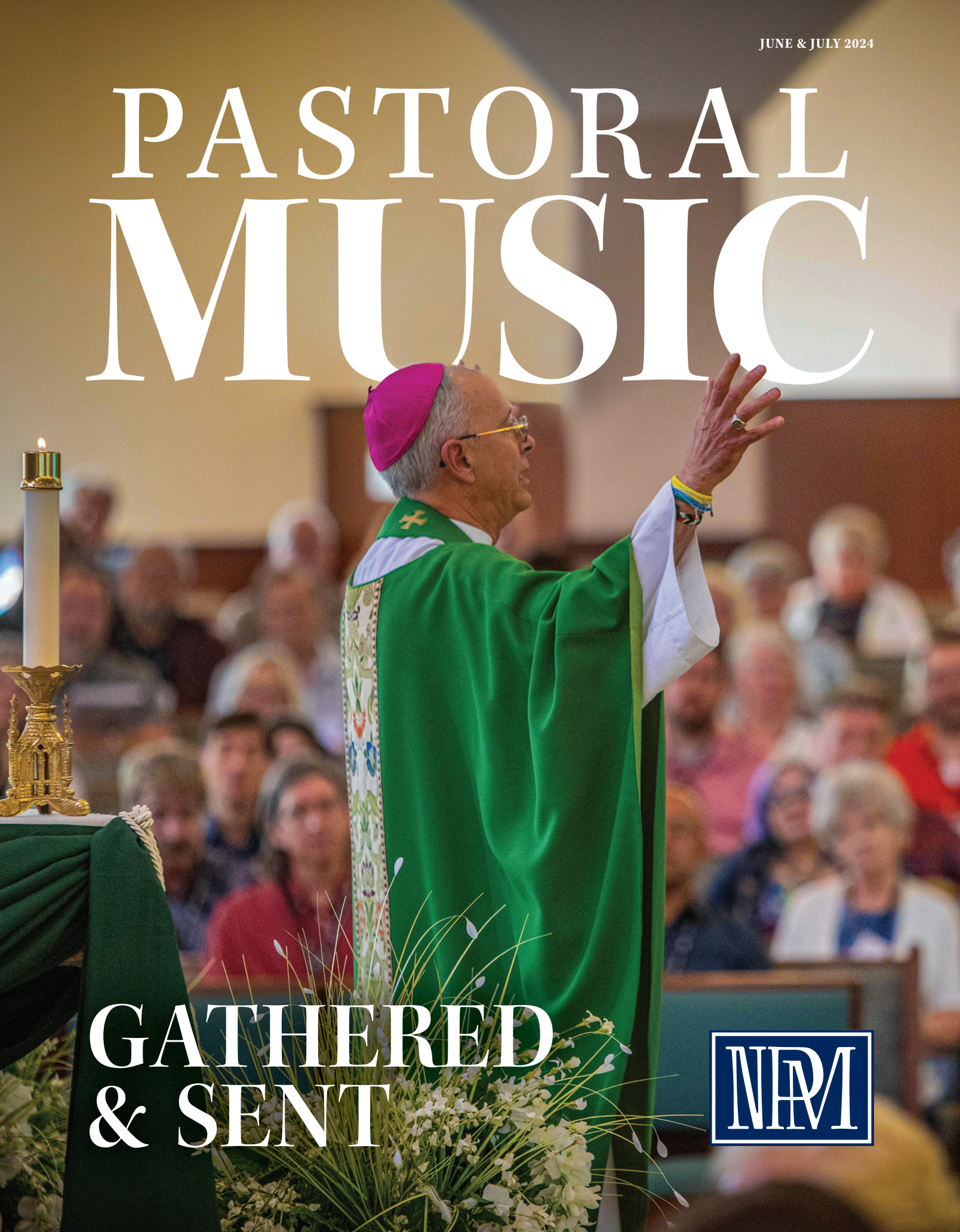
JUNE & JULY 2024

PASTORAL MUSIC



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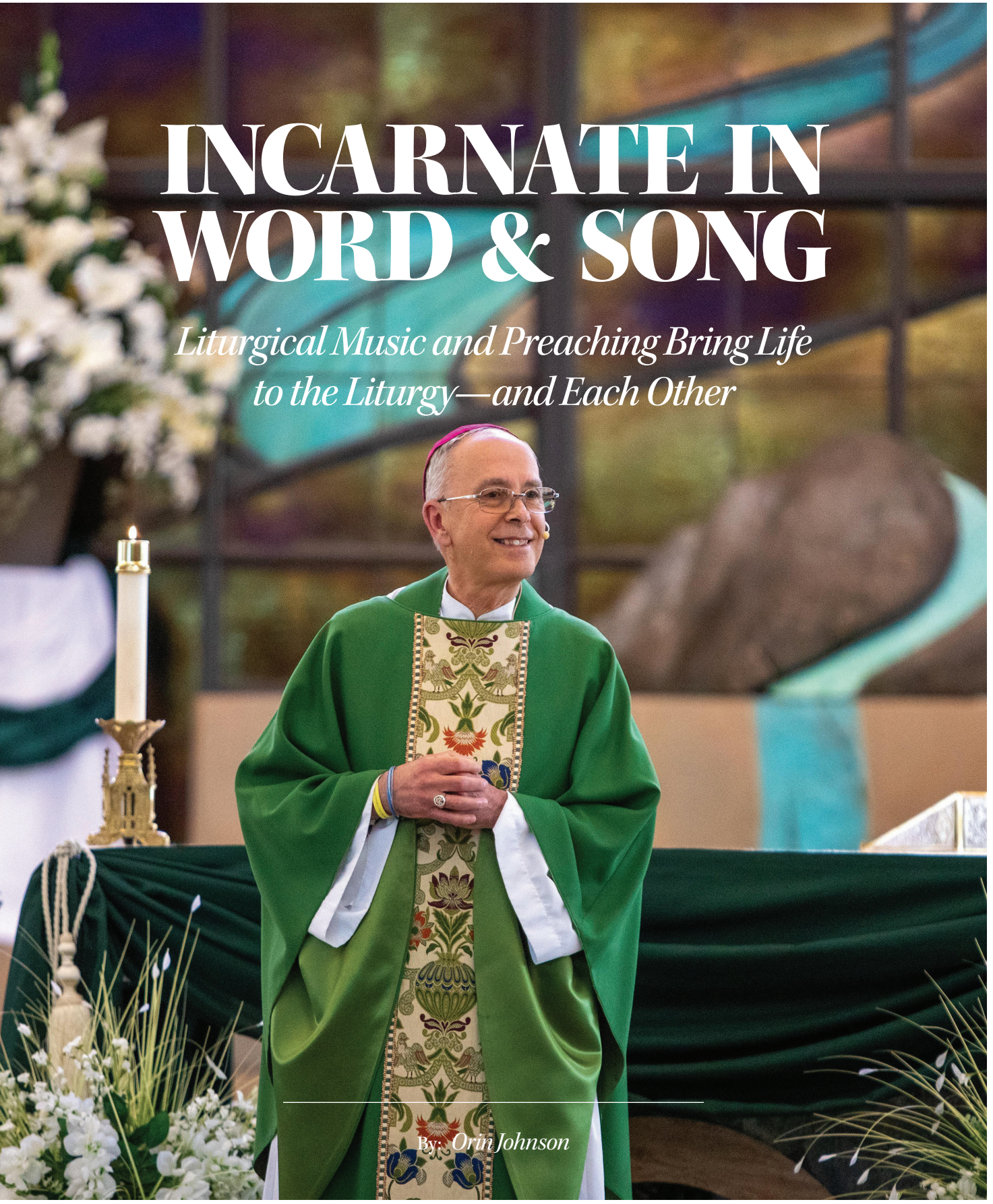

INCARNATE IN WORD & SONG

Liturgical Music and Preaching Bring Life to the Liturgy—and Each Other

By: *Orin Johnson*

The essay below is excerpted from the author's 2023 book, published by Liturgical Press, Incarnate in Word and Song: Exploring Music in Liturgy and Life*, with permission by and gratitude to the publisher.*

The songs and hymns that are frequent pillars of most parishes' liturgies are tremendously variant in most every possible way. In terms of text, they might be scriptural, theological, devotional, or some combination of these. They might have many or few words, might rhyme or not, might have consistent meter or not, might utilize a refrain or not, might be monolingual or multilingual, and on and on and on.

The music to which these texts are set is just as varied. A composition might envision accompaniment by organ, piano, guitar, strings, or any other instrumentation suitable for liturgy—or no accompaniment at all! It might score out unison singing or four-part harmony; it might take the style of a march, a love ballad, any number of dance rhythms, a folk melody, or a beautiful art song. It might sound distinctly of a particular culture or region, or it might sound as if sung by cherubs joyfully, eternally worshiping around God's throne.

