

Through Hymns, with

The Catechesis of Sacred Music

The desire for God is written in the human heart (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 27)

What is the way to a person's heart? It is said that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Although exploring the veracity of that saying is beyond the scope of this article, the question remains: just what is the way to a person's heart? To penetrate the human heart where the desire for God resides, words alone do not suffice. The language of mystery requires more than words. Expressing faith in the one, true God requires a different language. One of the most powerful languages of the heart is music. It is absolutely unthinkable to conceive of the Catholic faith without music and singing. We simply cannot love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength without lifting our voices in song. And yet, we keep trying to do Catholic faith formation using words alone. What am I proposing? The catechesis of sacred music.

In other words, I'm proposing catechesis that flows from our treasury of sacred hymns. All hymns teach theology. Why else would the U.S. bishops have issued new norms (November 2006) for the doctrinal content of hymns sung at Mass? The bishops recognize that the hymns we sing at Mass form us in faith. Personally, I'm convinced that if a Catholic community were forbidden from using textbooks to teach the faith, it would be able to do so armed with only a hymnal.

Given that many people are musically inclined and actually learn best through music, melodies, rhythms, and lyrics, we could unleash a powerful catechetical method if we developed a curriculum that synthesized sacred music with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In essence, what we need is a soundtrack to the catechism.

Drawing on traditional and contemporary church hymns, the church could introduce not only catechumens but all of the faithful to the central teachings of the Catholic faith. Before we go any further, let's take a look at what the church herself says about sacred music:

Because sacred music gives glory and praise to God, it has been an integral part of the life of the Church from the very beginning

Consequently, sacred music also has a distinct catechetical purpose

Sacred music invites the faithful to give glory to God; it enhances their prayer, fosters the unity of their minds and hearts, and aims to draw them closer to Christ (*National Directory for Catechesis* 37 B 3).

Among the many signs and symbols used by the Church to celebrate its faith, music is of preeminent importance. 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. In addition to expressing texts, music can also unveil a dimension of meaning and feeling, a communication of ideas and intuitions which words alone cannot yield (*Music in Catholic Worship* 23–24).

The Christian faithful who gather together as one to await the Lord's coming are instructed by the Apostle Paul to sing together psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (cf. Col 3:16). Singing is the sign of the heart's joy (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal* 39).

The first Christian communities, in the newness of the Spirit, composed hymns and canticles in the light of the unheard-of event that God accomplished in his Son: his Incarnation, his death which conquered death, his Resurrection, and Ascension to the right hand of the Father. Doxology, the praise of God, arises from this "marvelous work" of the whole economy of salvation (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2641).

Music is so important in salvation history that the Book of Genesis tells us that one of Adam's grandsons was named Jubal (a name that means "horn" and from which we get the word "jubilee"); he was considered the ancestor of all who play the lyre and pipe (4:21). In a similar way, the Bible "ends" in the Book of Revelation with the sound of a trumpet signaling the end of the world (11:15) and the church singing a victory song (19:5–10). In between, references to singing and music occur more than 300 times throughout the Bible.

With all of this emphasis on music in Scripture and Tradition, it is odd that we rely so exclusively on words alone to form faith. Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar once

Hymns, and in Hymns

lamented that “all the eros has gone out of theology.” He went on to say, “Theology and exegesis can border on prayer, but they are not of themselves necessarily prayer. Not explicitly, at least. All acts of the Christian life, whether of the intellect or not, should be accompanied by an openness for worship, like a *basso continuo* accompanying the soul, and this applies to the act of theology and exegesis, too” (*Prayer* [Ignatius Press, 1986]). Inspired by this thinking, former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger once wrote that “being struck and overcome by the beauty of Christ is a more real, more profound knowledge than mere rational deduction. Of course we must not underrate the importance of theological reflection, of exact and precise theological thought; it remains absolutely necessary. But to move from here to disdain or to reject the impact produced by the response of the heart in the encounter with beauty as a true form of knowledge would impoverish us and dry up our faith and our theology. We must rediscover this form of knowledge; it is a pressing need of our time” (*The Feeling of Things, The Contemplation of Beauty*, message to the Communion and Liberation Meeting at Rimini [Aug. 24–30, 2002]).

Suffice to say, it is time that we as a church lifted our voices, not only at Mass but in every gathering of the faithful — most of all in our catechetical settings. So just what would a “curriculum” of sacred music correlated to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* look like? Here’s a sample, based on the “four pillars” of the catechism.

Part 1: The profession of faith

The longest of the four parts of the catechism deals with the longing that human beings have for God and how God responds to that desire by revealing himself to us. Jesus, of course, is the pinnacle of that revelation. Jesus, in turn, transmitted the truths of divine revelation to his apostles and, through them, to the church. The greatest part of part 1 is devoted to the Creed — our profession of faith in the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and the church, including Mary and the saints. Some hymns that reflect the theology of part 1 of the catechism include:

- How Great Thou Art
- I Have Loved You
- Your Word Is My Light
- Sow the Word
- Here I Am, Lord
- Now Thank We All, Our God
- I Say Yes
- We Walk by Faith
- Holy God, We Praise Thy Name

