

**LITURGY TO LIVE – LIVE FOR THE LITURGY**  
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**Introduction**

A few weeks before my grandmother “Panchita” had her final encounter with the Lord, they had appointed me auxiliary bishop of San Antonio. Before a celebration I asked my grandmother – who was 90 at the time – what she liked to do for fun. She said she went to funerals. I asked her, “How can you have fun at a funeral?” and she answered, “Son, haven’t you learned yet that it is a privilege to die?” Indeed throughout all my studies I had never learned about death in these terms.

When I saw her for the last time, she told me, “I want to see the Lord’s face! I only want to see the Lord’s face!” My aunts tell me that as she was dying she would sing songs from her childhood, “*Al cielo, al cielo quiero ir.*” Yes, thanks to my grandmother Panchita, I learned that for Christians, death is a privilege, because it is the encounter for which we came to this world, so that some day we can meet the Lord and see his face.

I share this story with you because the theme of this conference is “Encounter with the Living Christ.” There is no doubt that this phrase refers to the encounter that occurs and that we feel during the liturgy. It is also the encounter we celebrate each time that we “eat from this bread and drink from this blood.”

**The Encounter**

We can encounter Christ in many different ways. I will try to relate some of these with the encounter with the liturgy and especially with the ministry of sacred music.

We find him in creation. We encounter God when we see every creature, big and small, for creation is a reflection of God. Artists, through their creative intuition – and here I include you, liturgical musicians – capture the divinity that we feel in creation. There are also sounds: the water from a small river that is carried over stones or a tall waterfall that thunders as it comes down, or the waves as they break on the shore; in the sound of the birds, the dogs, the cats, the cows, the chickens, the whales, the wind, the thunder and the rain. God is revealed through these sounds and noises. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork...through all the earth their voice resounds, and to the ends of the world, their message. He has pitched a tent there for the sun” (Psalm 19). Musicians imitate the melody of nature, its rhythms, its highs and lows, the loudness and softness of its melodies. Members of the *cursillos* capture the spirit to which I am referring in the Spanish song that says,

*“Canta el gallo, canta el gallo con el quiri-quiri-quiri-quiri-quiri.  
La gallina, la gallina con al cara-cara-cara-cara-cara.  
Los polluelos, los polluelos con el pío-pío-pío-pi.  
Y por eso los grandes amores de muchos colores me gustan a mí.  
Y por eso los grandes amores de muchos colores me gustan a mí.”*

Music discovers and captures the music that is already present in creation. And when musicians compose their music and when they sing it at the liturgy, they attempt to create an encounter between God and the faithful. Theirs is an awesome responsibility.

The greatest encounter is God made flesh. It is the Word that comes to “live among us”. This phrase is an allusion to the Hebrew *skene-sekinah*, which means “tabernacle or meeting tent” (Ex. 33, 7), which is normally translated as “*the word made flesh.*” In reality the temple is for us “the meeting tent where we encounter the Word made flesh, the living Christ. When Jesus Christ became man, we saw the perfect union between God and man. Jesus Christ is God and man, at the same time, not divided; there exists a perfect union: both natures, God and man are united in one person.

For this reason Mary is the Mother of God, because Mary is the Mother of God-Man, who is one person.

We could say that the first liturgy took place when the Word became flesh in Mary's womb. An encounter also takes place there, and Mary responds with the Magnificat. Mary is the first music minister, she is the first one to worship the God-man in the name of all those who would become members of the People of God.

For me one of the most dramatic moments of God's encounter with humankind is when Christ is on the cross. Suspended between heaven and earth he unites humanity with God. The vertical part of the cross reminds us that God comes to us through his son Jesus. The horizontal part of the cross reminds us of us, fallen because of our sins, but raised by all that transcends material and earthly things.

An encounter happens when two people meet. Many times people are introduced by a third person. In Christ we encounter God the Father. He is the "sacrament of the encounter with God." A sacrament is something living and dynamic. It means what it does and it does what it means.

