

# Skills and Spirituality

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## Introduction

In 2001 Bishop Raymond Boland appointed me pastor of St. Munchin Catholic Church in Cameron and its mission St. Aloysius in Maysville. A couple of weeks before I started my work, I got into my car and drove up there to meet up with my predecessor, Precious Blood Father Al Herber, who was anxious to start his retirement. Father Al introduced me to the secretary and gave me a tour of the house and the church. We talked about parish leadership and ministry at the state prison in Cameron. Then I asked, “What about Maysville?” He said, “Do you want to see that?” I said, “Yes, if you have time. I’ve never been up there.” It had taken me an hour to drive from Kansas City to Cameron; it took another twenty minutes to get to Maysville for a look at St. Aloysius Catholic Church.

Cameron has a population of about 10,000. Maysville had a population of 1200. In Cameron, the Catholic Church sits on 3rd Street, just outside the city center, very accessible. In Maysville, though, the Catholic Church is hidden away on Water Street. You have to know where you are going to get there. Very few people stumble onto St. Aloysius. The property is not picturesque. There isn’t much parking, and simple homes line the street. We got about 40 people for Sunday mass, and they more than half-filled the church.

Father Al gave me the tour, which did not take long: front door, nave, sanctuary. On either side of the altar, doors lead to the sacristy. Above the front door hangs a skinny balcony. That was it. One of the books Father Al liked for his liturgical ministry was LTP’s annual *Sourcebook for Sundays and Seasons*. He knew that that year I was the author. He also knew I was a musician. He looked at me, looked around the inside of that tiny church in Maysville, and probably wondered if I would run away. But I was looking forward to serving there. Then Father Al said these words to me about mass in Maysville: “If you want any music, you’ll have to lead it yourself.”

Well, I wanted music, so for the first few weeks I led the songs, but I did ask around if anyone knew anyone who wanted to do this or who could play their frankly unimpressive electronic organ. In small town life there can be a code of silence about questions from newcomers. It took a little while, but before too long, we had a cantor and an organist, both members of the community who agreed to step forward. They also agreed to plan the music each week. The cantor could not read music, but he had a pleasant voice. For the responsorial psalm, he just chanted verses to a tone he spontaneously made up each week, and that was fine with me. Eventually we got better hymnals. And then most amazingly an anonymous donor paid for a tiny pipe organ from a builder 35 miles away. In small town life, people like to buy local. Our music program wasn’t sophisticated, but we went from nothing to robust participation in just a few years. Oh, we also

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renovated the interior of the church, added a restroom, a sacristy / confessional, and a new baptismal font. We did all of that for very little money, and the people took great pride in the way they themselves had developed the liturgy at St. Al's. When I left there after eleven years, I cried harder over Maysville than I did over Cameron.

This story embodies some of the best about Catholic liturgy. We can make it work anywhere. Sometimes the instruments are bad - the organ doesn't work and the piano is out of tune. But when people use the instruments they have and give the skills they possess, they will praise God. We may not have the most talented musicians, but we can have the most faith-filled musicians. What they lack in skill they make up for with integrity of life. Sometimes a person with minimal skills feels bad about leading music at mass, but we need that person to share their gift for the glory of God. The best can happen with very little.

Since our topic for this gathering is skills and spirituality, I'd like to focus on three areas in this talk: practice, networking and prayer.

### Practice

First, practice your music. Every day. At my first college organ lesson, my teacher, Mrs. Rounds, asked if I could play a four-part hymn. She regarded that as the foundation for any organ music. Well, I was playing hymns in grade school, so I demonstrated one for her. "OK," she said, without much emotion, of course, because she was the teacher and I was the new student. But I aced that hymn. She said, "Remember to practice your hymns. Whatever you're going to play at a service, practice to make sure you can do it."

I'll tell you one other story about Mrs. Rounds. Just before my college graduation, knowing that I was going to study theology, I asked her, "What should I do with the limited time I will have available to devote to music? Should I study music history? Music theory? Should I go to concerts? What should I do with my time?" She said, "Practice." I still do. Sometimes I can only practice a little, but the best can happen with very little.

