



Catechesis For the Masses

Basic Teachings on Liturgy and Participation in the Mass in Both Forms.

Part 11: The Power of Singing in Worship.

Back in my days of Kindergarten, I remember an important task to complete (among several) was the memorization of the alphabet.

While there are many methods that can be used for memorization (as some methods work better for some than others), a particularly effective way that was used for the memorizing of the alphabet that is well known is a little song that goes like this:

“A B C D E F G,
H I J K L M N O P,
Q R S,
T U V,
W X,
Y and Z,
Now I know my ABCs,
Next time won’t you sing with me.”

Perhaps as you read the listed letters, you had no idea how to sing this song until reading its last two lines, which hopefully prompted a memory. The genius of this song and many like it is *the power of music to become rooted in our subconscious*.

All of us have had experiences of “a song being stuck in our head.” Aware that this common experience is not always welcomed - such as when we have an unattractive song in our head due to an accidental encounter with such a song - the power of music to enter our minds and to remain there clearly shows how powerful of a tool it can be for us to learn and internalize knowledge (such as the alphabet.) Likewise, the experience of having a song “in our head,” annoying though it may be in some instances, often

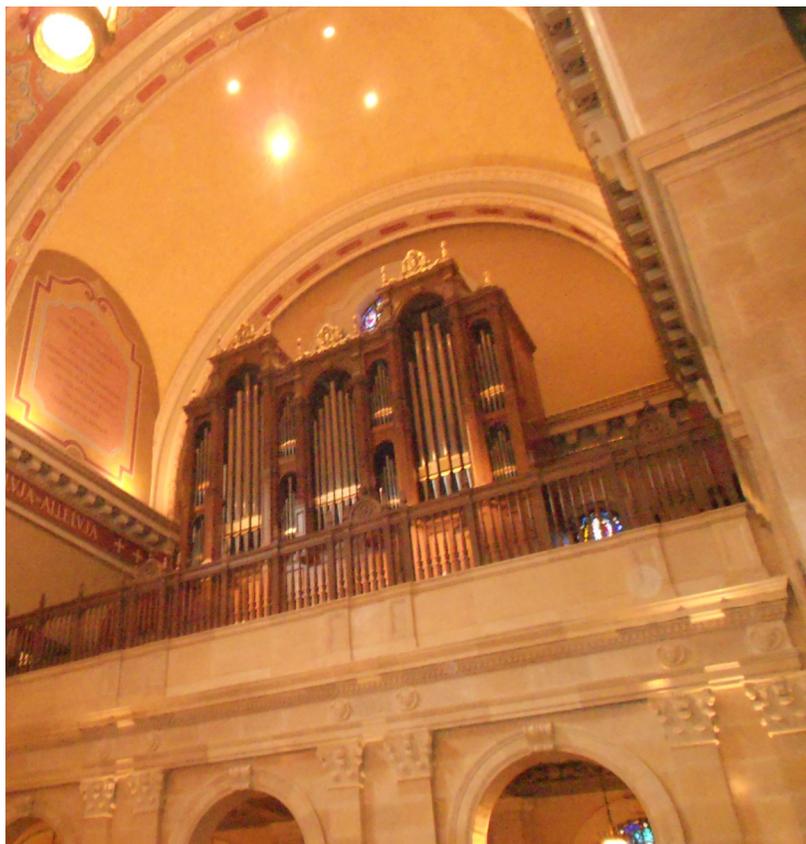
leads to the song becoming *part of us*, giving us ownership over the song and our ability to recall its sound, its words, and its message.

While we will return to this imagery of the power of music in the context of our learning and internalizing later in this column, might we first consider another element of singing in more direct relationship to worship. Perhaps you have heard the ancient expression (often attributed to St. Augustine) that “he who sings well prays twice.” While the source of this expression is debatable, the truth of the expression itself is quite beautiful. For whenever or wherever we sing, we are utilizing a particular gift that God has given to us to bring greater beauty to the expressing of words. While other creatures sing beautifully (particularly songbirds,) no other creature than we human beings are able to express all possible words and emotions in song. In reference to worship, such expressing of both words and emotions is an ancient and integral part of “how” we worship. The antiquity of such sung expression is evident when considering the hymns and songs contained throughout the Scriptures themselves, particularly in the Psalms. When you read the Psalms, keep in mind that these poetic words are meant for being sung, each according to the message, emotion, and particular moment for which it was composed. Some of the psalms and hymns convey praise, others thanksgiving, still others petition and pleading, and still others such emotion as lament and grief - in so many words, the whole range of human emotion. Rightly sung, the words of the psalms both give God an elevated form of worship beyond the spoken word (again, because we are utilizing a gift that He

has given to us in singing) and carry with it a more “wholistic” offering of ourselves that includes the use of our physical capacity to utter song and our interior disposition and emotion that is expressed in the song. Thus, our singing in worship truly does form an elevated and fuller expression of prayer that can be seen like “praying twice.”

Along with the power of singing as an act of worship and as an offering to God is an added benefit for us: that we are able to internalize and in some sense “become” our worship. This becoming brings us back to the original example of the ABC song: that music has the power to become part of who we are - to the extent that what we sing is no longer simply a fancy uttering of words, but is instead a real communication of ourselves. Learning the truth of God Himself, of the works that He has carried out and accomplished, of the depth of His love, or any other sacred truth can most certainly be learned by various methods. However, when these truths of faith are articulated for us within the Church’s music, they take on the power to both be sung to God in right prayer and worship to Him and to become part of us - even to the point that we think of holy things set to song in what may be by all accounts not such holy settings - simply because the song is “stuck in our heads,” reminding us of the holy words that were sung in beautiful, memorable melodies.

While these ideas may seem as “theories” of music, might I encourage each one of us to appeal to experience to consider that our favorite lyrical music (whatever type or genre that may be) stays with us. Similarly, when the Church’s faith is proclaimed in music, those very truths stay with us. For example, in the popular hymn “Holy God, We Praise thy Name,” we sing the words “Infinite thy vast domain; everlasting is thy reign.” Such words, if only given as words on a page surely stand alone as a poetic rhyme; howev-



How significant is the role of music in Catholic worship? In the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” Vatican II calls our sacred music patrimony “a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art.” The same paragraph further states: “The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as sacred song united to the words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy.”

Pictured Above - a view of the MARTIN PASI OPUS 14 DUAL-TEMPERAMENT pipe organ at St. Cecilia Cathedral, Omaha, Nebraska. Photo taken by Fr. Joel Hastings, 2013.

er, in song, they become memorable an expression of the power and expansiveness of God’s Kingdom that are easily recalled. Such is also true of words in a foreign language, such as the Church’s use of Latin. Anyone who participates regularly in Eucharistic Benediction may not know the meaning of the words “Tantum ergo sacramentum;” however, to hear the hymn that begins with these words easily and rightly connects one to worship of the Holy Eucharist. Such is the power of music.

So when it comes to the “ABCs” of worship, know that our ability to sing has great power in our worship - even and especially in Latin - to help us internalize deeper truths of God and to worship Him in ways of beauty beyond our human understanding.