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The Pastor and the Musician:

10 Strategies
for Developing a
Supportive Relationship

By Dr. Eileen Guenther



Music as Catechesis:

What Music Education Can Teach Children about the Real Presence

John Flaherty



John Flaherty has been involved in music and educational ministry for almost 40 years as an educator, elementary school principal, music director, liturgy director, and composer.

He has taught on the elementary, secondary, and college levels and is presently on the Campus Ministry team at Loyola Marymount University where he serves as the director of Liturgy and Music. He serves on the Liturgy Committee for the Los Angeles Religious Education Conference and has published music with both World Library Publications and GIA Publications. He is the director and founder of the Pastoral Liturgy and Pastoral Music Certification Programs in the Center for Religion and Spirituality at LMU. He and his wife Kathleen have five children.

*“Be mindful of the words (and songs) you place in people’s mouths.
What they place in their mouths, they take into their bodies.
What they take into their bodies, they become.”*

—John Flaherty

“My experience is more of a feeling than a memory. When I hear songs that I learned as a child, the feeling takes me back to those moments. I don’t know if back then I felt Christ’s presence, but I know I felt something. I am very emotional.

“Singing in church makes me very emotional. When I was a child, it was about how the music made me feel. As an adult, I get the same feeling with more intensity because the lyrics connect with me in different ways depending on what I am going through in my life at the moment. Although I didn’t fully comprehend Jesus’ presence as a child, I know that the feeling I get every time I hear and/or sing certain songs is the seed that was planted in my soul then, waiting for when I would need it again as an adult.”

— A.R., a former student; now age 44

As a young educator, my mentor taught me that teaching children is akin to planting seeds and nurturing young plants—only others will know and experience their maturation. We may never see those full blossomings. Our work is that important. We find our vocation within the octaves of time and music that we live over and over living ever deeper into the Paschal Mystery and salvation history.

As Catholic primary school educators, we have a critically important job in building up the Body of Christ. It is this—to teach every child to praise God through song, and to love doing it. Not to sing perfectly, be able to sing in parts, or to even insist that every child sing in tune, but to make a joyful noise to the Lord, and to love doing it.

We’ve heard and read many times—“Don’t sing songs during the Mass. Sing the Mass.” The liturgy is intended to be sung from the initial Sign of the Cross to the “Thanks be to God,” of the Final Dismissal.

If the most important voice in the liturgy is that of the assembly, then we must teach every single child that their voice is important and that without it, we are not whole. To tell a child not to sing, or to only mouth the words, is tantamount to telling a child of God that he or she cannot and is not permitted to pray. To sing is to pray.

Whenever I assembled the choirs for First Eucharist, graduation, or Easter, the choir was

never fewer than 225 voices from a student body of 300. The choirs would have been larger in number, but the choir loft could only hold that many bodies. As a music teacher, my expectation was always that every child would be encouraged to sing, just as every child would study math, English, social studies, and physical education. The result was that every child wanted to sing in whatever choir needed to be assembled for the celebration at hand.

How many of us can recall sacred Scripture because we learned to sing these passages when we were young? How many of us know tenants of our faith because we can sing and remember them in the melodies that live in our bodies?

The first day of my first theology class at Pepperdine University (where I completed my undergraduate degree in music education and choral conducting) was exciting. Malibu! Pepperdine was founded by the Church of Christ, a Protestant denomination. The first night's homework assignment was to come to class the next day prepared to take a quiz and name every book of the Bible. My new music major friends and I panicked. And then spent the entire first night of our university life trying to memorize the Table of Contents of our Bibles. I don't think we slept. Many of us failed that first quiz. Many of the Protestant students received perfect scores. They recalled the song they learned as children comprised of all the books of the Canon. In order. Those of us who failed were given another chance and we all, those who failed with those who passed, spent our second evening of university life with new friends who taught us the song. When we were confident we knew the song, we sang and taught each other many other songs – sacred as well as secular. What a great professor and what a wonderful learning experience. In the end we, and our professor, had a great and joyful laugh together. I realize now that I can quote a great swath of Scripture and almost all of psalmody from memory because of the teachers and mentors who taught me how to pray through the music we sang—from Gregorian chant to any of the masters of past European glory, to the music brought to us today by the migrants who flee persecution just as Joseph, Mary, and the Christ child did two millennia ago, to whoever the composer de jour of tomorrow might be.

The Church's documents tell us that liturgy is the public work of the Church. Most understand this rubric as that which the ordained, women religious, and lay professional ministers do to prepare and celebrate the weekly Eucharist. In reality, it is what the Body of Christ, having been nourished in Word and Sacrament, does in the world throughout the days of each week. In embracing this principle, we prepare our communities and ourselves to celebrate and encounter Christ in the world. The corner of the garden in

which music educators serve is perhaps one of the most important and richest places any individual can toil.

During the many years I spent (and loved!) teaching children music, I never taught them music written or composed solely for children. I taught them music that the parish sang every Sunday at Eucharist—music they could and would grow into as they aged and matured. We do a great disservice to those in our care when we feed them food that will not sustain them for the long journey that lies ahead. With this in mind, I also did not teach them music written by composers who didn't work with children on a regular basis.

Don't teach children only "kiddie" music with all rainbows and sunbeams. Teach them music that they don't yet fully understand but that which they will grow into throughout their lifetime.

Who among us fully understood *To Kill A Mockingbird* when we were assigned to read it in the sixth grade? Or *Hamlet*, when we were high school sophomores. We read and experienced these great pieces of art and then grew into them as we experienced life. It is the same with the music we sing in Catholic worship. Who we are, what we say, and how we live are all a daily witness to the presence of Christ in our students' lives, and they are being formed and informed by what we teach them intentionally, and by what we model for them unintentionally.

If we are teaching a song of reconciliation and forgiveness and lose our patience with the student or choir member who is disruptive, we betray that which we're attempting to teach. Take care not to rush through a song or Psalm of lament and make certain that the interpretation and performance reflects the moments in which you're teaching.

Feed those in your care a balanced diet of music, poetry, and art. Too much of any one musical genre is not healthy for the body... or, the Body. The work you do now grows the deep roots that will sustain those in your care for the long and beautiful road that lies ahead for them. In the words of Benedictine Father Aidan Kavanaugh, "for through the work you do, God saves people."

You must be passionate about what you do—not frenetic, but passionate and in love with this vocation. It must exude from you in all you do and how you teach. Be joyful. And, make that noise... that joyful noise.

"Children have never been good at listening to their elders—but they have never failed to imitate them."

— James Baldwin

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