

Why Do We Keep Singing?

By J. Michael McMahon

Why sing? A look around the world today, as at any time in human history, provides plenty of reasons not to sing. In addition to the icons of tragedy in New York, Washington, and Afghanistan, Israelis and Arabs continue shooting at one another as peace continues to elude the people of the Holy Land. In Northern Ireland, at least squabbling has replaced bombings and street violence; yet the stakes are so high that the country could easily erupt into renewed bloodshed. India and Pakistan, armed with nuclear weapons, face one another across a broken and divided Kashmir.

Why sing? Abortion has nearly become routine in our society, and the individualistic moral outlook prevalent in our nation has led to more favorable attitudes toward abortion. We look around to see a country where a man can be dragged to his death because he is black, where a college student can be beaten and left to die because he is gay, and where the desire for retribution has led to an ever-increasing number of executions.

Why sing? We live in a world that suffers from the effects of genocide, religious persecution, child abuse, exploitation of workers, family divisions, mistreatment of women, discrimination against immigrants, and a whole host of other problems.

Why sing indeed? Each Sunday we stand before people in our parish churches, encouraging them, leading them, sometimes even cajoling them to join in song. Why? We sing, I believe, because God sings and summons us to join in the divine song that has power to transform and renew.

The Song of God

Why sing? "In the beginning was the song and the song was with God, and the song was in God's presence, and the song was God . . . And the song became flesh, and dwelt among us." The beginning of the Gospel of John, with "song" substituted for "word," proclaims the divine Logos, the Word that God speaks or sings. In the cultures of the New Testament communities, the distinction between singing and speaking was not so clearly drawn as it is for us today, and one might just as easily translate God's "speaking" as God's "singing." In fact, "singing" may be a stronger way of imaging God's speech as those communities understood it. To hear God singing the Word is first of all to gain a new appreciation of the depths of love from which God speaks. God sings the world into being: Stars and planets and galaxies, light and darkness, plants and birds and fish and animals, women and men and children, all are expressions of God's song of creative love.

Why do we sing? In Jesus, God's song has become flesh. Because Jesus is himself the Song of God, and because Jesus has fully taken on our human nature, the love of God is proclaimed in the very midst of human suffering and sin and death. God's song, as it is sung by Jesus, proclaims good news for the poor, freedom for the captive, hearing for the deaf, sight for the blind, forgiveness for the sinner, life for those who walk in the shadow of death. The song of Jesus is a song of freedom. In Jesus God sings peace in the face of violence, healing in the face of sickness, liberation in the face of injustice.

Why sing? We sing because we have been baptized into Christ Jesus and have pledged ourselves to be his followers. We have heard his song, and now we are called to enter his song and to sing it in a world that stands in need of it.

Why sing? We sing because our song gives expression to the power of God. God's love continues to be sung in the world especially in the face of sin and evil. Sometimes it is the song of lament, as the in the wail of a mother at the execution of her son. Sometimes it is the song of victory, as in the 1989 performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at the site of the recently dismantled Berlin Wall. Sometimes it is the song of defiance, as in

the freedom songs of the civil rights movement. All of these give voice to God's power to overcome evil and injustice.

Song of Gathering

The liturgy, of course, is the great song of God's people, and we can look to the act of worship itself to provide some additional answers to our question: Why sing?

Just as God's song calls creation into being, so in the liturgy God's song forms a group of people into the body of Christ. This body has first been fashioned by the saving song of Christ in his death and resurrection, so each time we gather for the liturgy, it is Christ himself who brings us together. We begin with a song that should, in the words of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, "intensify the unity of the assembled people" (no. 25), so that the power of Christ may be revealed in our midst. The blending of our voices in a hymn of praise gives expression to the song of God that has brought us together into one people, united in Christ. To opt out of the song that gathers us is to opt out of our role as members of Christ's body. It's not simply about making people welcome, although that is surely a part of our ministry. As music ministers, we lead a community in singing the song of God which in turn shapes us into a people made in the image of Christ. Our song proclaims the God who has called us from darkness into light, forgiven and redeemed, chosen to be God's living presence in the world.

Why sing? We sing in order to be who we are: God's own people, formed and gathered by the song of God.

Song of the Living Word

In the liturgy the song of God is both heard and sung. The song of the liturgy proclaims the Word of God. More importantly, it makes present the living Word of God, who is Christ. As ministers of that song, we help the members of the assembly to hear the Word and so to encounter Christ, the living Song of God. The music of the liturgy is a sacrament of that encounter.

About fifteen years ago, I sleepily made my way to the parish office one day during the week after Easter to find a letter in my box. This one was quite different from the usual post-Easter cards that express appreciation for the beauty of the liturgy and music. It was from a woman who had come to the 11:00 Mass on Easter Sunday after having been away from the practice of the faith for a number of years. The choir had worked hard for many weeks rehearsing and for many days singing at the liturgies of the Triduum: Thursday evening at 7:30, Friday afternoon at 3:00, the Easter Vigil from 4:00 to 7:00 am on Easter Sunday morning. When they came back to sing for Easter morning at 11:00, they were tired but sang with energy and conviction. The letter I received during that week came from a woman who had been moved by the singing and had met Christ in that celebration. She heard the good news of Easter that day in a whole new way. The song of the liturgy helped her to hear Christ summoning her to follow him through death into life. She not only began coming to church once again, but she became an active participant in God's song: She joined the choir herself!

