

Homily Advent 4C: 23 Dec 2012: HT-W/XII-PC

It is a fact of liturgical life so well-known that it's become a staple of jokes and books as well the topic of conversation among church musicians. I speak of the fact that Catholics don't sing. It doesn't matter how good the choir's support is. It doesn't matter how clearly the music is indicated in the missalette. It doesn't matter how much the pastor pleads with the congregation just to pick up the blessed book and give it a try. Catholics, at least a lot of them, stubbornly refuse to make the feeblest of attempts at singing. Now I admit, sometimes the selection of music leaves something to be desired, of course not here. And I admit that sometimes pastors themselves, perhaps too pressed for time, discourage music at Masses, of course not here. Nonetheless, the ideal for Eucharist, esp. the Sunday Eucharist, is that the whole assembly actively participate by joining in the religious hymns. But getting some of the faithful to sing is like trying to pull teeth out of a Tyrannosaurus.

My dear people, sacred music is a vital part of religious. For instance, if Luke's Narrative of the Lord's Nativity were to be performed on stage, it would have to be a musical, or even an opera, because it lends itself so well to sung speech. Throughout these two chapters, central actors discovering the wondrous works of the Almighty burst forth into canticles, poetically arranged speeches that simply cry out to be sung. So Zechariah chants his famous Benedictus at the birth of his son John the future Baptist, rejoicing and praising God for the unexpected gift of a progeny in the evening of his life. Mary, the Virgin Mother, intones her celebrated Magnificat, extolling the God of her fathers who has done marvels for her, his lowly servant, in granting her the singular privilege of bearing his Son, the Savior of the world. Likewise the aged Simeon, promised a glimpse of the long awaited Messiah before his death, sings the Nunc dimittis--Now, O Lord, you may dismiss your servant in peace--as he delights to hold the infant Christ in his arms. Today, we hear the mini-canticle of Elizabeth--blessed are you, Mary, among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. If that sounds familiar, it should: it's been incorporated into the Hail Mary prayer. Elizabeth explodes in song because she is overjoyed to stand in the presence of the mother of the Messiah. And tiny John the Baptist is so happy that he does a little dance since he can't yet sing.

Singing gives voice to the deepest sentiments of the human heart: passions, feelings, and convictions that the spoken word cannot convey. It expresses something more profound, and it often evokes a more radical response from the hearer. We're all familiar w/ how rock stars capture the hearts of countless teenagers with their sonorous voices. We think of the desperate suitor strumming his guitar outside his sweetheart's window, hoping his attempts at melodic seduction will succeed where other efforts have failed.

Singing, music in general, entered the liturgical tradition very early, for worshipers realized that in order to communicate the strongest movements of their hearts to the Almighty--be they praise

or penance, thanksgiving or lamentation--they required the assistance of sacred song. Indeed, our Jewish forebears bequeathed this tradition to us: the psalms and other poignant passages of the OT were specifically written to be sung together w/ instrumental accompaniment. Among the greatest masterpieces of Western music are the Masses composed by Bach and Mozart. And so even today we dedicate certain parts of the liturgy to musical praise and proclamation, the better part of which are to be sung by the entire congregation.

Coming to church should be for us a moment akin to the Visitation. For Mary is a kind of personification of the Church. She brings Christ in her womb to Elizabeth. So also the Church brings Christ to his people at the sacred liturgy. Mysteriously veiled under sign and symbol, Scripture and Sacrament, the Lord is presented to us. If our hearts and heads be in the right place, this should be an occasion for joy that bubbles over in musical expression. Like Elizabeth and John before us, we should rejoice at our unmerited privilege of being graced with a visit from our Redeemer at every Mass. Ours is a joy born of faith that our God has come to dwell among us. In this Year of Faith, may this Christian joy grow stronger in our hearts. Let's pray that this Christmas, God's people in our parishes will join in the joyous angelic chorus, with full heart and full voice: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to people of good will.