



Choosing Songs for Liturgical Celebrations: Using the Three Judgments

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Liturgical Judgment.

The nature of the liturgy itself will help to determine what kind of music is called for. An essential part of this judgment is on interpretation of text. To quote: "Does the music express and interpret the text correctly and make it more meaningful?" Also, "Music should assist the assembled believers to express and share the gift of faith that is within them and to nourish and strengthen their interior commitment of faith. It should heighten the texts so that they speak more fully and more effectively."

For anyone who serves during liturgies, adequate knowledge of the structures, symbols and meanings of the liturgy is necessary. For music ministers, the most important judgment is founded on a knowledge and love of the liturgy. One must be familiar with the order of the Mass and the various responses used, the movements of the Mass as a communal prayer, for these will be the bases of the LITURGICAL JUDGMENT. How close are the songs or responses to the actual texts of the prayers? Which songs are appropriate for certain rites or feasts? Certain liturgists and liturgical manuals may have more particular guidelines to follow, but what is important is that the music ministry serves to enhance and deepen the liturgical celebration.

The challenge to us is to select songs which accurately interpret the text, which are musically expressive and aesthetic, and are reflective of and relevant to the congregation's culture and circumstance.

Musical Judgment.

The MUSICAL JUDGMENT follows the thrust of the Liturgical Judgment. An important consideration in determining whether the music enhances the liturgy is its beauty. MUSICAL JUDGMENT essentially asks, to quote, "Is the music technically, aesthetically, and expressively good? This judgment is basic and primary and should be made by competent musicians. Only artistically sound music will be effective in the long run."

In the context of the music ministry, beauty is not necessarily the complexity or grandeur of the arrangement or sound. Is the music melodic? Do the lyrics and notes coincide to deliver the message of the text? Does the music draw the community deeper into prayer, or does it distract them, either by its lack or abundance of artistry? Here, the skills of the music ministers are also important. Do the music ministers add to the prayerful atmosphere with their voices? Does the music they produce give sufficient reverence to the liturgy?

Pastoral Judgment.

PASTORAL JUDGMENT, finally asks: "Does the music in the celebration enable people to express their faith, in this place, in this age, in this culture?" Ideally this judgment is made by the planning team or committee. It is the judgment that must be made in this particular situation, in these concrete circumstances.

Pastoral judgment returns to the nature of liturgy as communal prayer. In constructing repertoires, music ministers must consider the community they serve. Are the songs easy enough for the congregation to learn and sing? Are they songs that people can identify with? Are the music ministers able to lead the community more deeply into prayer?

Conclusion.

Therefore, the challenge to us is to scan the songs available, and to select not only that which accurately interprets the text (LITURGICAL JUDGMENT), but also that which is musically expressive and aesthetic (MUSICAL JUDGMENT), and is reflective of and relevant to the congregation's culture and circumstance (PASTORAL JUDGMENT).

Behind these three judgments, however, there lies something more fundamental. At the heart of the music ministry is the reality of MINISTRY. The mission of ministers is to serve, to help lead people closer to God. When the music ministry becomes more about listening to our own voices, rather than helping people to find their own voices with which to sing their faith, we cease to be ministers. We sing, and sing forever, only by and for the love of the Lord. May our lives as music ministers become songs of praise to the goodness and glory of God.