I was ordained a priest in 1979, was still practicing on the side, and by the late 1990s I had met the retired principal cellist of the Kansas City Philharmonic, Norman Hollander. Norm was one of the nicest guys you could ever meet. You wanted him as your uncle. His concert days were over, but he still enjoyed playing chamber music, and he agreed to let me accompany him. Norman was losing his hearing, and it showed in his playing. He could not always match pitch. It was painful on many levels, as you could imagine. One day, when I paid him a visit, I met his son David, a fine pianist. I ended up having an extended conversation with David about practice. I told him I was working on the Chopin 24 Preludes for Piano, and that I despaired of ever being able to play them. He said, "You probably can." I said, "I can't get my fingers to move that quickly." He said, "Here's what you do. When you practice, be sure to play all the notes correctly. Slow the piece down until you can play everything. Then, before you finish the practice, play the piece slower than you just did. After that, play it even slower. Then, stop. When you come back to it the next day, you'll be able to play it more

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quickly. Just keep doing that.” This is how the conversation went that day. I still can’t play the 24 Preludes, but that was the best piano lesson I ever had without having a piano in the room. We just talked about how to practice, and that made a difference in my playing.

So, here are some practical tips: Do practice the music you intend to lead at worship. Try to sing and play the notes correctly, and practice until you can. Then get inside the piece so that you become one with the music. The deeper the music gets into your soul, the deeper it will enter the souls of those who hear it.

Try learning new music. You may not like everything you try, but explore. This is how you improve your art. Find out who is composing what today, and who did compose what in the past. Our field has a lot of terrific historical music, and ever-evolving newer styles.

Do study the classics. They are classic for a reason. They have a beauty that other pieces aspire to achieve. In November I’m going to play some Bach and Buxtehude on a program at the cathedral. I’m already practicing for it. I feel that I have a responsibility to these composers. If people are going to hear their work live today, then it’s up to people like me to perform it for them.

Practice what you will be playing and even some things you won’t be playing. You are building a tower. When the time of worship arrives, you will give people a view from the top, but only if you have built your tower with practice.

Practice daily. You have other responsibilities, but good musicians budget their time to practice every day. When you do, you will tell the difference every day. The music will sit ever more deeply inside you. You’ll even experience something like a runner’s high - the physical rush after about 20 minutes of exercise. Something similar can happen in music if you let the art of practice absorb you.

### Networking

Second point: Networking. You practice in private, but musicians enjoy socializing with other musicians. When I meet somebody new, if I find out that they’re a musician, we immediately get a connection. Some years ago a popular sports drink used the advertising slogan, “Is it in you?” That’s what I sometimes wonder about people I’m meeting. Is it in you? Is music in you? Do you know what it’s like to play and sing?

In our two dioceses we provide opportunities for networking. We have local chapters of the National Association of Pastoral Musicians. We have choirs you can join for diocesan events. Your own choir can sing at the Missouri cathedral for St. Cecilia’s day. Our Office of Divine Worship pays visits to deaneries to bring people together and talk over ideas.

You can also connect on the national level at conferences. These are costly, but if you can go, you will gain wisdom and a spiritual boost from other musicians around the country. Youth will hear today about the One Call Institute.

You can network in other ways - meeting up with groups online, or dialoguing over articles and books you’ve read. By devoting time to other people,

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you will share ideas. Others are going to learn from your experience, and you will learn from theirs. Your participation here today shows you already value opportunities to network. You'll find you can do a lot with a little.

### Prayer

**Third point: Prayer. As liturgical musicians, you know the value of developing your spiritual life together with your musical life. As important as it is to practice every day, it is more important to pray every day.**

**You may choose whatever tools you want, but I recommend something rooted in the liturgy, either texts from daily mass or the Liturgy of the Hours. Find prayer that works for you, and do it every day. Find a place and a time, and be faithful to it, just as you do for practice.**

**You're trying to achieve in prayer what you achieve in music. Get inside the praying. Make it yours - not just something you read or rattle off. You want a close conversation with God, as you would with anyone you love. Even if you don't have much to say, you just want to be with the one you love. That is enough.**

**You may find that one kind of prayer works at one stage of your life and some other kind at another. It's fine. Just find something that works. You usually get the most benefit when you stick with it for a while.**

**Key among liturgical texts is the responsorial psalm, which pertains to the readings of the day. This weekend we hear Luke's account of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, with a first reading where Amos excoriates the wealthy. The psalm, during Ordinary Time, usually develops the theme from the first reading, which itself prepares for the gospel. This weekend the response will be "Praise the Lord, my soul!" By itself, that doesn't have much to do with the readings, but it goes with specific verses of Psalm 146 - the last ones, verses 7-10. Those verses show God's care for the oppressed, the hungry, the captives, the blind, the bowed down, the stranger, the fatherless and the widow. They all get mentioned - but only if you sing the right verses. If you sing verses 1-6, you don't connect the readings of the day.**

