

Songs That Make a Difference: A Report on the NPM Survey

BY THE NPM STAFF

During the months of August and September, 2005, the National Association of Pastoral Musicians (NPM) conducted a national online survey called “Songs That Make a Difference.” We invited Catholics from across the United States to name a liturgical song that has made a lasting impact on their own lives of faith and then to provide a brief explanation for their choice.

We were surprised and delighted to receive more than 3,000 responses to the survey. The questionnaire was completed by a variety of respondents, including parish directors of music ministries, choir directors, choir members, and average parishioners. The age of participants in the survey also covered a broad range—from elementary school students to retired persons.

We hope in the not too distant future to procure funding for a more in-depth study of the practice and pastoral impact of American Catholic liturgical music. In the meantime, however, this survey of songs that make a difference reveals some very interesting patterns among those who responded.

1. A very wide variety of songs. There is no one song or style of singing that dominates the responses. In fact, the 3,009 replies that we received named more than 670 different songs. Although “On Eagle’s Wings” was chosen by more participants than any other single song, it was nonetheless the selection of just eight percent of the respondents.

2. A wide variety of musical styles. Most of the top twenty-five songs selected by survey respondents derive from two major streams:

- *Catholic contemporary music* (13), including compositions by Michael Joncas, Dan Schutte, Bob Dufford, SJ, David Haas, Marty Haugen, Sebastian



Photo courtesy of The Long Island Catholic

Temple, Suzanne Toolan, RSM, Cesáreo Gabaráin, Donna McCargill, OSM, John Foley, SJ, and Carey Landry.

- *Traditional Catholic music* (6), both metrical and chant hymns, mostly in Latin, including “Holy God, We Praise Thy Name”; “Ave Maria”; “Panis angelicus”; “Ave Verum Corpus”; “Tantum ergo”; and “Pange lingua.”

The remaining six songs among the top twenty-five choices include hymns from traditional Protestant/Evangelical and contemporary religious (not Catholic) sources.

3. Associated with significant events. In explaining the choice of a song that has made an impact on their faith, a large num-

ber of respondents reported that it had been used at an important celebration—the funeral of a loved one or friend, the baptism of a child, a wedding, or a religious profession. Funeral celebrations were by far the most commonly cited occasions on which a particular song made a lasting effect.

4. Associated with childhood experiences. Another large group of respondents chose songs that they recalled from childhood and that have continued to evoke and express a connection to faith and to the Church.

Practical Consequences

These findings suggest several practical consequences for the ministry of pastoral musicians. Because the survey revealed such a wide variety of songs that make a difference, musicians and other pastoral leaders should be attentive to the many different musical styles that nourish and support the faith of American Catholics, taking care not merely to choose music from our own personal taste but to make

selections out of a pastoral concern for the members of our communities.

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We need to take a critical look at the musical selections commonly used for major celebrations—especially funerals—through the lens of the Church’s evangelizing role. We should ask ourselves if these songs are able to bear the weight of inspiring and sustaining faith.

Finally, pastoral musicians and other leaders should take very seriously the impact that our music making has on the children in our midst. Are we introducing our children to repertoire that can last a lifetime?

Top Twenty-Five

These are the top twenty-five songs identified by our respondents as making a difference in their own lives of faith. Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of respondents who chose that song.

- 1 On Eagle's Wings (242)
- 2 Here I Am, Lord (152)
- 3 Be Not Afraid (146)
- 4 You Are Mine (138)
- 5 How Great Thou Art (76)
- 6 Holy God, We Praise Thy Name (70)
- 7 Amazing Grace (69)
- 8 All Are Welcome (58)
- 9 Prayer of St. Francis (43)
- 10 Ave Maria (42)
- 11 We Are Called (38)
- 12 Let There Be Peace on Earth (36)
- 13 I Am the Bread of Life (30)
- 14 The Summons (30)
- 15 Panis angelicus (29)
- 16 The Servant Song—Gillard (29)
- 17 Pescador de Hombres (28)
- 18 Servant Song—McCargill (28)
- 19 Shepherd Me, O God (27)
- 20 Ave Verum Corpus (26)
- 21 Lord of the Dance (24)
- 22 One Bread, One Body (24)
- 23 Tantum ergo (24)
- 24 Hosea (23)
- 25 Pange lingua (23)

Why They Make a Difference

Here are some selected comments from respondents to the NPM survey that explain how a particular song has made a difference to that person's life of faith.

All Are Welcome (*text and music: Marty Haugen, b. 1950*). "I believe that the words really are words for our time, both for our Church and our world. They tell us who we ought to be and what we are to be about as Catholic Christians. It calls us to be who we say we are. When we sing it at our parish I feel a real sense of community, even though I know we have a long way to go to be the ideal Christian community. When we sing it I experience a sense of unity even as it challenges us to strive together to become that more ideal

Christian community" (Linda Corey, Eau Claire, Wisconsin).

