

CHILDREN AND SACRED MUSIC: FOSTERING “ANGEL VOICES”

Anno Domini **1903**— it was an eventful year: Archbishop Ireland politely declined an offer to convert the Kittson mansion (where our Cathedral sits) into his residence, the first silent film debuted, and Orville and Wilbur Wright made **aviation history** at Kitty Hawk. Meanwhile, on the Feast of St. Cecilia in Rome, **Pope St. Pius X** issued the document *Tra le Sollecitudini*, his motu proprio on **sacred music**. It would have lasting effects in the life of the Church. He distinguished **three** key characteristics of sacred music, noting (pun intended): “it must possess **holiness** and **beauty of form**: from these two qualities a third will spontaneously arise— **universality**.” In the west, these qualities are found in the highest degree in Gregorian Chant, the form most proper to the Church’s liturgy. Through chant, the inherited tradition of psalm-singing set a permanent standard for the liturgy of the Church.

Before his election as pope, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger traced this history in his wonderful book, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. **Chant** was earliest to develop, then later in the late Middle Ages, **polyphony** developed. This is the music for several voices (from Gk. *polu-* ‘many’ + *phōnē* ‘sound’), whereas in chant, everyone sings in unison and unaccompanied. Later, **instruments** returned to liturgy. Unquestionably, sacred music has meandered through time, adjusting to different cultures and customs. Even the **Council of Trent** intervened in the “culture war” that had broken out. It became normative that liturgical music should be at the service of the **Word**. The use of instruments was substantially reduced and the difference between secular and sacred music was clearly affirmed. The Mass is **not a concert!** But in all its forms, quality sacred music **lifts** our mind, heart and soul to the contemplation and love of God. This applies to all ages!

In line with an age-old tradition, the **Second Vatican Council** taught that music “is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as a combination of sacred music and words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy.” *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 112. The document goes on to stress that the “treasure of sacred music is to be **preserved** and **fostered** (*servetur et foveatur*) with great care. **Choirs** must be diligently promoted, **especially** in **cathedral** churches; but bishops and other pastors of souls must be at pains to ensure that, whenever the sacred action is to be celebrated with song, the whole body of the faithful may be able to contribute that active participation which is rightly theirs...” What better way to model this than to inculcate in our young people a love of sacred music? We do this by exposing them to holiness, beauty and music’s universal patrimony.

“Singing belongs to **one who loves**” stated St. Augustine in a homily given on the occasion of the Dedication of the Church. Quoting from Psalm 95: “Sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord every land.” he continues: “What it said there, ‘a new song;’ this the Lord said, a new commandment. For what has a new song unless a new lover? To sing is a ‘characteristic’ of a lover. The voice of this singer, is the fervor of holy love.” (*Sermon 336.1*) He also added in his autobiography: “I feel that our souls are moved to the ardor of piety by the sacred words more piously and powerfully when these words are sung than when they are not sung, and that all the affections of our soul in their variety have modes of their own in song and chant by which they are stirred up by an indescribable and secret sympathy.” *Confessions* Book X, chap. 33

Why is it that so many Catholics struggle with singing? The reasons are manifold, but much of it has to do with a fear of not sounding very pleasing to the person next to us! Pride creeps in, and we do not give ourselves permission to put these concerns aside. In the major seminary, our voice

teacher told us (that's right— we all had **mandatory** lessons during our first semester) that she could teach **anyone** to sing— and said this before she heard us even open our mouths! She was not kidding, backing up her claims with solid results. And while we may have smirked at music classes, we were **all grateful** in the end. To all who are reading this column, I encourage you to **pick up** the **hymnal** and give it your best shot! For those with more experience, consider joining our adult choir. And to our youngest parishioners, we invite you to consider joining our Saint Cecilia choir on Wednesdays. Yes, it is an act of trust— a leap into the deep end that requires **commitment**. Go for it—you'll never know until you try.

As a child, I **struggled** mightily with **piano** lessons. But when my great aunt showed up one day with my new **saxophone** in hand, I gave it a try. Bingo! I loved it and played for many years; it provided me with wonderful memories. If enough kids join us and **remain committed**, our Saint Cecilia choir would sing occasionally on Sundays, in addition to special occasions throughout the year—St. Patrick's Day, Children's Rosary, Prayer Service for Life, to name but a few. After a 30-month hiatus, a re-launch demands commitment. I believe we can re-build organically. Children's choirs are among some of the world's finest. To all students entering 3-8 grade this fall— share your **"angel voices"** on Wednesday afternoons, make new friends, lifting your voices for the praise and glory of God! The Cathedral parish website now contains a registration link.

- It is always a joy to welcome **visiting groups**. During the pandemic, group visits dried up. Last week, **five** youth groups visited, representing the dioceses of Bismarck (130 strong!), St. Cloud, La Crosse, Sioux City and Green Bay. All were incredibly respectful and inquisitive. Once again, I was asked a question to which I had to answer, "I don't know, but will try to find out!" Keeps me humble.
- I am grateful to our **dedicated** and **diligent** and above all, **devout** altar servers. It was a pleasure to treat them (and the generous dads who drove them) to a **Twins** game last Tuesday. It was a scorcher! At 90°+, I suffered in my blacks! Young people are much more resilient—they didn't seem to mind.
- Liturgically, we are incredibly blessed. Our cantors are outstanding— and quite peripatetic this summer! Gabby Doran traveled to the **U.K.** to sing Vespers with VOCES 8; Tucker Moore was in **Trondheim** Norway with "Together in Hope," an ecumenical Lutheran-Catholic choir; Ben Sieverding sang in NYC at **The Met** this spring! I suspect I am missing yet other accomplishments. Congratulations to all!
- No, I hadn't been following the build-up of the **Mega Millions®** lottery. But yes—something about **\$1 billion** caught my attention! Can you imagine? It was worth \$2 just to think about what I'd do with the jackpot! I gave the ticket to my mother, with the proviso that if we won, the first \$3.9 million would be used to wipe out the Cathedral debt! Hey, it can't hurt to dream!
- It was **240** years ago today, August 7, 1782, that General **George Washington** created the **Purple Heart** award. We honor all men and women wounded in battle, who bear the scars and ravages of war. Their personal sacrifices have made possible our freedom.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector