

# Evaluating the texts of praise and worship music

By Christina Ronzio

**S**t. Paul writes, “Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 5.18-20). For centuries the church has been engaged in this practice, employing texts and music from an earlier historical period at the same time as new texts and tunes, reflecting the church’s current experience, were introduced into the worship of the believing community.

Today we are experiencing the introduction of settings of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs of many genres, including praise and worship music. When new offerings enter our repertoire it makes sense to evaluate both the texts and musical settings to determine their appropriateness for giving thanks to God in the name of Jesus Christ.

In its official documents, the church does not specifically articulate guidelines or tools for evaluating the appropriateness of sacred music texts. However, some general direction can be found in two documents.

The first is Chapter VI of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, which addresses sacred music. Here the church attempts to define the nature and purpose

of sacred music, referring not just to the musical composition, but also to texts that are to be sung.

The basic principles this chapter sets out are: sacred music will be more holy the more closely it is bound to the liturgical rite (112); the active participation of the faithful in the singing is of great value (113, 114, 118, 121); Gregorian chant has pride of place, but other music is admitted as long as it is in accord with the spirit of the liturgical service; texts must always be consistent with Catholic teaching, and be drawn chiefly from scriptural and liturgical sources (121).

The second document, *The Milwaukee Symposia for Church Composers: A Ten-Year Report (1992)*, while not a document of the universal church, dedicates a number of paragraphs to the issue of sacred music texts. This is perhaps the clearest articulation of the function of sacred music texts we can find in the contemporary Roman Catholic tradition.

The document identifies the following qualities of sung texts: they are to possess a lyricism so that they are more effective when proclaimed or set to music (47); they demand orthodoxy, character and substance because they are the words we live by and the words that continue to enrich our lives (47); they must be inspired and engaging and able to bear repetition (48); attention is to be given to sense lines and stressed and unstressed syllables (50); overly indulgent,

sentimental and personalized texts are to be avoided (53); although texts will affect people in different ways, the texts of sacred music should not alienate worshippers (54).

It is clear from this review that the texts we sing in worship need to convey the meaning of our rituals in addition to reflecting and shaping our doctrinal truths. But before we examine the texts of praise and worship music, it is important to consider the purpose of our song in the act of worship.

In his book *The Singing Thing: A Case for Congregational Song* (GIA Publications, 2000) John Bell examines this question and provides the following explanations: because we can, to create identity, to express emotion, to express words, to revisit the past, to tell stories, to shape the future, to enable work, to exercise our creativity and to give of ourselves.

The information on sacred music from the *Constitution* and the *Milwaukee Report*, along with John Bell's case for congregational song, give us tools for assessing the texts of praise and worship music that will allow us to consider how these pieces might fit into Roman Catholic liturgical celebrations.

In general, texts of sacred music falling within the "praise and worship" category share the following characteristics. 1) These texts are generally expressed in the first person singular. 2) While the texts do, in most cases, offer praise and worship to God, they have distinctively devotional overtones. 3) Emphasis is placed on the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary, while less attention is focused on the resurrection as an essential moment in the paschal mystery. 4) The verses of texts generally do not follow a standard meter within a given composition. 5) The texts tend to address only a single person of the Trinity—usually the Son—and doxologies are rarely, if ever, to be found. 6) The text is usually fixed on either the present moment or an event in the past.

The future is rarely addressed in these texts. 7) The texts are generally limited to expressing relationship between the singer and the divine and rarely express connection with the wider community, believing and unbelieving.

From these general characteristics we turn now to the evaluation of three song texts from the praise and worship genre. Each song considered is included on the recording, *Top 25 Praise Songs 2005*. The website [www.worshipmusic.com](http://www.worshipmusic.com) identifies this as, "A collection of the year's most popular songs being used and sung in churches across America as reported by CCLI (Christian Copyright Licensing International)."