- O God, Almighty Father
- All Hail, Adored Trinity
- Morning Has Broken
- All Creatures of Our God and King
- Jesus, the Lord
- To Jesus Christ, Our Sovereign King
- Come All Ye Faithful
- Were You There?
- O Sacred Head Surrounded
- Behold the Wood
- Lift High the Cross
- Sing My Tongue
- Ye Sons and Daughters
- Jesus Christ Is Risen Today
- Crown Him with Many Crowns
- Soon and Very Soon
- Come, O Come, Emmanuel
- Come Holy Ghost
- Veni Sancti Spiritus
- Veni Creator Spiritus
- O Holy Spirit by Whose Breath
- Gather Us In
- All Are Welcome
- One Bread, One Body
- The Church’s One Foundation
- We Are Many Parts
- Sing of Mary
- Immaculate Mary
- Hail, Holy Queen
- Ave Maria
- Salve Regina
- At the Cross Her Station Keeping (Stabat Mater)
- Hail Mary, Gentle Woman
- For All the Saints

Part 2: The celebration of the Christian mystery

The second “pillar” of the catechism is primarily concerned with the liturgy of the church (signs and symbols, words and actions, singing and music, the liturgical calendar, and so on). This section also deals with each of the seven sacraments of the church. Some hymns that reflect the theology of part 2 of the catechism include:

- At That First Eucharist
- We Remember
- This Is the Feast of Victory
- Litany of Saints
- Baptized in Water
- Healing River
- Come to the Water
- Amazing Grace
- Here I Am, Lord
- Send Us Your Spirit
- You Have Anointed Me
- O Holy Spirit by Whose Breath
- Be Not Afraid
- On Eagle’s Wings
- Gift of Finest Wheat
- We Gather Together
- I Am the Bread of Life
- One Bread, One Body
- Taste and See
- Pange Lingua
- Panis Angelicus
- Tantum Ergo
- Now We Remain
- Deep Within
- Ashes
- Be With Me
- Hosea

- Be Merciful O Lord
- Be With Me
- Change Our Hearts
- Precious Lord,
Take My Hand
- Jesus, Remember Me
- There Is a Balm in Gilead
- Be Not Afraid
- Shepherd Me O God
- Here I Am Lord
- Pescador de Hombre
- Go Make of All Disciples
- Wherever You Go
- I Have Loved You
- No Greater Love

Part 3: Life in Christ

The third “pillar” of the catechism is devoted to our vocation of life in the Spirit (dignity of the human person, freedom and responsibility, conscience, morality, the Beatitudes, the virtues, sin, community, social justice, the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, grace) and the Ten Commandments. Some hymns that reflect the theology of part 3 of the catechism include:

- Blest Are They
- We Are the Light
of the World
- Ubi Caritas
- Where Charity
and Love Prevail
- Let There Be Peace
on Earth
- We Shall Overcome
- Whatsoever You Do
- We Are Called
- Voices That Challenge
- Let Justice Roll
Like a River
- City of God
- Lord You Have the Words
- Deep Within
- Amazing Grace
- This Little Light of Mine
- Praise God from Whom
All Blessings Flow
- Holy God We Praise
Thy Name
- This Day God Gives Me
- Prayer of St. Francis
- Let There Be Peace
on Earth

Part 4: Christian prayer

The fourth “pillar” of the catechism is prayer. Part 4 focuses on the raising of our hearts and minds to God in prayer. Various types of prayer are explored and then the Lord’s Prayer, the gospel in miniature, is explored in detail. Some hymns that reflect the theology of part 4 of the catechism include:

- All Creatures of Our God
and King
- Praise to the Lord
the Almighty
- Morning Has Broken
- Now Thank We All
Our God
- Joyful, Joyful
- Precious Lord,
Take My Hand
- I Lift Up My Soul
- Glory and Praise
to Our God
- Jesus Remember Me
- I Lift Up My Soul
- Lift Up Your Hearts
- Our Father (chant)
- Lead Me, Guide Me
- You Are Near
- Make Me a Channel
of Your Peace
- O Lord, Hear My Prayer
- Various psalms
(for example, Ps 23,
Shepherd Me, O God;
Ps 98, All the Ends
of the Earth)

The catechesis of sacred music provides a wonderful opportunity for liturgical catechesis that relies on the expertise and collaboration of both the catechetical and liturgical ministers of the parish. Music ministers and directors of religious education can work together to provide experiences

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of formation for the more musically inclined in the parish. Parishes can arrange for these formation experiences to take place in a variety of formats:

- a four-week program with each week devoted to one of the pillars of the catechism
- 12 intergenerational gatherings throughout the year (one per month), with each pillar of the catechism focused on for three sessions
- a Lenten–Easter series that extends over eight weeks, with two weeks devoted to each pillar
- a catechumenate program that introduces each session with a sacred hymn and then correlates it to Catholic doctrine

Participants in catechesis of sacred music sessions could be provided with copies of the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* and whatever hymnals are used in the parish. Sessions would alternate between singing selected hymns that pertain to one of the four pillars of the catechism, a discussion of the texts of these hymns in small and large groups, and a presentation by a catechetical minister that correlates the theology from the song with the pertinent section of the catechism.

It has been said that a person’s favorite hymns will reveal a lot about his or her personal theology, or at least his or her personal piety. The hymns of the Catholic Church reveal the theology of the church. If we want the faithful to be imbued with the truth of Catholic Tradition, sacred hymns are an effective means to this end. Sacred hymns are the church’s lyrical and musical commentaries on our faith tradition, calling us to deepen our faith and to practice that faith daily. They are one way — a very effective way — to the human heart, where the desire for God resides. **ML**

Joe Paprocki is associate director of catechetical services at Loyola Press in Chicago. With more than 25 years of experience in pastoral ministry in the Archdiocese of Chicago, he is the author of numerous books and videos on pastoral ministry and catechesis. Joe earned his master’s degree in pastoral studies from Loyola University’s Institute of Pastoral Studies and is presently a Doctor of Ministry candidate at the University of St. Mary of the Lake. He and his wife, Joanne, and their two children live in Evergreen Park.