These attributes are not especially important at the moment. What is important is that high-quality liturgical music arises from all times throughout Christian history and from as many places and cultures as there ever have been or ever will be. The craft of composing good music and, in particular, good liturgical music, ultimately, is the same no matter the time, place, or style.

One of the foundational elements of crafting an effective piece of music is maintaining a balance between meeting and denying the musical expectations of the performer and the listener. A piece of music that only meets musical expectations quickly becomes dull and boring. A piece of music that only offers musical surprises of pitch, harmony, or rhythm is challenging for a singer, especially one untrained in the pews, to learn and appreciate and is difficult to listen to.

It should be with our liturgical preaching as well, then, that we take care to make sure the content of it—as well as the delivery of it—usually meets expectations (but doesn't always) and has some sort of structure to it, be that borrowed from classical music or elsewhere.

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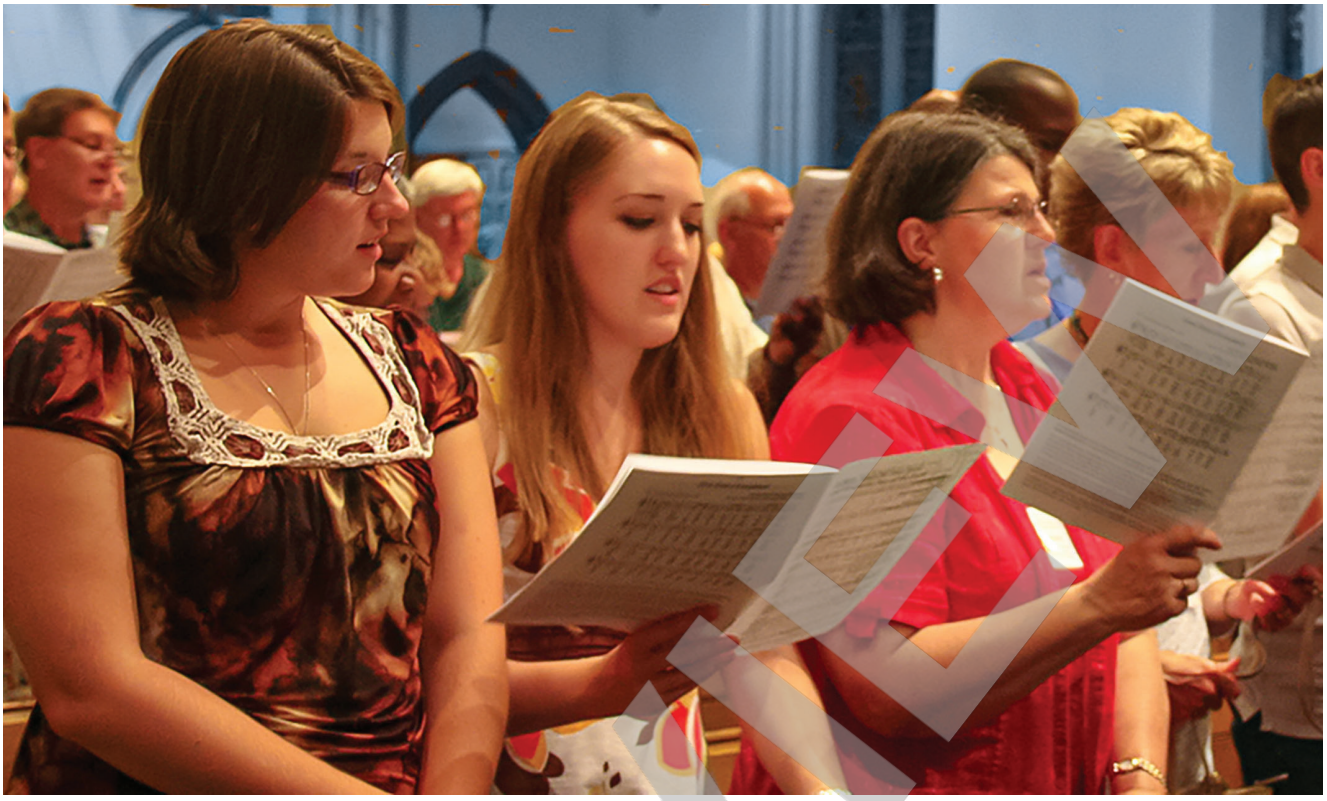
This could be as simple as having a common saying used from homily to homily, but one time, for particular cause and emphasis, changing the last word or two. Or it could be, in terms of structure, making sure to vary the style and tone of both the content and delivery around halfway through to effectively give an assembly member's ears something new to tune in to.

