

Sacred Fine Art Music vs. Liturgical Pop: Pastoral Reality or Conservatory Construct?^{1*}

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The year was 1996. A prominent US cleric had died, and a well-staffed worship committee had prepared the funeral liturgy. When the musical choices were presented to the organist, he balked. The selected communion song was the well-known “I Am the Bread of Life,” by Suzanne Toolan. The organist indicated he would not perform the piece because, in his opinion, it was not a composition of sufficient quality to merit inclusion in the funeral liturgy. Despite his opinion, however, he was contractually required to perform the piece along with the rest of the music for that liturgy. Apparently regardless of the quality of the work, the community raised the roof singing the Toolan composition during the subsequent celebration.

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There has been and probably continues to be some polarization in the various musical-liturgical worlds that we inhabit—partially reflected in this true story: between chant and contemporary song, between the position of the Snowbird statement and the Milwaukee statement, between sixteenth century polyphony and what some consider liturgical pop. As early as 1966 the music advisory board of the US Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy had a contentious debate in such a binary mode between what Rembert Weakland characterized as the “pastorally acceptable” and the “aesthetically pleasing.”¹ Nonetheless, the framing of such positions through the use of binaries—as though two pugilists in opposite corners of the squared circle ready for battle—is relatively simplistic, largely inaccurate, and particularly unhelpful in this hybrid moment of late modernity. Thus my original tongue-in-cheek

title for this brief reflection: “In This Corner the Heavyweight Champions: Gregorian Chant and Palestrina, and Their Lightweight Opponents: Haugen, Haas, and Joncas.”

Some of the reasons for my inability to embrace or affirm such a flimsy binary are rooted in the insights of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy from Vatican II and the multiple position papers and directives of the US Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy informed by that document that, early on, understood how evaluating music across

¹ See my *A Lyrical Vision* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), chap. 1.

styles in a monochromatic way for all age groups, all social contexts, and all ethnic and cultural identifications was both perilous and untenable. Most recently *Sing to the Lord*² invokes the insight of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*³ when it notes that the church has “not adopted any particular style of art as her own. She has admitted styles from every period, in keeping with the natural characteristics and conditions of peoples and the needs of the various rites” (SC, no. 123).

Another reason for my unwillingness to engage in such a binary polemic is *Sacrosanctum Concilium*'s emphasis on the ministerial function of music in the liturgy, and its litmus test for holiness—not based on some compositional or stylistic judgment, but based on how closely it is connected with the liturgical action, whether making prayer more acceptable, promoting the unity of the faithful, or conferring greater solemnity upon the rite (no. 112).

Many years ago Joseph Gelineau⁴ of blessed memory (d. 2008) offered the useful distinction between music in the liturgy and music of the liturgy. According to *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, authentic liturgy is an action of Christ, head and members. Because of that perspective, every event or word or gesture that happens, for example, within a Sunday eucharist, does not immediately qualify as liturgy. When presiders, as unfortunately sometimes happens, are abusive or demeaning during a Eucharistic liturgy, their actions **in** the liturgy are not Christlike and by definition are at least diminished if not voided as actions **of** the liturgy even though they occur within its temporal framework. Analogously, just because a piece of music is inserted in worship—no matter what its style or compositional quality—it is not necessary fulfilling its ministerial function and thus does not necessarily meet the criteria for rendering it an authentic musical-liturgical event.

Thus, in my opinion, the very documents of the Roman Catholic Church do not support any contemporary paraphrase of Julius Caesar suggesting that “*musica sacra est omnis divisa in partes duas.*” This longstanding position that some of us have advocated for decades receives new refractions in this second decade of the twenty-first century that is more post-modern, more post-colonial, and in many places more post-Christian than the 1963 context in which *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was shaped.

For example, in 1963 there was no such thing as ritual theory, that interdisciplinary study of ritual that appeared at the end of the twentieth century, primarily in North America and Europe.⁵ Admittedly there is great divergence of approaches in this emerging field, symbolized by the lack of uniformity in even attempting to define what ritual is, much less what any given ritual means. Saudi American anthropologist Talal Asad wisely admits that, while ethnographers may not agree about the meaning of any given ritual, they have little difficulty recognizing one.⁶

While there are divergent approaches and presuppositions in this field, there are yet deep trends and broad flows identifiable in ritual studies. One of them, highlighted in the influential writings of Catherine Bell (d. 2008), is an awareness that all forms of ritualization are exercises in power. Strongly influenced by the work of French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault (d. 1984), Bell argued that ritual—including Roman Catholic liturgy, which she specifically addresses—does not so much have a content to deliver but is a strategy for doing something, particularly for constructing power relationships. She writes:

2 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sing to the Lord* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2007).

3 Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

4 Joseph Gelineau, *Voices and Instruments in Christian Worship: Principles, Laws, Applications*, trans. Clifford Howell (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1964), 63ff.

5 See my “Ritual Theory,” in *Wiley Blackwell Companions to Religion: A Companion to Practical Theology*, ed., Bonnie Miller McLemore (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 143-52.

6 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 55.

