

WHY I NEED OUR CHURCH MUSICIAN

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This is the sixth in a series of articles following the conference, "Common, Uncommon, and Holy Ground," sponsored by the AGO Committee on Denominational Relations. You are invited to participate in a workshop on the topic of the conference at the National Convention in Denver.

In his book, *Living the Message*, Eugene Petersen writes: "A poet uses words not to explain something, and not to describe something, but to make something. Poet (poetess) means 'maker.' Poetry is not the language of objective explanation but the language of imagination. It makes an image of reality in such a way as to invite our participation in it. We do not have more information after we read the poem, we have more experience. It is not 'an examination of what happens but an immersion in what happens.'"

Early in my educational preparation for the ministry, one of my classmates asked an interesting question of our scripture professor. "You have made of this Bible a most interesting textbook for us. Who will not make of it a prayer book for us?" That question comes often to mind as I reflect on the years I spent learning theology, knowing well, I hope, the proper dogmas and creeds, laws, and proper ritual. And indeed, I value such training and knowledge as important. After all, it was Saint Teresa of Avila who said that if one had a choice between a holy spiritual director and an educated one, choose the educated one!

Yet, I know, too, that as much as learning is necessary, we are often divided within churches and among churches by the manner of our theology and the litmus tests we often apply for proper membership, tests that focus on the proper understanding of the truths we hold dear. We speak of how our churches differ in teachings or practices, yet we often say little about the experience of Emmanuel, "God among us," discovered as we gather for worship week after week.

The challenge of worship is a strange paradox. It is the work of so many, including the assembly of believers, in singing, praying, listening . . . yet all to reveal the One truly at work among us. It is experience, not knowledge, as Petersen reminds us, that the poet provides, reminding me of another classmate who many years ago said rather innocently, "I think we need more poets and fewer theologians." Today, I remember one of our tradition's greatest theologians, Saint Thomas Aquinas, who provided what many still consider the clearest theological explanations of many of our most profound mysteries.

Yet in spite or because of all that he wrote, he still found it necessary to write hymns to give full expression to and experience of these profound mysteries.

I need our church musician because worship is not simply about teaching the community or preaching or singing about a God who seems strangely "elsewhere" during such moments, but rather worship seeks to "realize" the presence among us, a presence that sometimes, as Peter discovered on the mountain, demands that the teacher be still and listen. It is the power of ritual to realize such presence, whether of high or low church, and like any poetry or art it makes use of color and rhythm, words and music, movement and stillness.

The role of the musician is no easy task. Although we know the power of music to manipulate others, to send armies into battle, to sell unwanted products to the masses, to create proper mood in movies, or to provide excitement to crowds of young admiring audiences, such is not the role of the church musician. It is to reveal as only beauty reveals. And therein the challenge continues. For is not beauty often in the eye of the beholder? And so the debate continues. It is a debate I know I cannot resolve.

I only know that while music can move the emotions, create a frenzy in a gospel church, elicit applause in a charismatic gathering, and bring tears in a wedding, these emotions, like worship itself, need to be in the service of conversion not simply comfort. Music faces the same challenges as preaching and poetry. It can, of course, seek a common denominator and appeal to the masses in a popular way and, at best, truly comfort the afflicted. To draw near to the gospel, however, is to know not only the comfort of the Shepherd but the challenge of the one who spoke in parable, the one who invited us to follow. The music needs, then, to serve the call and the conversion.

I need the church musician to provide music that calls us together, unites us, creates a sense of prayer, and becomes prayer itself. How often after a wedding have I overheard someone compliment the cantor, not the preacher, for creating a spirit of prayer. Texts and tone chosen and employed by the musician, therefore, demand the same critical judgment as those chosen by the preacher. Viewing the movie *Amistad*, it was apparent how easy it is to gather in a church and sing well-established hymns of generic praise and be so unaware of the slavery in which one participates. What a challenge: to seek familiar tunes but texts that participate in the very challenge of the gospel itself!

I need our church musician because we do not gather as talking heads, to debate intellectual ideas or theological differences. We gather as human beings filled with God's breath, human beings whose lives are filled with melody, rhythm, and movement. The Psalms express well the combination of rhythm and texts as they continue today to give voice to every possible human emotion—the joy and doubt of walking in faith. How often, too, they sing of so many varied instruments, as well as creation itself giving voice to the praise of God. Without overlooking the added rhythm of silence so easily neglected in our rush to be busy about our worship, I would think that to eliminate the musician would be to eliminate part of the human soul, the human spirit, and to leave so important a part of us outside the church door.

I need our church musician for, again to quote Eugene Petersen, "It is particularly appropriate that a poet has the last word in the Bible. . . . Saint John takes the familiar words and, by arranging them in unexpected rhythms, wakes us up so that we see 'the revelation of Jesus Christ' entire, as if for the first time."

Sadly, this "revelation" seems too easily cast in words debated, discussed, argued, and offered as a proof text for one's particular rightful stance, as though both Moses and Jesus' only testament was one of words rather than an ongoing promise of faithful presence. I need our church musician to reawaken us to another dimension of those timeless words and stories, a dimension too easily overlooked in our obsession with words in our information age. Again, Eugene Petersen reminds us of the value of song in his meditation for March 9 in his book, *Living the Message*:

"There are songs everywhere in scripture. The people of God sing. They express exuberance in realizing the majesty of God and the mercy of Christ, the wholeness of reality and their newfound ability to participate in it. Songs proliferate. Hymns gather the voices of men, women, and children into century-tiered choirs. Moses sings. Miriam sings. Deborah sings. David sings. Mary sings. Angels sing. Jesus and his disciples sing. Paul and Silas sing. When persons of faith become aware of who God is and what He does, they sing. The songs are irrepressible."

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