Ave Verum Corpus (*text ascribed to Innocent VI, d. 1362; music: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, 1756–1791*). "In 2001, after 9/11, my church in New York City did a memorial concert and produced a CD to raise money for the firefighters' and rescue workers' widows. We chose 'Ave Verum' among others, because it poignantly confronts suffering and yet it proclaims the core truth of our faith: Christ's suffering (and ours) is redemptive; he is with us in life, in the Eucharist forever, and in death that opens to eternity with him" (Colleen Baxter, Sarasota, Florida).

Be Not Afraid (*text based on Isaiah 43:2–3 and Luke 6:20 ff. by Bob Dufford, sj, b. 1943; music: Bob Dufford, b. 1943*). "The message 'be not afraid' is emphasized multiple times by prophets, disciples, and Christ himself! This is the story of my life and this is the true word of God. He is always with us; hence be afraid of nothing! It gives much hope, comfort, and peace—things we all desire and strive for" (Andrew Berthold, Omaha, Nebraska).

"I am constantly amazed that a poet from 3,000 years ago has put into words the same experience of God that I have."

Here I Am, Lord (*text and music: Dan Schutte, b. 1947*). "I first heard this song shortly after its publication, when my sister completed her training for youth ministry. It spoke clearly of her reasons for vocation, and she and her husband (whom she met during training) still work in the field for the Oakland Diocese. Most of my family members have served our parishes as musicians, singers, CCD teachers, and ministers of the Eucharist. I still get a lump in my throat when I sing this hymn. How else do you respond to the Lord's call but to use his gifts in service to others?" (Steven West, Morton Grove, Illinois).

Lord of All Hopefulness (*text: Jan Struther, 1901–1953; tune: SLANE*). "I have long loved this hymn as a prayer for God's blessing throughout the day, but it took on a new meaning as a prayer of blessing and thanks for a life when we used it for the funerals of my father and mother" (Gordon E. Truitt, Sykesville, Maryland).

"I remember the first time I heard 'Lord of All Hopefulness.' It was a rainy day and

Confirming Survey Results

Recently, *The Catholic Spirit*—newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis—conducted a similar survey of its readers, asking them to name their favorite religious songs and hymns. The top twenty-five responses on that list bear a remarkable resemblance to the top twenty-five "songs that make a difference" in the NPM survey. In fact, sixteen titles appear on both lists. Here is the list from *The Catholic Spirit*. Numbers in parentheses indicate where that song appears in the NPM list.

- 1 Be Not Afraid (3)
- 2 Here I Am, Lord (2)
- 3 On Eagle's Wings (1)
- 4 Ave Maria (10)
- 5 How Great Thou Art (5)
- 6 We Are Called (11)
- 7 You Are Mine (4)
- 8 Amazing Grace (7)
- 9 We Remember
- 10 One Bread, One Body (22)
- 11 Tantum ergo (23)
- 12 Holy God, We Praise Thy Name (6)
- 13 City of God
- 14 Blest Are They
- 15 The Servant Song (16 or 18)
- 16 Lord of the Dance (21)
- 17 Gather Us In
- 18 Eye Has Not Seen
- 19 We Have Been Told
- 20 Panis Angelicus
- 21 Pange lingua (25)
- 22 On This Day, O Beautiful Mother
- 23 Let There Be Peace on Earth (12)
- 24 Jesus Christ Is Risen Today
- 25 I Am the Bread of Life (13)

we were having Morning Prayer in the center hall instead of in church. I was in first grade and didn't have my own book or know the words to the hymn. I looked lost to an older boy with a book, who let me read over his shoulder. I thought it was really nice of him and now whenever I hear this song I remember it. I also think this hymn is very calming and peaceful. It makes me feel relaxed and makes me think about how God is always with me through anything. Our music teacher told us this morning that it is not only about him being there all day, but all throughout our lives, and the end of the day is like the end of our lives, and God is with us

through all of it. That is why 'Lord of All Hopefulness' is special to me" (Maria Latanzio, Immaculate Conception Regional School, Franklin, New Jersey).

My Soul Is Thirsting (Psalm 63) (*music: Michael Joncas, b. 1951*). "I find the psalms to be the richest source of my prayers. I am constantly amazed that a poet from 3,000 years ago has put into words the same experience of God that I have. Psalm 63 is one of my favorites, and this setting has enabled me to memorize the psalm and keep it with me, no matter how far I may be from my Bible" (Terri Miyamoto, Staten Island, New York).