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### OPEN THE EYES OF MY HEART

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The text of "Open the Eyes of My Heart" is relatively brief with only nine lines, some of which are repeated numerous times. There is no sense of consistent meter in this piece as the syllables fall into the pattern 8,7,5,8,9,7,9,6,5. The text itself is relatively simple and easy to catch onto. Yet there is a lack of clarity of the "voice" of the singer who is expressing this text. It begins with the use of the first person singular demonstrated through the use of the words "I" (I want to see you) and "my" (Open the eyes of my heart). Near the end, the text suddenly switches to the use of the plural "we" (As we sing "Holy, holy, holy"). This abrupt switch makes one wonder if this piece was intended to be sung by a single performer in a concert setting, with the textual switch to "we" being an invitation or cue for the audience to join in singing the two repeated phrases that follow.

In three ways this text measures up to the demands of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. 1) It seems to be simple enough to allow the active participation of the faithful in the singing; 2) part of the text is based on a scriptural image found

in St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened," (Eph 1.18), although the original sense of St. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians has

*It will be necessary  
for our faith  
communities to be  
able to sing each  
other's music,  
children singing  
their grandparents  
favourite hymns and  
grandparents singing  
their grandchildren's  
favourite praise and  
worship songs.*

been altered from a communal address to an individual prayer; 3) the text seems to be consistent with Catholic teaching. Where this text doesn't seem to meet the criteria for sacred music is in its lack of connection to the liturgical rite and accord with the spirit of the liturgy. This is demonstrated in the devotional nature of the text, which is focused

mostly on intercession to the Lord, with only a brief reference of praise found in the repetition of "holy".

We turn now to the qualities articulated in the Milwaukee document. This text demonstrates the potential to bear repetition because of its simplicity and the repetitive nature of the text itself, although some members of the assembly might wish for a meatier text than this. It might have the potential to alienate worshippers who are not of the devotional mindset offered by this text, either because they are uncomfortable by the intimacy presented in the text, or because they have moved beyond the spiritual depth this text offers.

According to John Bell's criteria for congregational song this text seems to express both emotion and words, and a sense that it is sung because an individual can sing, while missing out on the other seven characteristics.

In terms of liturgical use, this piece might find use at the end of the liturgical

year, as the church recalls the expected return of Christ in glory at the end of time. Because of the individualistic nature of the text, this piece would not function well as an entrance or communion song, but might work as a concluding/recessional song, although it lacks the sense of being sent into the world for mission that the recessional hymn has begun to take on.

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## TRADING MY SORROWS

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The second text, "Trading My Sorrows" finds popular use with assemblies of teenagers and children in elementary school. There are two verses and a refrain. The meter of the first verse (6,5,11 D) varies from that of the second verse (6,8,6,7,7,9,7) by 13 syllables. The two-line refrain is textually simple. The first line, containing the words "yes" and "Lord" occurring in succession three times is then itself repeated three times (7,7,7) with a final "Amen." One wonders if this threefold repetition might be an attempt at Trinitarian theology. Unlike the previous text selection, the entire text remains in the first person singular.

When compared to Chapter VI of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, nothing in this text sticks out as being strictly inconsistent with Catholic teaching. However, there is nothing about the text that can be easily linked to a liturgical rite, nor does anything seem to be in accord with the spirit of the liturgical celebration. Additionally, there seems to be no single or identifiable scriptural or liturgical source for this text.

Considering this text through the values presented in the Milwaukee statement one wonders if this text, especially the refrain can bear repetition.

Because the members of a worshipping community have different spiritual experiences it is possible that every text a community sings has the potential to alienate worshippers. With this particular

text, I think the refrain has potential to alienate worshipers because, while simple, it is monotonous. It seems to fall short of the degree of praise one might express at the joy we receive when we lay down those things itemized in the verses so that we might share in the joy of the Lord.

Another potential source of alienation is in the cut-and-dried way the text talks about trading sorrows for joy. While this song seems to call forth a spirit of joy from the worshipper, there will likely be individuals and families in a worshipping community currently experiencing a sorrow (i.e.; clinical depression), sickness (i.e.; recent diagnosis of inoperable cancer), or pain so deep (i.e.; the loss of a child or an experience of a miscarriage) that the text of this song, even with its paradoxes of sorrow and joy, might grate on people's raw spirit. Life is rarely so black and white that we move instantly from sorrow, sickness and pain to joy simply because of the fact of the promise of the resurrection. In such trying moments something less startling, such as "All My Hope on God Is Founded" might express more accurately one's joy in the Lord in the face of suffering.