The deployment of ritualization, consciously or unconsciously, is the deployment of a particular construction of power relationships, a particular relationship of domination, consent, and resistance. As a strategy of power, ritualization has both positive and effective aspects as well as specific limits to what it can do and how far it can extend. . . . It is necessary to explore the relationships of power constituted through ritualization and the circumstances in which these relationships are effective or ineffective forms of social action.⁷

Now some of you might be wondering what ritual theory and Foucaultian constructs of strategies and power have to do with thinking about sacred music or liturgical music. Isn't the latter fundamentally about judging the quality of the art, and has everything to do with voice leading, properly constructed harmonization, and how a singable and inspiring melody is wed to an intelligent and inventive accompaniment? From my perspective, that answer to that question in a word is "no." As a Roman Catholic presbyter, who has presided and preached for almost forty years, and as a professor of liturgy and music who has taught others to do the same for over three decades, Bell's theoretical work wed with my personal experiences as well as the feedback from many others underscore that liturgy in all of its aspects is a kind of strategy . . . and not only, but nonetheless, an inevitable exercise of power. In my opinion, Roman Catholic clergy hold too much of that power in our liturgical enactments, but musicians do as well.

The power of the musician is exercised in the selection of the repertoire, in its placement in the liturgy—whether or not it is actually "of" the liturgy—and even in the naming of the field. While I understand *musica sacra* is the official language of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and subsequent Vatican documents (and thus is often echoed in documents from the US bishops), its English equivalent is not the ordinary vernacular of what *Sing to the Lord* calls "liturgical musicians." Rather, in my experience, the language of sacred music in the Roman Catholic Church is largely employed in this country by academics and some church administrators, but is not the language of the thousands of ministers who musically animate Roman Catholic worship around this country. If you're wondering what difference it makes if church musicians have admittedly limited but nonetheless real power over repertoire and worship styles, the categorization and very definition of the field, then it might be time to consult with the work of the Pew Center for the Study of Religion in this country.

In their extensive and groundbreaking Religious Landscape Survey of 2007, whose findings were published in 2008,⁸ the Pew Forum outlined in sometimes painful detail the decline of the mainline Protestant Churches in the United States, and the massive hemorrhaging of members from the Roman Catholic Church in this country: cradle Catholics are not remaining in the cradle. The Roman Catholic Church, according to that study, experienced the greatest net losses from affiliation changes than any other denomination in the United States, and our numbers only appeared "healthy" because of immigrants to this country. The immigrants are largely Hispanic, according to that study, who tend to be less well-off economically and have less formal education. According to the Pew Report only 26 percent of Roman Catholics in this country had a college or post-graduate degree, while a staggering 51 percent had a high school diploma or less. So the net number of Roman Catholics seems relatively stable, but the profile is poorer and less well-educated than at the time of Vatican II. The revelation brings to mind the comment of mentor and minor deity Nathan Mitchell, who once wrote: "Secretly, many of us believe that God loves the poor, but hates their art. Surely, we suspect, God prefers Mozart to Randy Travis."⁹

Over the past decades, according to Pew, one-third of those who were born into Roman Catholicism in this coun

7 Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 206.

8 "Religious Landscape Survey," *Pew Research Religion and Life Project*, February 2008, <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports#>.

9 Nathan Mitchell, "Amen Corner," *Worship* 70, no. 3 (1996): 258.

try no longer identify with our church; one out of every ten adult Americans is an ex-Catholic: a number so staggering that if those who have left us were to form a separate denomination, they would be the third-largest religious denomination in the United States, after Roman Catholics and Baptists. It is a trend one could certainly understand, in the language of Catherine Bell, as an act of **resistance** to the power strategy of Roman Catholicism and its worship. While many Roman Catholics are metaphorically leaving home, the group that we are bleeding the most are young adults, eighteen- to thirty-five-year-olds. Ironically, however, many of them actually are not really leaving their religious or spiritual home. As Dr. Kate DeVries, former associate director of young adult ministry in the archdiocese of Chicago, pointedly noted in her doctoral work, you cannot invite young adults to come “home” to a church which for many of them was never really their home in the first place.

In subsequent studies, Pew and others have documented the growing national trend, most apparent with people under thirty years of age, of religious nonaffiliation. According to the Pew Research Center, “the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. One-fifth of the U.S. public—and a third of adults under 30—are religiously unaffiliated today.”¹⁰ According to the research, almost 70 percent of the unaffiliated believe in God or a universal spirit, over 40 percent of them still pray, and almost 55 percent think of themselves as religious or “spiritual.” On the other hand, just 5 percent of this population says that they attend worship services on a weekly basis.

So, it appears that the number of Roman Catholics in this country is in decline, and that those who stay or join are increasingly immigrant, many of whom experience higher poverty levels and less education than dominant-culture Roman Catholics who have the time and wherewithal even to attend such a colloquium. But should this reality make any difference to those who teach or study in sacred music or liturgical music programs, like that at Notre Dame? I think so, and it seems to me that Pope Francis thinks so as well.