**Last year I reviewed this point with a local parish musician. She was preparing for the Fifth Sunday of Easter in Year B. She noted that the psalm was 22. Now, in Easter Time, the Sunday readings do not fit together the way they do in Ordinary Time. The gospel for the Fifth Sunday of Easter always comes from John's account of Jesus' farewell discourse at the Last Supper, and the same is true of the Sixth Sunday. The first readings, though, are on their own mission. They come from Acts of the Apostles, and they run a miniseries of how Christianity got its start. The particular episode that day was an appearance in Jerusalem of the newly converted Saul, also known as Paul. He scared the living daylights out of everybody because they knew him as the persecutor. Barnabas stood up and defended Paul, and they all lightened up. Paul then began his career speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord.**

**Now, if you know anything about Psalm 22, you know the opening line, "My God, why have you abandoned me?", which Jesus quoted from the cross.**

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However, the particular verses for that Sunday in Easter Time do not include that famous opening, but rather 26-32 - the end of the psalm, where things are finally going much better. The refrain for that day is, “I will praise you Lord, in the assembly of your people.” You can imagine Saint Paul singing these verses as he starts his preaching career.

But the musician speaking with me that day had not yet looked at the verses. She was looking at the number of the psalm. Seeing 22, she started seeking out settings of “My God, why have you abandoned me?” and to her credit she knew immediately something was wrong. When you prepare for Sunday, look over all the readings, and, as you pray, try to figure out why this psalm is assigned for this day, and why these particular verses are important.

When you sing or play the psalm, you should have put those puzzle pieces together in your head. If you practice, network and pray, even a little, you will get the best results.

### Epilogue

Which brings me to Yo-Yo Ma. In February of 2018 I was in Washington DC for a meeting of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, and I had dinner one night with my friend Fr. Michael Witczak, who teaches liturgy at the Catholic University of America. In his car we were listening to a classical music radio station. Just to make conversation I told him that Yo-Yo Ma was coming to Kansas City for a performance with the symphony in March. He asked, “Really? What’s he going to play?” I couldn’t remember the program, so I said, “Cello.”

Over the past several decades, I started contributing to the orchestra the way many of you contribute to your favorite charities. I then got to know the now retired executive director, Frank Byrne. After I got home from that trip to Washington, I got an email from Frank, asking for a time we could visit by phone. He had an idea he wanted to present.

When we connected, he said, “We have a musician who wants to do a popup concert. He’ll appear unannounced and play for people who aren’t expecting classical music.” I said, “OK.” I’d heard of these events. Frank said, “Don’t you have a food kitchen at the cathedral?” I said, “Yes, we serve breakfast Tuesday through Friday and lunch on Saturday and Sunday. The people who come are mostly homeless. Many are transients. They’ve learned through connections that the gold dome is a place where they can get a free meal.” Frank said, “That’s perfect.” I said, “If you really want to surprise people, come for breakfast. No one is expecting music to happen first thing in the morning.” Frank said, “We have a date in mind.” I said, “OK.” He said, “Saturday, March 24. We’d like to come about 1 o’clock.” I said, “All right, but lunch begins at noon, and I’m not sure how many of our guys will still be here by 1.” He said, “Maybe we could arrive a little earlier.”

Meanwhile, I’m thinking, something is really odd about this. Then I remembered who the symphony had programmed for the weekend of March 24. I’m going, “Oh my goodness. Frank Byrne wants to bring one of the greatest and most popular musicians on the planet to the cathedral next month.” But Frank

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was holding his cards close to his vest. He did not tell me the name of the musician. I was 99% sure who this was. I literally could not sleep that night.

Anyway, we set it up, and Frank came by a few weeks later to look at the space. I stupidly invited him on a Monday morning when Morning Glory Ministries is closed, so he could only look at the space behind a locked glass door, but he got the idea, and said it would be fine. He still said nothing about who was coming to play. So I said nothing to anyone. I honored his silence. A few days before the event, Frank told me this much: “We have three musicians coming: a violinist, a violist, and, uh, and a cellist.” I said to myself, “OK, that means concertmaster Noah Geller, principal violist Christine Grossman, and Yo-Yo Ma are going to play classical music for homeless people on Saturday afternoon.”

