

Essay No. 2

MUSIC OF WELCOME

“The Song’s the Thing!”

Imagine this: It is a Sunday morning in summer. You have parked and are walking into your parish church. You know what to expect. Sure enough, the Organist is playing what you are learning to call, an “Instrumental Invitatory.”

You seat yourself. The music is mellow, not loud; listenable. It fits the bright morning, the coolness of the church’s interior. The pews are comfortable; recently padded, now thick enough to render them more comfortable.

On your way in, you grabbed the week’s bulletin. Seated, you open the bulletin to find out what the Organist is playing. The highlighted article of liturgical information for that Sunday indicates he is playing, “Blessed Jesus, We Are Here” from the “Little Organ Book” by no less than Johann Sebastian Bach! You have always thought of Bach’s music as complex, inaccessible. This is straightforward, mellow, just right before Mass. It *sounds prayerful*. You’ve come to look forward to these “invitatories” each Sunday. They set the tone before Mass.

The Lector comes out to the ambo, greets everyone, invites all to sing. She indicates that the lyrics of the Opening Hymn will appear on the large screen off to the side of the Sanctuary, easily seen by all.

The Organist starts his “intro” to the hymntune. Uh-oh: A tune you do not recognize. Will the Congregation be able to sing it? You glance to your right and through the open side door you see the priest and servers marching briskly around the outside to

reach the vestibule in time for the Procession. Then you realize that the Lector and Organist have begun a little earlier than usual, and the Organist seems to be playing the opening tune completely through, perhaps to show the Congregation how this new tune goes.

You glance backward and see that all are lined up in the Vestibule at the entrance door to the nave of the Church, ready to process in. And now, on cue, the Cantrice (this church uses the feminine form of “cantor” as a professional compliment) begins the hymn with the People. The screen is pointing words with a little bouncing ball so they know which syllable to sing, the ball bouncing slightly upward when the tune goes up, downward when the melody goes downward. You have been away on business and this manner of projecting the words of the hymn rather than using hymnals, is new to the parish. This is a new tune for the parish, that you know; but the Congregation must’ve heard it before because they are singing along though carefully.

Wait! They are already louder in Verse Two. They’ve sung it before. They just had to be reminded. Well, during Ordinary Time an Introit doesn’t have to be “super dynamic,” and they *are* gradually opening their voices on one very good hymntune.

You glance again at the bulletin when Music is indicated. The hymn tune is Hyfrydol, a beautiful Welsh melody well worth learning. The words, “Church of God, Elect and Glorious,” are spelled out well when sung to this tune.

This Mass has the Parish Choir. It’s a custom of the Congregation to give the third verse of a hymn to the choir. The Organist begins verse three with softer stops and all listen to the

harmonies of the Choir. Then, a rousing fourth verse. This turns out to be a successful Entrance Song to begin the Liturgy.

During the fourth verse, the priest, who has already revered the Altar and has been singing along while standing at his Presidential Chair, now finds himself looking around the Congregation, smiling indeed, and just for the moment enjoying the full house that the Parish now has for this very musical of its Sunday Masses. And as the Organist delineates it chord by slightly slower note and chord, the Congregation, Choir and Cantricle end their singing of the Opening Hymn with a beautiful Rallentando singing very much together.

My, has this parish improved since only a few years ago the singing was always soft and, it seemed, half-hearted. The new Director of Music and new professionally-trained Organist have made a difference. The Opening of this Mass had a “group feeling.” Even a “growing together as a group” feeling, insofar as the hymntune was a new likeable addition to the Parish’s repertoire. You glance around and see people standing comfortably, many of them smiling. They have just concluded singing, “Church of God, Elect and Glorious,” to a strikingly beautiful tune harmonized by the Parish Choir, accompanied by a capable organist and guided by the well-trained choir member who is the Cantricle for this Mass.

The Pastor opens Mass by chanting, “The Lord be with you,” and the Congregation answers *a cappella* – no organ needed, “And with your spirit,” echoing the same notes. The Pastor describes the scriptural theme he will highlight in his homily. The Organist plays the Intro to the Congregational and Cantoral Kyrie and Gloria, a wonderful beginning.

Also a realistic beginning. You have read about the trend at this time, to replace even the best opening hymntunes with English versions of the chant-like Antiphons that appear in print in the Altar Missal for the beginning of the Proper of the Mass, but are just not used – not yet. You read that it was the hope of the capitulants of the Second Vatican Council that those wonderful Introits of the Tridentine Mass – now called the “Extraordinary Form” would be rendered Congregational in modern languages and sung once again. This would provide further resources for excellent opening music at the Mass. Your reflection is that if a parish can be as eager to learn and use fine new hymns as your parish is, then these parishioners will be all the more delighted to restore the traditional Introits. You have heard that there are a few new “books of introits” already available. You’re intrigued with the prospect that well-achieved openings of Mass like that of today’s Mass, will take a further giant step if these chanted antiphons are re-introduced. And you reflect that the vision of the participants in the Second Vatican Council for renewed Liturgy is coming about in your lifetime.

Fr. Ted Ley, SM
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