If we pause here for a moment to consider the type of music that is to be afforded pride of place in our worship, there is also something that preaching can learn from Gregorian chant. These pieces of music, when sung well, follow very closely the rhythms of speech, or at least they should. Too often we experience chant as a bit slow, lugubrious, with equal emphasis and volume on each note and syllable. Put plainly, this is wrong. Chant has much more vitality and is truer to itself when it is allowed to pulse both rhythmically and dynamically with the natural speech rhythms of the text that it is setting.

The preaching that we offer must also be true to our own selves, the preachers, with obvious integrity and a consistency with who we are outside of the homily and, indeed, outside of the liturgy. There seem to be many in seminaries who are being taught, not incorrectly, that their presiding and preaching must not be used to call undue attention to themselves and should only point to Christ. After all, while the liturgy is rightly called *performative*, it is at the same time not *performance*. In agreement with this premise, let me simultaneously observe that the way to reach that laudable end is not



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– Mark Twain

to make one's preaching and presiding as bland and unexciting as possible. Rather, this approach calls even more attention to itself than do some presiders who might be accused of being too gregarious and attention-seeking during their liturgical ministries. Recall here the "poorly concealed mania to be the centre of attention" that Pope Francis describes in *Desiderio Desideravi* (54). In the words of Polonius, given him by William Shakespeare, "This above all: to thine own self be true." Enough said.

Turning now to language, we remind ourselves that preaching exists to expound upon the mysteries of the faith. As such, songs and hymns can remind us that poetic language is most often valuable when breaking open such mysteries. Poetry is capable of this because good poetry itself already resides in the sphere of mystery, symbolism, metaphor, analogy, synecdoche, and the like. There is a good reason Jesus taught principally in parables, which frequently use more or less similar techniques as poetry. A parable draws you in, allows you to hold it beside your own life experiences and that of the whole community and seek divine wisdom and understanding there. Poetry, written well, does this, too.

As Mark Twain once famously observed, "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning." Poetry is stringing together many "right words" by use of various techniques to affect the sound of the text when read or sung aloud, to juxtapose various meanings and images, to create metaphor and synecdoche, and to utilize many other techniques to create a profundity of meaning that is greater than the sum of its parts and in fact incapable of being expressed any other way. This is why poetry is the right (and perhaps only) linguistic vehicle capable of addressing core Christian beliefs like the Paschal Mystery, whether it be in song, poetry, catechesis, preaching, or ordinary conversations.

Many of us will easily recall the poem written and performed by Amanda Gorman at the 2021 presidential inauguration, "The Hill We Climb," and how her words spoke so eloquently and meaningfully to that moment in time. Politics aside, to address the topics that she did but with some sort of technical prose would not have brought about the unique moment in time that her poem created. Had her poem not been read aloud, not been performed but rather been read silently, here too the distinctive moment would have been lost. Poetry, particularly poetry read aloud or sung, speaks to the heart in ways most other language cannot.

"The Hill We Climb" was obviously well crafted and was presented for and in a particular moment. Those who create preaching would do well to consider their particular context of time and space when creating their reflections. The best liturgical music seems to be universal in terms of meeting a person at prayer where they are, no matter the context, just like Christ met those seeking miraculous healings. Yet it is a known fact in the realm of liturgical music that the best compositions come when someone is writing for a particular moment, a particular family of faith, filling a particular need. Writing hymns today, especially ones that might be published, can be an exacting challenge, as the writer needs to attend both to the local community vis-à-vis *lex orandi*, *lex credendi* and to the desire of the teaching authority of the Church to ensure the beliefs espoused in the hymn are constant and true.

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When "Catholic Hymnody at the Service of the Church," from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine, appeared in December 2020, many in the world of liturgical music saw it, optimistically, as an opportunity to enter into dialogue with our bishops, an occasion where helpful distinctions might be made and mutually beneficial progress could be achieved. The document, in broad strokes, concerns itself with an ostensible trend of incompleteness and imprecision in hymn texts, listing six "categories of potential deficiencies" as a way to evaluate their suitability for liturgy.

