

Come and See . . . and Hear . . . and Sing

What do young Catholics want from the liturgy? How do “we” (whoever we are) reach “them” (whoever they are)? How do “they” reach “us” to answer our questions or to proclaim the faith that is in them? How do we work together to be faithful people?

The first mistake in asking questions like this is considering that “young Catholics” all have similar interests, similar understandings of liturgy and Church, and even similar interests in music. Young Catholics are not a monolith; they are as diverse as any other age group. And what will draw them into the Church’s liturgical life and keep them interested while they deepen their understanding and participation is as diverse as Gregorian chant and Matt Maher, organ and drum sets, Latin and vernacular translations, simple and elaborate ritual, country churches and great cathedrals.

What young Catholics do have in common is what we all have in common: the need for witnesses who show us by their lives what is important, what has meaning, and how to be whole. We don’t have to agree with these witnesses all at once; we may even argue with them or choose for a time to ignore them. But these are the people who make us wonder about the way we’re living and what it means, who offer us an alternative way to exist that, finally, becomes a way that we’re willing to make our own. In this sense, we’re all like those disciples of John the Baptist who approach Jesus in the early chapters of the fourth Gospel. Jesus asks them—as he asks us: “What are you looking for?” When they stammer out that they’d like to know where he lives, he says: “Come and see.” This is the same invitation, a few paragraphs later, that Philip offers Nathanael, when Nathanael asks the disparaging question about Jesus’ origins: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip responds: “Come and see” (John 1:35–46).

So the first thing we have to do as faithful people is issue that invitation. We have to be sure enough in our faith that we’re willing to offer ourselves as examples. We need to be confident enough to let someone get close enough to ask questions, to offer challenges, and to become

disciples like us, drawing on our example, our teaching, and our strength.

What is it that we’re inviting young people in particular to come and see? And what are they inviting us to see and hear and be part of? Two things, actually: the God revealed in Jesus Christ and our response to that revelation. The God of Jesus loves us infinitely, unquestioningly, unfathomably, and unconditionally—so much as to become one of us and to be present to us now and forever. Our response to that revelation must also be love, as we learn to live in and through the God who dwells within us, among us, and infinitely beyond us. And we need to show that response primarily in simple, daily ways, in the enduring ways that we live in communion with God, through Christ, in the power of the Spirit: in the ways we care for ourselves, for each other, and for strangers, especially the poor, forgotten, and suffering.

One of the key ways we issue the invitation to “come and see” is through the liturgy. It is here, we believe, that we are most fully in communion with the living God. If we believe that, then the way we worship should reflect that belief. This doesn’t mean that liturgy should be a “clappy happy” event, but it does mean that it should involve us completely (or at least as completely as we can give ourselves at any moment)—participating fully, consciously, and actively, body and mind, burning with faith, hope, and charity. Our liturgical celebrations should invite people to ask: “Who lives here?” And we should be ready to answer: “Come and see. Come and hear. Come and join our song.”

We offer that invitation especially through song, for, as the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* reminds us, “singing is the sign of the heart’s joy Thus St. Augustine says rightly, ‘Singing is for one who loves.’ There is also the ancient proverb: ‘One who sings well prays twice’” (GIRM, 39). Whatever music we use and songs we sing should express our deep commitment to the faith we share and to our belief in God’s presence when we gather to worship.

We have a whole treasury of music to use in crafting the song of our worship

in ways that will allow us to express our faith, share it with others, and give glory to God. The foundation stone on which all music for worship is built is chant, of course. Chanting a text elevates it from ordinary speech, calls attention to what is being said in the text, and highlights things we might otherwise have missed. Chant is a part of all societies and comes in many forms (one form in the United States includes certain kinds of rap). The Church has taken the chanting that existed in Israel and the Hellenic world at the time of the first Christians and built it up over the centuries, refining it and elaborating it even while keeping the simple, basic chants alive. That’s why there is a body of “plainchant” that we can use in dialogues at Mass and that the priest or deacon uses to chant some of the prayer texts, and there is another body of chant that belongs to choirs. On these basic foundation stones each generation and each culture has added its own layer of musical gifts. Some gifts have endured, others have passed away when they were no longer useful, and some are being added right now.

When we think about inviting young people through our own witness and encouraging them to be witnesses themselves, and when they think about doing that for us, we need to remember that the Father’s house has many dwelling places (John 14:2) and that there are many paths on which people are guided by the one Spirit. There is a rich treasury of music that we can use at worship. In our diversity, not everything will appeal to everyone, just as not every form of private prayer or every form of spirituality will appeal to every believer. We can’t offer everything for everyone; after all, music is a servant of the liturgy, not something added onto the liturgical act or stuck in to provide entertainment. But what we can do is this: Realize how foundational music ministry is in expressing and proclaiming the faith and then treat our ministry accordingly. What we do, after all, is proclaim the Word of God and the mystery of faith in song; we should do that as well as we can, using the best resources available, being the best witnesses we can be, so that everyone can hear the invitation we sing: “Come and see.”