

Changing Hearts and Minds in the Pews

By Mary Jane Ballou



If your pews are filled with devout, prayerful, singing Catholics, you don't need to read any further. On the other hand, if you look out from the organ bench to see an ocean of empty faces, stay with me.

Don't say you haven't seen them. Listless, holding the closed hymnal in one hand, or perhaps leaning back in the pew, arms folded, waiting for things to end. Their "full, active, and conscious participation" consists of not being unconscious. Occasionally, extravagant humor from a visiting priest can make them laugh. Maybe. Neither traditional music nor contemporary pop ballads incite them to sing. While the vast majority receives Communion, there is no reverence and no joy in the gift. At the end of the liturgy, they are like third-graders waiting for the bell to ring. Next week you will find them in the pews, ready to endure this process again. The parish may be filled with activities and ministries; picnics and school festivities, thriving families and prayer groups. And still the worship is so lacking in vitality. Why?

From *Sacrosanctum Concilium* to the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, the dreams of liturgists and composers such as Lucien Deiss, envisioning a celebrating assembly, remain unrealized. There are exceptions, of course. All choir directors read jealously of cathedrals (and the occasional university parish) with choirs, scholas, and a plethora of brass players who can transpose at sight, surrounded by a full-voiced assembly. The reality for most of us is different—a landscape of limited resources, willing but undertrained singers, and a middle-school trumpet player. At the same time, it's not about the money or the resources. Many of the most moving liturgies I've attended were in humble circumstances with modest musical equipment. It was the unity of focus of the worshipping congregation and the priest that seemed to place that particular time and space in contact with heaven. Why was this experience the exception?

The intention of this essay is not to rehearse the sorry situation in which many parishes find themselves when it comes to worship. Instead, the reader will find some thoughts about causes and possible cures.

Why Are They There, Anyway?

This is the question that first comes to mind when considering the seemingly unhappy people in the pews. Market research organizations survey the church-going population of the United States on a regular basis. In March 2007, the Gallup Poll contacted 1,006 American adults over the age of eighteen with the open-ended question, "What is the most important reason why you attend church or synagogue?" Here are the Catholic responses.

Keeps me grounded/inspired	28%
It's my faith	21%
For spiritual growth/guidance	17%
Brought up that way/Tradition/A family value	15%
To worship God	13%
Believe in God/religion	11%
Fellowship of other members/The community	3%

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While one would never apply results such as these to an "intentional" parish, such as a community centered on the Extraordinary Rite or members of an ecclesial movement, they have some value for considering the "it's the closest to my house and the parking lot is good" parish. While the comments that follow are unscientific, they combine the survey results with years of informal conversations with church-goers.

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All the hand-shaking during the sign of peace aside, it does not appear that the surveyed Catholics were over enamored of each other with only three percent of respondents interested in fellowship.

The "it's my faith" and "brought up that way" fall into a category I will call "force of habit." These are the people who are there because they have always been there. They have ridden out liturgical

and pastoral changes. When the felt banners were replaced with fabric and when the three-chord guitar players were replaced by a grand piano and a synthesizer, they just blinked and continued not singing. They sat through "If I Had a Hammer" and "Here I Am, Lord" and they will wait out the Gregorian revival as well.

"Keeps me grounded/inspired" and "spiritual growth and guidance" respondents probably focus on the reception of Holy Communion and the quality of the homilies. They come to Mass to get their batteries charged and they are happy if the music contributes to the process. Bear in mind, however, that the music must help them have an experience or feeling. Members of this group have a fondness for highly personal hymns and upbeat tunes.

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The last group who "believe in God and/or religion" may actually be members of other groups who didn't state their reasons too clearly. On the other hand, we may be looking at "Pascal's wager" at work and their Mass attendance is just to be on the safe side.

All these results aside, I believe there are other unarticulated reasons people come back week after week. The first is that they are drawn by the grace of God. The second is the longing of the human heart, made for God and constantly seeking him. The social philosopher Eugene Rosenstock-Huussy commented once that the human heart is made for love and if it cannot find love, it will fall sick and do dreadful things. Our pews have in them hearts longing to love God and be loved by him. Worship is honor and adoration given to what we love.

For those of us who direct, play, and sing, our worship is very conscious and we all hope that our music will be acceptable to God. Musicians are by nature very responsive to music and enjoy the "doing" of music. Not everyone shares our experience. Let us consider the sonic world our would-be worshippers know, whose sounds are still ringing in their ears as they enter the church on Sunday morning.