The day arrived. I led communion minister training at the Catholic Center that morning, and then I walked to the cathedral’s Donnelly Hall, where lunch was already in process. When I entered, Frank Byrne stepped up to greet me. He said, “Do you see who’s here?” The room was noisy. Our meal guests were talking loudly over their lunch, and in the corner a trio of musicians was playing through the din: Noah Geller, Christine Grossman and - I said to Frank, “That’s Yo-Yo Ma.”

Frank had a worried look on his face. I asked, “How’s it going?” He indicated our homeless guests and said, “These people don’t know who he is.” I said, “I’ll take care of that.” As I walked toward the microphone, I passed a few other people associated with the symphony who came that day, including our associate conductor Jason Seber and our conductor Michael Stern (son of Isaac Stern). I shook hands with them, and then I met the violinist, the violist and the cellist. I thanked them for coming, grabbed the mic, got everyone’s attention, greeted the group, and said with awe and trembling, “The musician you see standing here beside me is none other than Yo-Yo Ma.” One of our homeless guests jumped from his seat, eyes and mouth wide open. He pushed past several other people with his arms outstretched, and said, “I can’t believe it. I’ve heard about you all my life!” Yo-Yo Ma shook his hands vigorously and then went through the crowd, greeting as many guests as he could reach. Now, just so you envision this scene correctly, the number of people who knew his name or cared about him were few. They had something else on their mind. Food. They came for food. Yo-Yo Ma didn’t seem to care. He came to play for the poor.

He had two more places to go that afternoon: The Veterans Hospital and the Ronald McDonald House. The event with us was ending. I overheard Michael Stern say to Frank Byrne, “We have a little time to kill.” I saw my opening, and I seized it.

You see, in the previous week, I was so sure of the identity of the surprise musician, that I looked through my music at home for something for piano and cello. I had the Bach sonatas, but I thought they would be too difficult to sight read. I looked further and found the sonata by Edvard Grieg. It was a piece I had played years ago for my parishioners in Cameron, Missouri, in a program with Norman Hollander. The middle movement, the slow movement, seemed perfect. I practiced the piano part, thinking, if the occasion presented itself, I could ask Yo-

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Yo Ma to play the cello part because he'd probably recorded it sometime in his life, and he could play it without rehearsing. Inside Donnelly Hall, we have a very bad spinet piano. I didn't care.

When Michael Stern said, "We have a little time to kill," I walked right up to him and said, "I have an idea. Do you think Yo-Yo Ma would let me accompany him playing the middle movement of the Grieg cello sonata on that out-of-tune piano?" Michael looked surprised. He said, "What about the music?" I said, "I have the score right here." His eyes lit up, his smile spread across his face, and he gleefully announced, "Let's ask him!"

In all the ways I dreamed that this moment might happen, I never imagined that Michael Stern would become my advocate. We walked up, I made my request, and Yo-Yo Ma said, "Yes." I turned around to get some help to push the piano into place, walking right by Frank Byrne, who now realized I had guessed all along. I took the microphone and announced the piece, sat down, began the opening bars, and with Yo-Yo Ma looking over my shoulder onto the score, we played together. Near the end of the first page, he got lost. I pointed out to him where we were. He apologized. He resumed, and we played the rest of the movement. We ended together, which is sort of important.

Afterward I thanked him and thanked him. My older sister later said to me, "You must feel like this was the crowning moment of your musical life." It was something special. When I was in college, Mrs. Rounds was hoping I would pursue a career in music. Now, she was the daughter of a Lutheran minister, so she understood the importance of a religious vocation and supported it. She was not alone among the experienced musicians I knew in my 20s who thought I could have had a career - if I practiced. But I felt a different calling. So I keep juggling time for music, but I devote myself to ministry.

That day in Donnelly Hall, I played on a very bad piano for an audience that wasn't really listening. But it was a moment I'll remember the rest of my life. The best can happen with very little. I felt perhaps this was God's way of saying to me, "Paul, thank you." I felt as if God understood better than I did what I had given up in order to become a priest, and wanted me to have some experience of the joy of music.

I hope you experience the same wonderment in your life. I know you will. You make many sacrifices for your art and for the liturgy in order to bring people closer to God through worship. In some way, I don't know how, but in some way, you will receive your reward. God will not be outdone in generosity. When you practice, network and pray, some day when you least expect it, in a manner you could never predict, under circumstances that seem impossibly poor, God will say to you what we so often say to him: Thank you.