Like the previous text, this one expresses both emotion and words. Likely, individuals singing the text will revisit their own past, providing a personalized meaning to these words. This text does not provide a vision for the shape of the future, although it is possible that the singer will supply, by individual reflection, the possible shape of the future when sorrows are traded for joy.

Were this included in eucharist, I think it would function best as a recessional song.

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### **AWESOME GOD**

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The final text to be considered is the popular "Awesome God." Its meter also varies from verse to verse (verse 1:14,7,14,7; verse 2:14,12,17,7; verse 3:7,7,7,7; verse 4:12,7,13,7; verse 5:10,10,13,7).

It is impossible to find anything in this text that harmonizes with the criteria for sacred music in the CSL. Although a case might be made for the repetitive-ness of "Our God is an awesome God," it seems that it would be impossible for an assembly to join in singing this text because of the vast spectrum of syllabic emphasis. Even a member of the assembly who is an accomplished musician would likely face a challenge in attempting to participate in this song. The text is loosely scriptural as it recalls moments in salvation history helpful to its case that "our God is an awesome God."

This text does not fare well when set next to the Milwaukee document. Although the text is more effective when set to music and is popular in communities where it is

known, it seems questionable that it can actually bear repeated use. The text has a strong potential to alienate worshippers because of the violent images of God, and the language used to convey the ideas of praise.

If an assembly were actually able to participate in the singing of the complete text of this song, an argument could be made that the text helps create a common identity as the assembly extols the characteristics of "our" awesome God. The text certainly expresses emotion and

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praise about our God at the same time it revisits the past and tells our Christian story in a carefully selected manner.

Because of the violent imagery and the slang contained in this text, I would not recommend it for use within a liturgical service. Even the simplicity of the repetitive phrase about God's that might facilitate the full, conscious and active participation of the assembly in the singing, is not sufficient bait to consider it for liturgical use. If worshippers were able to participate in singing the complete text, it is doubtful that they would be led to full, conscious, and active participation in the part(s) of the liturgical celebration that followed this song.

Although the lack of an anticipated meter can lead to confusion for worshippers trying to sing these songs, it seems that the text of the song takes precedence over the music of the song. This is a different experience from other contemporary compositions used in worship where there is a sense that the text is written to fit a melodic line determined well before a text was ever set to the music.

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### **OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

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The growing use of praise and worship music in Roman Catholic liturgical celebration presents the church with both opportunities and challenges. One of the opportunities this repertoire brings is the active engagement, both in song and gesture, of members of the faithful who may have, until now, felt alienated from the worship experience of the community. It is possible that by employing this repertoire previously disenfranchised members of the community may now feel able to "give thanks to God; by offering the immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him, and will learn to offer themselves

as well" (CSL 48). At the same time, however, this also presents a challenge because the exclusive use of these texts fails to communicate the ecclesial nature of eucharist as the memorial of Christ's sacrifice, death, and resurrection (*This Holy and Living Sacrifice*, 28).

An argument for the use of texts expressed in the first person could be made by saying, "if everyone is singing a song in the first person, doesn't that form community more than a text expressed in the plural that no one sings because they don't connect with or understand the text"? While our voices may be unified, I believe it is a more difficult case to prove that our spirits are unified when we are singing about our experience as individuals. Would we still feel a sense of unity singing the Canadian national anthem if the words were, "O Canada, I stand on guard for thee"?

After considering all this, it seems appropriate to proceed with a sense of balance when using sacred music of the praise and worship genre in liturgical celebrations. The church invites all the faithful to the full, conscious and active participation called for by the very nature of the liturgy and that is their right and duty by virtue of their baptism (CSL 14). For all the faithful to participate in this way it will be necessary for our faith communities to be able to sing each other's music, children singing their grandparents favourite hymns and grandparents singing their grandchildren's favourite praise and worship songs. This is the ideal towards which we strive in offering our sung praise to God through Christ.

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