The World in Which They Live

Do our would-be worshippers come into the church after a stroll through the countryside or a meditative walk down a cloister?

When they get up, the noise begins. If there are children, the house erupts in the chaos, accompanied by a television morning show, of assembling outfits and sulking teenagers, wiping strained apricots off the baby and stuffing everyone into the minivan. Even calmer houses are full of morning e-mail, bad news on the radio, and lost keys. Children and teenagers have been with us for centuries. It's the electronics that up the ante.

Folks are wired for sound and speech all the time. In offices and stores, there is an unbroken stream of music and announcements rattling in the background. The radio and CD player (not to mention the DVD and the isolating Ipod in the back seat) play continuously in the car. How often do any of us sit in our homes with absolutely nothing on but the refrigerator?

We demand to be entertained and engaged immediately. The ubiquitous remote control gives broadcasters five seconds to grab the attention of viewers. Otherwise, they click on by. Slouched on the couch, tired eyes watch home decorating, reality shows, Geraldo Rivera, earthquakes and incipient hurricanes, sitcoms and dramas, sports, and Mother Angelica pass by. Like a day laborer on a street corner, each program shouts, "Watch me, watch me!" After a few rounds on the cable cycle, the viewer settles down and gazes at the best thing in the line-up.

In the production of a single 30-second broadcast commercial, developers may spend in excess of \$1,000,000. There is not one moment of that commercial that has not been crafted and polished perfectly. In the studio music industry, voices can be passed through digital processors to correct pitch. A single missed note can be re-recorded and plugged in; the possibility for retakes is limited only by the finances of the producers. Live performances outside the shrinking classical music arena are increasingly multimedia extravaganzas with laser lights, fireworks, and singers chosen for looks and personality over talent.

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In schools, students are enticed into learning with computer games and simulations that break down material into tiny bits of text surrounded by images that reproduce the visuals of television and cinema. Maybe a minute for each item, maybe less, lest boredom set in. The production values of these tidbits are usually excellent because the designers know that students will judge them according to the standards set by other media. Hokey graphics and silence or mere speech are turn-offs, so the "life of the molecule" program had better look and sound good.

Lastly, the internet has brought everything else home. Sites need to be fast-loading and eye-grabbing or the mouse-wielding user will click away. Designers labor to develop "sticky" pages that will hold visitors for at least minimal communication. Everything is there for the taking—music, texts, art, video—for every taste imaginable. You can range from the Sistine Chapel ceiling to the rankest pornography and rap on a medium that is completely neutral. "Freshness" is all, with the average life expectancy for a major web site being three to four months before a major overhaul is required to keep the visitors coming back.

This "entertainment culture" is about passive reception. The most movement that is demanded is a thumb on a remote or an index finger on a mouse. The head rarely swivels, while gravity rules. Someone else, somewhere else designs and delivers. The greatest demand made on the potential audience is "stay tuned." Content becomes secondary to delivery. Marshall McLuhan's prediction that the "medium becomes the message" is a pervasive truth. The goal is to keep that viewer/listener entranced with something, anything. Nothing more.

This sonically and visually saturated population staggers into your churches on Sunday morning (or Saturday afternoon if they have Sunday plans). They are fatigued from workplace power plays and family squabbles. Perhaps they wish they had a job and a family to argue with

and their main companionship is the shopping channel. One way or another, their tired minds and souls are now in the pews and we ask them (often in a chirpy emcee voice) to “join in the celebration and lift your hearts and voices in song and prayer.” These are individuals who are used to consuming music and spectacle, not creating it. The response is close to nil and most refuse to even touch the hymnal. Forty years of preaching “full, conscious, and active participation” seems only to have immunized them to our pleas.

What’s Been Tried

The churches have tried it all.

In parishes with ample financial resources, you’ll find the best sound equipment on the market and a taste for glitz (within some limits, of course). The music choices will increasingly mimic the harmonies and phrasing of popular music and a personable cantor is always an asset. Youth Masses may travel even further down this road and go for a full combo. For those with more “high-brow” tastes, publishers offer streamlined arrangements of polyphony or suggest

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ways to soup up the old favorites from the 1980s with instrumental obbligatos and brass quartets at Easter. For want of another term, let’s call this the “we’ll beat them at their own game” model.

In the plush parish, the assembly looks for a nice balance of snappy and sentimental accompaniments with some great riffs, and all their favorites at Christmas and Easter. Music is expected to uplift, inspire, energize, soothe, or provoke some emotional reaction from the listeners. They might sing along on a few of their favorite numbers, but who can compete with the

professional singers and the choir with the back-up combo or the fantastic pipe organ. It is better to go along for the ride. High quality music is something the parishioners have paid for.