In his stunning apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*,¹¹ Francis places evangelization at the heart of the Church’s mission, as he exhorts the church to take up its missionary mandate received from Jesus (no. 19). The pope believes that the first place this new evangelization is carried out is in the area of “ordinary pastoral ministry,” which is intended in his words “to inflame the hearts of the faithful who regularly take part in community worship and gather on the Lord’s day to be nourished by his word and by the bread of eternal life” (no. 14).

While *Evangelii Gaudium* makes no specific mention of liturgical or pastoral musicians, and employs only one fleeting musical metaphor, in my opinion Francis’ exhortation throws much light on musical ministries and shatters any bifurcation of this ministry into high art versus liturgical pop. For example, he believes we need to move from “a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry” (no. 15), and dreams of a missionary option capable of transforming the usual customs, language, and ways of doing things channeled for evangelization “rather than for [the Church’s] self-preservation” (no. 27). In that same vein he insists that some of our ways of doing things—even some with deep historical roots—are no longer properly understood and appreciated and we should not be afraid to reexamine them (no. 43). He further insists that, given the invitation of Jesus, we are called to “go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the gospel” (no. 20). In sometimes graphic language Francis talks about an evangelizing community willing to abase itself if necessary, embrace human life, and take on the smell of the sheep (no. 24). In one of his more notable lines he writes, “I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security” (no. 49).

10 “Nones’ on the Rise,” *Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project*, October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>, emphasis mine.

11 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.htm.

These papal reflections find resonance in the US Bishops' 2007 statement on music in worship, *Sing to the Lord*. In that document the bishops affirm that "the liturgical music of the Western European tradition is to be remembered, cherished, and used." At the same time the bishops recognize that "the rich cultural and ethnic heritage of the many peoples of our country must also be recognized, fostered, and celebrate" (no. 57). To ignore the musical gifts of immigrants and other cultural minorities in the midst of our worship and instead expect them to share the musical tastes of those trained in Western musical styles could be a not-too-subtle form of musical colonialism and cultural elitism.

Maybe most valuable in *Evangelii Gaudium* for liturgical musicians is the Pope's extended reflection upon another liturgical event, the homily. Particularly helpful is his emphasis on preachers' needing to keep their ear to the people and discover what it is the faithful need to hear (no. 154). He nuances that perspective by suggesting that "the greatest risk for a preacher is that he becomes so accustomed to his own language that he thinks that everyone else naturally understands and uses it. If we wish to adapt to people's language and to reach them with God's word, we need to share in their lives and pay loving attention to them" (no. 15).

Francis also expends considerable energy talking about "beauty." Preaching in the vision of *EG* is not to be a "burden" on the people of God, but an encounter with beauty: "the Church evangelizes and is herself evangelized through the beauty of the Liturgy" (no. 24). "In the homily, truth goes hand in hand with beauty and goodness" (no. 142). Yet the beauty of which he speaks is the beauty of the Gospel (no. 195), the beauty of the saving love of God (no. 36), a beatific love that especially extends itself to the marginalized, the poor, the oppressed, and those treated by society as disposable commodities.

Francis' writings seem to embrace what could be considered a Marian aesthetic—a Guadalupe aesthetic, or beauty as refracted through the *anawim* hymn Mary voices in Luke 1:45-66. In his exploration of theological aesthetics, Alejandro García-Rivera argues that a true aesthetic—even a liturgical aesthetic—must embrace the lowly. This lifting up the lowly, according to García-Rivera, takes place "in the biblical heart" where good and evil must be discerned.¹² Francis continuously emphasizes the need for the baptized to tune our hearts to the poor and marginalized. The resulting aesthetic seems to be one less defined by music theory or German philosophy, and more defined by the heart of Mary the blessed one whom the Pope deems the very "Mother of Evangelization" (no. 284).

Liturgical musicians are called to be evangelizers, like the rest of the church. Their evangelizing mission is not, in my opinion, to convert the baptized or seekers to a particular musical aesthetic or style, but to expose and invite them to a gospel tuned to the poor and in love with a world that God so embraced that even the blood of the only begotten was not spared to demonstrate this love. Thus, in the spirit of *Evangelii Gaudium*, the evangelizing mission is tuned to the sheep, not the shepherd, it is centrifugal not centripetal, it acknowledges and respects the language and art forms of the baptized in all of their social and cultural diversity, and does not require them to acquire ours in the pursuit of the gospel.

Five times *Sacrosanctum Concilium* asserts the two inseparable functions of liturgy: the glorification of God and the sanctification of people.¹³ I would contend that this is not a conciliar binary, but a stereoscopic view of worship that intimately links these two functions. Ironically, the ancient wisdom of the church is that God does not need our praise, nor even needs sacraments or liturgy; it is only people who have that need. God is glorified in the very act of people's sanctification and hardly apart from it. The council fathers linked people's sanctification with their active participation in the Church's liturgy. The evangelizing and missionary task of every liturgical musician is

¹² Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 181.

¹³ These two elements are consistently conjoined when *SC* speaks about the nature of the liturgy; besides here in no. 7, also see nos. 5, 10, 61, and 112.

to deploy every possible musical skill and degree of lyrical imagination, across the terrain of tonal and harmonic possibilities, so that in our music God is truly glorified through the incarnational instrument we call the people of God, through Christ our Lord.