Why sing? Because the song of the liturgy proclaims the living Word of God and fosters a personal encounter with Christ, who calls us to leave behind our fear and our isolation to follow him into a new way of life.

Song of Thanksgiving

In the liturgy the assembly of the faithful joins its voices in a great hymn of praise and thanksgiving: "Lift up your hearts./We lift them up to the Lord. Let us give thanks to the Lord our God./It is right to give thanks and praise." The heart of our worship is this act of thanksgiving or, to use the Greek word, this act of eucharisteia. In

the Letter to the Colossians (3:15-17), St. Paul makes a strong connection between thankfulness and singing. We are always, he suggests, to be thankful. We should sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in our hearts to God. There have been times in my life that I have found this a little hard to swallow. How can we be always thankful? My father and I used to have a running argument over one of his BPs ("basic principles"): "There's no such thing as a bad experience," he used to say. In our discussions I always maintained that some experiences are simply negative and need to be left behind, such as child abuse or genocide. He, on the other hand, argued that there is something to be learned from every experience, something to help us to grow stronger. Now that I myself am closer to procuring an AARP card, I realize that there is truth in both his position and mine. There is indeed real suffering, real loss, and real tragedy in the life experience of the human family, and we can never dismiss it as simply an opportunity for growth. It needs to be faced and acknowledged. The Book of Psalms contains many examples of laments, of songs that cry out to God in an expression of sorrow and pain.

As Christians we are called to an attitude of thankfulness, not for human suffering, but in spite of it, recognizing the God who stands with us and has embraced it in the divine song of love. On the cross, Jesus himself was heard to sing from the twenty-second psalm, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" God sings with those who suffer abandonment, God weeps with them, God takes on their pain. It is for this we give thanks. The psalm of Jesus on the cross itself reflects this attitude in its concluding verses:

I will proclaim your name to my people,

I will praise you in the assembly.

My soul lives for the Lord!

My children will serve,

will proclaim God to the future,

announcing to peoples yet unborn,

God saves.

In his dying song on the cross, Jesus cried out to God complaining of his abandonment, yet proclaiming God's faithfulness in praise and thanksgiving.

"Be thankful," Paul instructs us. Each time we gather at the Eucharistic table, we bring this thanksgiving to expression: "It is our duty and our salvation always and everywhere to give you thanks." For the members of Christ's body, the song of thanks is to be always on our lips and in our hearts. Does such a stance make us Pollyannas? Not at all. We are not thankful for suffering, nor do we seek suffering. We are not thankful for evil, but we seek to resist it.

Thankfulness is the fruit of remembrance. We hold in memory the great deeds God has performed in the past. We remember God's creative actions and Christ's redeeming life, death, and resurrection. These past events are sung at this present moment, and they become present (i.e., with us now). We give thanks because "we hold the death of the Lord deep in our hearts." We give thanks because we live, even at this moment, in the light of Christ's resurrection. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" Paul challenges the Romans. "Neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38). The remembrance of God's ever-faithful love evokes our hymn of thanksgiving even in the

midst of turmoil, division, and loss. Even at Masses for the dead, we offer to God the sacrifice of praise, proclaiming in our sorrow that "for your faithful people, life is changed not ended."

Why sing? We sing in the memory of God's faithfulness. God's mercy is greater than our sin; God's love is stronger than death. In all things and at all times we sing our thanks and praise to God, and live in the hope of God's continuing care for us, even in the midst of suffering.

God's Song in the World

The song of the liturgy is a rehearsal, if you will, for the song of our life. The liturgy of Word-and-Eucharist prepares us and sends us out to be active participants in the liturgy of the world. At the liturgy we hear God's song: God's song forms us into a people. God sings to us the living Word of life. At the table of thanksgiving, we sing in remembrance the song of God's faithfulness and love. We are transformed to live in joyful hope as we wait for the final stanza of God's song to the world.

When we are sent forth from the Lord's table, nourished by his living presence, we are to sing God's song in the world. God's song is to become our song, singing life where there is death, singing hope where there is cynicism, singing unity where there is division, singing justice where there is oppression, singing freedom where there is bondage, singing healing where there is sickness, singing comfort where there is sorrow. And above all, we sing love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Why sing? We sing because we have heard God's song and have ourselves become a part of the song. For us, the question is no longer, "Why sing?" but "How can I keep from singing?"

At the time this article was written, Dr. J. Michael McMahon was the president of the National Association of Pastoral Musicians. This article is based on a homily for the celebration of evening prayer at the Archdiocese of Cincinnati Musicians' Evening of Reflection in 2000.

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