In smaller or more financially straitened parishes, we often find another response. This is “since we can’t beat them, we’ll just give up.” Obviously, no one is going to make that announcement in the Sunday bulletin, but you can see (and hear) the results. The minimal choir will walk a treadmill of a dozen hymns and a single Mass setting throughout the year. Rehearsals will be limited to thirty minutes before the liturgy and one or two evenings before Christmas and Easter. The sincerity of heart of the musicians becomes the selling point of the parish’s music program. And very few buyers will appear. Choir membership will stagnate, despite repeated pleas. The weary keyboard player and the singers will soldier on.

In this “parish of despair,” the expectations have sunk. Many small parishes had meager music before the liturgical changes of the 1970s. In the intervening years, parishioners count themselves lucky to have survived “Blowin’ in the Wind,” played by teenagers. In fact, many believe that poorly executed music is the sign of a “truly sincere” heart and somehow mandated by Vatican II, along with newsprint missalettes.

For those working toward a rediscovery of liturgical music (versus “music at the liturgy”), coping with either of these models is difficult. Take away the snazzy arrangements or try to shove the congregation out of their hymnic rut and the pastor’s telephone will begin to ring. Surprisingly, the most resistant group is not “the young people” to whom your aging guitarist is always referring. It is often the elders of the parish.

On bad days one is tempted to think that Frank Sinatra was replaced by “On Eagle’s Wings,” because the fans of that school of ballad hymnody are often in their sixties or older. They are also

in many instances the first to complain about the reappearance of chant and Latin, even though their generation was carefully taught the *Missa de Angelis* and the Eucharistic hymns. Forty years ago, the powers that be told them that Latin was bad and chant was passé. In fact, the impression was given that everything prior to 1965 was one big mistake and it was time to move on. Now we're telling them that what we told them *then* was a *bigger* mistake. Quite honestly, the skepticism is understandable. They probably believe it is just a matter of time before the current line of thinking will be rejected, so they'll stand pat with the Greatest Hits of the 1980s.

Every parish has a mixture of people and opinions. On the same Sunday, notes can appear on the music stand complaining that "the music is too boring" and that "the music is too bouncy." Leave the extremes aside and look back again at that large group in the middle that cannot be bothered to complain. They don't complain; they tolerate. Physically present, they are still mentally in the office, fixing lunch, or just way far away. Do they even know what worship is? Do we?

Worship Considered

First, what is "worship" anyway and what is its purpose? The dictionary definition of worship is "the honor and adoration accorded a deity." How is that honor and adoration to be rendered? In the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, the focus is on the divine action believed to take place in the Eucharist.

In an interview with Zenit News Service published January 25, 2005, Fr. Richard John Neuhaus gave a succinct summary of the purpose of worship: "The worship of God has no purpose other than the worship of God. While worship has many benefits, we do not worship in order to attain those benefits. The simple and radical truth is that we worship God because God is to be worshiped."¹

Wait! We're going to tell people that it's not about their "being grounded" or working on spiritual growth. For many Catholics, the concept of worship that is not self-improvement or self-actualization is unknown. In the interview quoted above, Fr. Neuhaus complained about "the ascendancy of an instrumental view of worship. Liturgy was subjected to psychological and sociological criteria alien to the very meaning of worship." Whatever our own understanding about the practice of worship may be, this instrumental view (also known as "what's in it for me") is the governing principle out in the pews.

What is "worship" anyway and what is its purpose?

We can help the congregation recognize the critical difference between that entertainment culture outside and a worshipping community of believers. While appeals from the lectern and bulletin inserts have their place in this process, most of us know that bulletins are sketchily read and announcements are half-heard while the congregation prepares for the race to the parking lot or the donuts. This is not a novel idea and many churches make a conscious effort in this direction. Since I am a musician, I will speak from that perspective, leaving aside shortcomings of the architectural and focusing on the "soundscape" an arriving worshipper finds. Let us consider how we can create an environment that encourages that transition from secular to sacred.

¹<http://www.zenit.org/article-12054?l=english> (accessed October 25, 2007).

The first step should be a tranquil environment that reflects a sacred space. Big churches with multiple services often feature folks dashing frantically around the altar and the pews, straightening up, setting up, and cleaning up. Sometimes there is a genuine press of time. Other times this can happen because those involved don't think to do this earlier. The result can be commotion going on at the same time the parishioners are expected to prepare for worship. Working to eliminate or minimize "pre-liturgical frenzy" will serve all those involved as well as those arriving.

