

The Musically Uncatechized Musician

Paul Turner

She correctly anticipated that my first weekend at the new parish would be hectic, so she waited to greet me on the second weekend.

She entered the sacristy before I vested for Mass. Tall, stately, and self-confident, she stretched out her hand and spoke the word I especially appreciated hearing that week. "Welcome," she said. "I'm Betty Price."

I had just become pastor of St. Munchin Catholic Church in Cameron, Missouri. If you've never heard of St. Munchin, you are not alone. The only other parish bearing his name is in Limerick, Ireland, where he was the founding bishop. The Catholics who promoted his devotion in 19th-century Missouri were Limerickmen building the rail line between St. Joseph, home of the Pony Express, and Hannibal, home of Mark Twain. Cars have replaced trains, but Cameron today, still on that route, boasts a population of 10,000, and one of them had entered the sacristy as the ambassador of the rest.

"Thank you," I said.

"I'm welcoming you on behalf of several groups," she explained, smiling broadly. "I'm the organist here, so welcome to the parish." I'd recognized her from the previous week. "I'm a member of Cameron United Methodist Church," she explained, "and the Methodists welcome you too." The parish had no Catholic musicians to equal her skill. Sometimes in rural America, you simply hire the musicians you can find. But that can also be true of urban America.

"And," she continued, revealing something I had not realized, "I'm the mayor of Cameron. Welcome to the city."

Betty had been playing the organ at the Catholic Mass for more than 20 years. She knew the service well, but I wonder what it was like for her to begin. Somehow she got good instruction, stuck with it, and by the time I arrived she and the community prayed well together.

Many times a Catholic parish hires a musician who has considerable technical abilities, but little liturgical knowledge. How can parishes ensure a positive experience with an uncatechized musician? Here are the topics to explain:

How instrumentalists accompany the congregation

Guest instrumentalists may know how to accompany a soloist, but during a church service, they accompany a congregation. In the first instance, the accompanist follows the soloist's lead. With a congregation, the accompanist needs to lead - gently but decisively. The instrumentalist determines the tempo, for example. It's more like being a conductor, even though we call it being an accompanist.

How cantors lead the singing of the congregation

Today's Liturgy

At times the cantor has a solo, but usually the cantor encourages others to sing. Like the accompanist, the singer is leading the song, but not overtaking the song. Good cantors avoid performing like soloists. The congregation relies on the singer's voice to know when to start and stop, even when to take a breath. But once the congregation is singing, a good songleader holds back. It's like conducting a chamber ensemble. If the musicians are good, they really don't need a conductor. The cantor's goal is to build the congregation to that level of confidence.

How to approach this particular organ

A substitute organist needs time to learn your church's organ. Guitarists carry their own instruments wherever they go. Organists don't. They have to get acquainted with the instrument every time they go somewhere new. The ranks, stops, expression pedals, ranks and pistons differ from one organ to another. If possible, arrange for an organist familiar with your instrument to give the substitute a tour of highlights and problems.

How the sound equipment works

Newcomers need to know information as basic as how to turn on a microphone. Let the musicians know about the sound equipment and the acoustics. Share the ground rules: "Don't touch this dial." Or "Keep this switch off." Visiting musicians appreciate knowing what works.

How to follow a participation aid

The participation aid in your pew probably has an order of service. Show the musicians this tool and explain how to follow what's going on at a Catholic Mass.

How to know when to begin

Newcomers to the Catholic liturgy need clear cues for starting the music. Prepare a detailed list of the music and indicate when to start each piece. Or provide a seasoned parishioner to stay with the musician throughout the service and personally give the cues.

How the accompanist should introduce which pieces

When introducing a congregational hymn, the accompanist may play a complete verse. When introducing a well-known acclamation, the accompanist may play a single note. When you hand over a list of songs, you're not done. Give advice on introductions too.

How to determine the number of verses

In some parishes, musicians lead all the verses of all the songs. In others, the number of verses depends on the timing of liturgical actions. For example, if your entrance hymn customarily comes to an end when the presider reaches his chair, tell the accompanist and songleader. Knowing when to stop is as important as knowing when to start.

How acclamations are sung

Today's Liturgy

Some liturgical music is short and to the point. Musicians inherently understand such pieces, but they may need some context to know why the Amen is so short but the Communion hymn takes so long.

How to play instrumentals effectively

Let the instrumentalists know when they may play a solo and guide them toward the appropriate literature. Ask which composers they have in repertoire. That will tell you a lot about their competency and liturgical know-how.

How to find the Scriptures of the day

Tip them off that they will gain a better understanding of the music if they study the scriptures to be proclaimed at the service. Show them how to find the readings, and encourage them to study up before coming to church.

How the music fits Catholic spirituality

Music is integral to the way we experience common prayer. Liturgical music is not something added on, like an encore after a concert. It functions like an aria that develops the plot of an opera. Offer musicians this quote from paragraph 112 of the Second Vatican *Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*: "The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as sacred song united to the words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy."

How to pray

Remind visiting musicians that they will be leading prayer. Good musicians get inside a piece of music. They suppress the self and let the music speak. That process resembles good habits of prayer. If the guest musicians are believers, encourage them to unite their skills of musicianship with their spiritual life. If they are not believers, reassure them that their commitment to their art will still provide spiritual benefits for those who sing.

How to determine eligibility for receiving Communion

If your guest musicians are not Catholic, they will not be receiving communion. Let them know the rules. Give them this link: <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/order-of-mass/liturgy-of-the-eucharist/guidelines-for-the-reception-of-communion.cfm>. There they will see the summary prepared by our own conference of bishops.

How to encounter Christ more personally

Invite guest musicians back when they don't have to provide music. Let them know that your church welcomes those who seek a deeper knowledge of the truth and of the meaning of life. If they experience something positive while they are with you, they may want to return. Open the door to Christ.

With attentive support, you may find that the uncatechized musician you hire as a substitute may stick around, growing in personal faith and enriching your community's worship.

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