A sacrament means and makes present another reality. Jesus Christ is the "personal sacrament" of the Father. Jesus Christ says, "Whoever sees me, sees my Father, whoever hears me, hears my Father." At the same time, the liturgy's main function is to announce Christ. In the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 2). "Each time we eat this bread and we drink this blood, we announce your death, Lord, until you return."

Just as catechists or evangelizers have the duty to introduce God to others, and make the encounter with Christ possible, ministers of sacred music have the privilege and the duty to introduce the living Christ to the faithful. Their responsibility is to introduce God to the people and the people to God. In this, they perform the same duty as the presider, the priest.

Also in the liturgy music ministers perform and they make palpable the priesthood of the faithful, the one that was received at baptism. It is up to them to unite others during the liturgy with Christ, the head of the mystical body. “God of kings, holy people, priestly people, people of God, bless your Lord.” During the liturgy we all participate in the eternal priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Music ministers also help the faithful recognize and discover that Christ is among them. “When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there also.” Through this unique sacred encounter our gift of life is given to us. “I have come so that you can have life and have it abundantly.” We also recall that he is “the way, the truth, and the Life.”

We must not forget that the encounter is a pathway to communion. When I receive the consecrated bread, I say, “AMEN! I believe that I am about to unite with Christ by way of this sacred food. AMEN! I believe that I am also united with the Father and with the Holy Spirit, because the Son is never separated from the other Persons from the Holy Trinity. AMEN! I believe that Christ is in the person in front of me, behind me, at my right, and at my left.” At the same time we unite with those who have died in the faith and that enjoy glory in heaven; I am referring to the communion of the saints; I also unite with those saints who have yet to be born (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 949, ff). It is a moment that transcends the present. “In the liturgy we experience Christ today, Christ yesterday, and Christ forever.”

### **Ritual and the Liturgy**

A rite is a ceremonial act, guided by rules, that people organize and when carried out, they are in communion with the divine. Rites are practiced in order to praise God, to ask for favors, give thanks, or ask for forgiveness. At times rites have included sacrifices aimed to please a god or gods.

For us Christians, rites are everything that we do at prayer, during the liturgy or in popular religiosity. Every Hispanic community has its own rites, by which they are identified, and by which they relate with God, with Mary and with all the saints. At the same time in their popular rituals there is an intuition or feeling that unites them with their ancestors or with those who will come. Thus popular religiosity is an expression of the communion of saints.

Popular religiosity continues to be one of the main ways by which our people hand on their faith from generation to generation. For this reason it is of utmost importance to keep the music that keeps these rites alive for the people. Is it possible that we may be forgetting some of the most popular songs to Mary?

### **Spirituality and the music minister**

Liturgical spirituality is not something apart from everything else. Liturgy must connect us with life, and what we do with life should be taken to the liturgy. The liturgy and our daily lives must nurture one another. Our Lord called us to “worship the Father in Spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:23). This means that our prayers and worship should be truthful, and that truthfulness should be reflected in our lives. I remember hearing about a man named Patrick. They used to say that Patrick attended Mass every Sunday, but that when he died, he went to Hell because of what he did on Monday.

While all of us are challenged by the need to unite the liturgy with our lives, liturgical ministers must pay special attention to the challenge of developing a better and more honest liturgical spirituality.

Our lives must be inspired by prayer and contemplation. We cannot gather around the altar with our hands empty. They must be full of faith and the love of God, and this will only happen when one has a well established faith life. Since spirituality is connected with daily life,

we are aware that the way we live our lives as disciples is connected directly with our celebration in the Mass.

Music leaders, cantors, and music ministers have the serious obligation to develop their liturgical spirituality. I used to think that in classical music the good musicians were those who played or sang the right notes. It was not until later that I found out that the good musicians were those who put their life and soul into the music they are interpreting. If those who play classical or secular music should be very concerned about the spirit of these, how much more concerned should those who play religious music be?