In addition, there is another obstacle to the congregation's recollection and I am as guilty as many other musicians. You guessed it: rehearsing right before the service in the church. There are two causes for this. The first is the truth that weekday choir rehearsals often lose in the competition for choir members' time. In churches committed to having some vestige of a choir at every service, a sizable percentage of the singers will see the music for the first time one hour before the liturgy begins. The second is the loss of dedicated rehearsal space. Older churches had often had choir rooms where warm-ups could take place and last-minute rough spots could be ironed out. Now there is often only one piano or organ and it is right up front. Early birds are treated to the rocky run-throughs of responsorial psalms and occasional seating squabbles. The choir members themselves are often in a flutter. The draconian solution is mandatory weeknight rehearsal attendance. A more realistic solution is a keyboard set up in a room for the warm-up/touch-up. Insisting that the congregation use this time to learn something new is even more objectionable. If the new setting of the ordinary or an unfamiliar hymn cannot be assimilated from the choir's modeling of it, then it is not meant to be. Remember, if people wanted a rehearsal, they would have joined the choir!

The nave and sanctuary of the church are special places. For many of us who work in churches, it is easy to get too comfortable in that space. This is not an office or just any public place. When musicians and others who spend time there act like it's nothing special, we really cannot blame the congregation for acting the same way. This is not an argument for exaggerated tiptoes and whispers—just a little *gravitas* and a lower speaking voice. Model the behavior you want to see and chances are better of getting it. This is the only time and place for many people to have an undistracted moment in an over-booked, over-loud world.

In the Orthodox Church, a cantor is generally chanting the "Third Hour" before the Liturgy begins. At the same time, the faithful are arranging for their offerings of altar breads to commemorate their living and dead and reverencing the icons around the church. There are sound and movement, but they are sound and movement that serve as "liturgical warm-up exercises." They are directly focused on the upcoming liturgy.

In the western churches, practices vary. "Doing nothing" is a poor option. Murmuring can develop into outright chatting across the aisles. Recitation of the rosary can yield mixed results. Quiet recitation is one thing. A leader reading elaborate introductions to each mystery in a loud voice is another. Parishioners also may resent the imposition of a group devotion into a time they want for private prayer.

Organ preludes can help with recollection if the organist is willing to forego getting everyone's attention with strange chords. As an organist, I have to confess that it is often hard to remember that many people find twentieth-century French organ music annoying and the period before Mass is not the time to change their opinion.

Parishes with stronger vocal resources may find the period before the Mass an excellent time to reintroduce the congregation to Gregorian chant. In some places, a small group will sing the introit from the *Graduale Romanum* in Latin. Others might find one of the English versions of the *Graduale Simplex* more appropriate. The point is not a performance. Instead, the singing should be recollected and unstrained. This is not the moment to take a chance on an uncertain work.

If chant isn't a desirable option, a choir with three or four competent parts might present a simple arrangement from the Russian Orthodox musical repertoire. These antiphons are generally understated in their style and singable by most ensembles. Again, the focus should be on helping the waiting congregation (and the singers) make the transition from the outside environment of public transportation or car radios, of getting the children ready and locking the dog out of the living room, to attentiveness and readiness to worship God as a community of believers.

These "sacred sounds," so to speak, could assist the people in shifting from outside to inside, both physically and psychologically. In *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger observes:

We are realizing more and more clearly that silence is part of the liturgy. We respond, by singing and praying, to the God who addresses us, but the greater mystery, surpassing all words, summons us to silence. It must, of course, be a silence with content, not just the absence of speech and action. We should expect the liturgy to give us a positive stillness that will restore us.²

A calm environment and music that defines the space as sacred will make that transition easier. The instrumental or vocal prelude should end with enough time for the silence to grow out of it. That silence in turn will naturally end with the opening of the introit or the organ's introduction to the processional hymn.

If we give the congregation those moments of music and silence, our chances of engaging them in a corporate act of honor and adoration are greatly improved. Forced activity and sulky withholding may be replaced with prayer, attention, and the amazed recognition that God comes among us. Let us cooperate with the grace of God that draws people into our churches and help them prepare their hearts to worship. ☩

Communion Antiphon

VI



In splendó-ri-bus sanctó-rum, * ex ú-te-ro
an-te lu-cí-fe-rum gé-nu-i te.
y. 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7
1. Di-xit Dómi-nus Dómi-no me-o: Se-de a dextris
me-is. In splendóribus.

²Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), p. 209.