Pescador de Hombres (*text and music: Cesáreo Gabaráin, 1936–1991*). "This hymn was truly inspired by our heavenly Father as is expressed through the very eloquent expression of Gabaráin as he makes "eye contact" with the Spirit of Jesus. I have visited Catholic liturgies all over the world and have rejoiced to hear this unifying hymn sung in many different languages. This is the most requested hymn when our choir is asked to sing for funerals, weddings, birthdays, etc." (Cordelia Garcia, Santa Fe, New Mexico).

Praise to the Lord (*text: Joachim Neander, 1650–1680, translated by Catherine Winkworth, 1827–1878; tune: LOBE DEN HERREN, Stralsund Gesangbuch, 1665*). "It is a great hymn of praise known to many Christians—Catholic and Protestant. When I was in college and sang in a concert choir, this hymn served as our theme, sung at the beginning of our concerts. When I passed my exam for my master's degree, I joyfully sang this hymn (all five of the original stanzas) on my way home in the car. I learned it in my Lutheran childhood and still use it in Catholic music ministry" (Naomi Matthews, Madison, Wisconsin).

Salve Regina (*text attributed to Hermanus Contractus, 1013–1054; tune: Chant, Mode V*). This hymn "connects us to 700 years of Catholics, and in its style and mood, really back to at least the seventh century. Together, the living and the dead make up the 'cloud of witnesses' (Hebrews), and we are connected to the great saints of the past who sang these very words to this very melody" (Joe Mulrooney, Rochester, New York).

Tantum ergo (*text: Thomas Aquinas, 1227–1274; tune: ST. THOMAS*). "It connects with the early days of my faith life, and I still find myself humming it" (Peggy D'Elia, San Francisco, California).

The Cross of Love Blessing Prayer (*text and music: Rufino Zaragoza, OFM*). "This song unites people to the cross in a



way that makes the cross something one would eagerly want to take up as it is a cross of love. . . . I cried and cried the first time I read the words. It struck a nerve deep within me, close to my heart.

"An odd occurrence happened the first time I used this song. I included it as a song after Communion for everyone to sing on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. On that Sunday I started the song and then heard strange sounds of metal clanging. I had no way of knowing this but found out afterwards that an elderly man in the rear pew of the church had collapsed after receiving Communion, and an ambulance was called. We sang as they laid him on the stretcher, and as we sang the last note of the song, the ambulance workers were out the door. I of course had no idea of all that had transpired downstairs in the main body of the church, although the cantor's eyes were quite wide and her facial expressions

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a little unusual. It was even more startling to realize that the opening words of the song are: 'May the Lord bless and keep you till your journey is complete.' Fortunately the gentleman had not completed his journey just yet and was given the medical treatment needed. It was a strange

coincidence, for sure, but certainly for that gentleman a fitting song for the moment and a beautiful song celebrating the cross and our call to discipleship" (Katherine M. Joseph, Merrimack, New Hampshire).

The King of Love My Shepherd Is (*text: Henry Williams Baker, 1821–1877; tune: St. COLUMBA, traditional Irish melody*). "This wonderful combination of inspired text and beautiful hymnody has found its way into my heart on many occasions, from mourning the tragic death of a young student to celebrating with my parish community. Henry Baker's text does brilliant justice not only to the psalm itself (Psalm 23) but also to the remarkably well-intertwined themes of trust, faith, love, providence, reconciliation, and hope. Equally as impressive to me is the way that this extraordinary hymn-tune and the emphases of the text complement each other, within each verse and through the piece as a whole, creating a musical journey from quiet gratitude to awe-inspired joy (Tony Ward, Omaha, Nebraska).

The Lord Is My Hope (*text and music by M. D. Ridge*). "This song has been my source of strength during some of the toughest, hardest times of my life. It's so easy for shadows to confuse our vision or sorrow to claim one's heart, but the Lord is there always to help those who rely on him and his assistance and love. I find courage to move forward with this song. My Shepherd and King is forever with me; I know that I *don't* walk alone" (Patricia McGinley, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania).

Voices That Challenge (*text and music by David Haas, b. 1957*). "When we first used this song at the campus ministry at James Madison University in Virginia, a young woman came up after Mass with tears in her eyes and said, 'I've never heard anyone mention AIDS in church before. My brother died of AIDS, and I've been afraid to tell anyone about him, until now.' Ironically, I had considered not singing that verse because I didn't want to offend anyone. The young woman was a voice that challenged me to keep singing for those who need their voices heard" (Steve Raml, Glendale, Arizona).

We Are Called (*text and music by David Haas, b. 1957*). "This song speaks to me as a Christian who is called to make a difference in my world, whether that's in my family, my neighborhood, my work, or my main ministry, which is serving the people in Haiti through the PTPA program. It also reminds me of God's call to me that I experienced when I made a Cursillo weekend in 1995." (Mary Rehovsky, Nashville, Tennessee).