCP) #369; and Journeysongs (OCP) #283.

In the music classroom, you could use this song to examine the 4/4 time signature, comparing it to other "marching songs" as suggested above for "At the Cross."

For the stations, since "Behold the Wood" only has six verses, you could alternate refrain and verses this way: Station One: refrain, sung and repeated; Station Two: Verse One plus refrain; Station Three: refrain, sung and repeated; Station Four: Verse Two plus refrain; and so on, returning to the first verse for Station Fourteen to complete the journey through the stations.

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