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 Temple, Suzanne Toolan, rsm, Cesáreo Gabarain, 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 number 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.

We should ask ourselves if these songs are able to bear the weight of inspiring and sustaining faith.

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. Holy God, We Praise Thy Name (69)
6. Ave Maria (42)
7. We Are Called (38)
8. Amazing Grace (36)
9. Prayer of St. Francis (35)
10. Ave Verum Corpus (26)

**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 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 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.

**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. Holy God, We Praise Thy Name (23)
6. We Are Called (11)
7. You Are Mine (4)
8. Amazing Grace (23)
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 See
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)
through all of it. That is why ‘Lord of All Hopefulness’ is special to me” (Maria Lattanzio, 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, Straslund 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 Hermannus 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, O.M.). “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. . .” (Tony Ward, Omaha, Nebraska).

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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” (Patricia McGinley, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania).

**The Lord Is My Hope** (text and music by M. D. Ride). “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).