It seems, though, that the difficult task of evaluating and interpreting these poetic texts, or erroneously interpreting them too literally, has led some to judge them as inadequate. Frequently, they are beautiful, faithful, and, especially through the use of synecdoche, more truthful than two or three times the number of words is capable of being.

Poetry about the divine is challenging, but it is also an opportunity. An essay written with thousands of words and clear intelligibility is still inadequate to impart fully the ineffable divine; here, poetry and music at the service of the faith are invaluable. With fewer words and with symbolic language—and amplified by lovely melodies and harmonies—sacred poetry can create, between composer and singer, between singer and God, an ephemeral dialogue that allows for communication of intense and otherwise inexpressible beauty and truth.

Poetic texts by definition cannot say everything with complete and total precision, nor would we want them to. Singing whole chapters of the catechism verbatim, for instance, would quickly become particularly tedious. Could a demand be put forth, if one sets the Beatitudes to music, that all of them must

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be included in the first verse of a piece, lest a music director end a hymn "early" and render incomplete Christ's important teaching?

Some observe that many current Eucharistic hymn texts utilize only vocabulary that regards Communion as "table fellowship" and exclude sacrificial language. On the surface this seems an accurate assessment. Consider, though, this text from the Missal itself, a Prayer after Communion from Wednesday of the Third Week of Lent: "May the heavenly banquet, at which we have been fed, / sanctify us, O Lord, / and, cleansing us of all errors, / make us worthy of your promises from on high. / Through Christ our Lord." Is this prayer speaking of Communion exclusively as a banquet? Or should we, by noting the language of sanctification and cleansing, also infer its sacrificial elements? *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, after all.

Poetry is hard. It is hard to create, and it is hard to interpret. What is theologically important regarding Communion, ultimately, is that it is both sacrifice and banquet simultaneously, a memorial meal at which Christ is made manifest before us as saving victim and is consumed to sustain us spiritually.

How could we not want the words of our homilies, by utilizing the poetic language of most effective and good modern hymnody, to achieve similar effects? Considering again the relationship of these texts with music: sometimes the choice of a hymn tune can profoundly impact the way the hymn text paired with it is sung or heard; so too the delivery of a homily can impact the reception of its thoughtful words. And sometimes the choice of a tune can have an impact we can't imagine and certainly don't even expect.

Early in my career, for a Christmas Eve Mass, I chose to sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem," but not to the familiar American tune (ST. LOUIS). I picked instead the British tune for the same words (FOREST GREEN)—to this day I'm not sure exactly why, other than I do like the sturdiness and contours of that Vaughan Williams tune. After Mass, a young man came up to speak with me, and specifically to thank me. He explained that he was originally from South Africa but was spending the Christmas holiday in the States for the first time in his life to be with his American fiancé. Though being with his love was wonderful, he had found being far from home, far from the familiar, a bit depressing. But then, when we began singing this hymn during Mass, everything changed. His American fiancé looked up, puzzled, and said, "Wait, that's not 'O Little Town of Bethlehem,'" to which he replied excitedly, "Oh yes, it is! Oh yes, it is!" as that was the tune familiar to him from his childhood overseas. My spurious choice of a piece of music was the best Christmas gift I perhaps ever gave anyone. It helped that young man truly recognize and celebrate the Word Incarnate that year. Even our unconscious liturgical choices, be they musical or textual, can have profound impacts, sometimes more so than our careful and deliberate ones.

Orin Johnson is Director of Music and Liturgy at St. Margaret of Scotland Parish in the Shaw neighborhood of St. Louis. Originally from Tyler, Minnesota, Orin received his B.A. in Music and Folklore & Mythology from Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts; his M.A. in Music Performance, with Choral Conducting emphasis, from Radford University in Radford, Virginia; and his M.A. in Theology from Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, Missouri. He is a composer and musical artist, with pieces published with ECS, GIA, OCP, and others. As half of Oddwalk Ministries, with Shannon Cerneka, he travels the country leading prayer, giving concerts, offering workshops and retreats, and more. He has resources on prayer and liturgy published with Twenty-third Publications, GIA Quarterly, Liguori, and Liturgical Press. Orin is also an accompanist and music director at Congregation Shaare Emeth in Creve Coeur, Missouri. He is an Assistant Director of and a singer with the St. Louis Chamber Chorus. He is active with Catholic youth summer camps such as Youth Sing Praise (for which he has co-written a full two-act musical) and One Bread, One Cup, and at various other churches and schools in the St. Louis area as a musician and director. He resides in St. Louis with his wife Erin.