

Homily for Vespers at St. Joseph Cathedral
American Guild of Organists
June 28, 2007
Rev. Msgr. Stephan J. Moloney

Revelation 5: 1-14

I want to begin this evening by telling you a story. It is a true story. You will wonder at first why I am telling it, but it will soon become apparent.

About 10 years ago, an exorcism was performed here in the Diocese of Columbus. I am talking about the full ritual of exorcism of a person possessed by a demonic spirit. If you have ever seen the movie “The Exorcist” or TV documentaries or dramatizations of exorcism of the possessed, that’s the kind of thing I am talking about. In order to protect the identities of the people involved, I cannot discuss the details, but there is one part I will share. I was the delegate of the Bishop, and the priests who acted as exorcists reported to me. The exorcism was ultimately successful. One of the priests sat in my office one day and gave me a progress report. He described one lengthy and difficult session. He told me that the possessed person, after several hours of prayer and ritual, was exhausted. The possessed person was not raised as a Christian and was never really exposed to Christian prayer or tradition and had little knowledge of the New Testament. She told the priest that, while undergoing the exorcism, she had heard voices singing, which comforted her greatly. The priest asked her if she remembered what the voices were singing. She replied – “Something like this, ‘worthy is the Lamb that was slain’ and ‘Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Hosts – Heaven and earth are full of your glory.’” When I heard that, the hairs on the back of my neck stood straight up.

I have reflected on that many times since then. Perhaps John’s vision of the host of heaven singing the new song of salvation to the lamb is more than just inspired poetry. Perhaps when we say in the liturgy “we echo on earth the song of the angels in heaven” it is not just a figure of speech, but quite literally true.

And if it is, what are the implications for those who make music in church and who lead liturgical worship?

What is most essential, and cannot be forgotten, is that our music is worship directed to almighty God. We offer Him a sacrifice of praise. Most ordinary musicians perform music for an audience who show their appreciation through applause. Church musicians, on the other hand, participate with and assist the assembly of believers in rendering their worship to almighty God. A church musician can never merely play the music; he or she must also pray it. Psalm 95 reminds us to whom we make music: “Come let us worship the Lord, and shout with joy to the Rock who saves us. Let us approach Him with praise and thanksgiving, and sing joyful songs to the Lord.” We do not make music in church to entertain others or amuse ourselves. It is an act of worship and homage to God our maker and savior. It is an obligation owed to Him, and in fulfilling it, the worshippers themselves are renewed and strengthened in spirit. The Church musician par-excellence, the Leipzig Thomas – Kantor Johann Sebastian Bach, knew this well. He said: “the aim and final reason of all music should be none else than the glory of God and the recreation of the mind. Where this is not observed, there can be no real music, but only a devilish hubbub.”

In order to truly glorify God, I believe, we must learn how to transcend the present moment of music-making, with its imperfections, mistakes, and distractions, and envision that heavenly worship that we are striving to harmonize with. Charles M. Widor said, “To play the organ properly, one must have a vision of eternity.”

J.S. Bach certainly believed in the reality of that eternal, heavenly worship – and he also knew all about the shortcomings of earthly worship. He once wrote to the Leipzig town council to complain about the sorry state of music, the lack of resources, instrumental and vocal, and the unqualified and truly unusable singers who had been accepted as students in the Thomas-schule. I doubt that he ever heard his own music sung and played as he would have wished. He probably never heard his B-minor Mass performed at all. He never had a really adequate organ at his disposal. In spite of this, as he read his Bible, specifically the second Book of Chronicles, about the splendid liturgy in Solomon’s temple in which the priests and trumpeters so filled the temple with praise and thanksgiving that the glory of the Lord, like a cloud, came and filled the temple, he was moved to write in the margin: “where there is devout music, God with His grace is always present.”

These are the things we organists who serve the church must believe and follow if our music-making is to fulfill its intended purpose. I close with a favorite prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours:

“Lord, extolled in the heights by angelic powers, you are also praised by all earth’s creatures, each in its own way. With all the splendor of heavenly worship, you still delight in such tokens of love as earth can offer. May heaven and earth together acclaim you as King. May the praise that is sung in heaven resound in the heart of every creature on earth. Amen!