### **Practical suggestions**

1. This first suggestion is the most important one. It has to do with appreciating and recognizing the intent of the composer. Let us remember that many of the texts of the songs we sing during the liturgy sometimes come from strong human and Christian experiences. Think of the popular song, “Pescador de Hombres” (“Lord, You Have Come,”) composed by Cesáreo Gabráin:

Tú has venido a la orilla,  
No has buscado ni a sabios ni a ricos;  
Tan sólo quieres que yo te siga.

Lord, you have come to the seashore  
Neither searching for the rich nor the wise  
Desiring only that I should follow.

Señor, me has mirado a los ojos  
Sonriendo has dicho mi nombre,  
En la arena he dejado mi barca,  
Junto a ti buscaré otro mar.

O Lord, with your eyes set upon me,  
gently smiling you have spoken my name  
all I longed for I have found by the water,  
at your side, I will seek other shores.

Look at the text from a song written by Juan Antonio Espinosa:

Desterrados, muy lejos de esa tierra  
Que hace tiempo nos vio por vez primera;  
Junto al fuego de unos cuantos palos secos,  
En la noche cantamos nuestras penas.

Uprooted, far from that land,  
That long ago saw us first;  
By the fire of a few dry logs,  
At night we sing our sorrows.

These songs certainly came from very profound experiences of Christian life.

We must imagine we are having a conversation with the songwriter.

“What is your message?”

The songwriter answers, “Examine the text I composed or that I chose from the Sacred Scriptures. Let your singing style reflect my message. Also remember that there is an intimate connection between the text and the music. The music gives life to the text. The music is at the service of the text.”

In interviews with various sacred and secular musicians, I learned some interesting ideas about music ministry. My question to them was, “What message could I give to Hispanic pastoral musicians?” One member of a trio that plays Mexican music said that when he was a seminarian, his music teacher would always insist, “Concentrate on the words!” and how that some piece of advice has helped him even as he sings secular music. Mary Frances Reza told me that the “text has power,” especially when it is derived from the Bible. The text evangelizes, converts and transmits the grace of forgiveness, of love, and of peace.

2. Sing with gusto! Don’t forget that your music has a deep impact in the hearts of those who listen to it. Salvador Hernández, a mariachi music singer in Las Cruces told me that when he sings he wants “*¡que la gente se sienta bonito!*, for people to feel good inside.”

Carlos Corral, one of my colleagues in the Diocese of Las Cruces shared with me that he was raised in a small town called El Ojito in Chihuahua. When the family left Chihuahua to seek a better life in the United States, Carlos was a young boy. His Catholic faith had come to him especially through his grandmother’s influence back in Chihuahua, and when the family left, he thought that they were leaving God behind. He was sad that God would not be with him in this new land. Then his mother took him to a church in New Mexico, and he heard a hymn to the

Blessed Virgin that he had heard back home. From then on he breathed easier, for God was in the United States too! His son, Andrés, when he was young, walked out of church with my friend Carlos, and when they were driving home he asked his father, “Dad, what does ‘the Lord is kind and merciful’ mean?” The repetition of the psalm’s response remains in the minds of children. Salvador Hernández, to whom I referred earlier, says that his three-year-old daughter gets distracted during Mass and starts to play. However, when it is time to sing the Our Father, that little girl wakes up, gets on her feet, puts her little hands together, and sings the Our Father together with the rest of the congregation, and this happens every time they attend Mass.

Music in the liturgy has to come from within, from the heart, the soul, for music is a gift from God, and it is the language of the heart. As Salvador said, music expresses our feelings. Mary Frances shared something from Arturo Campos, a New Mexico historian who said, “the song is the most lyrical and most subjective manifestation of the soul of any culture, and through its music, we can hear the rhythm of its people.”

3. Rehearsal is important. Because music ministry is so important in order to give life to the liturgy, musicians need to work hard to make the music sound its best during the liturgy. For this reason rehearsals are not only important and useful but absolutely necessary! Liturgical musicians need to be well prepared and to taken the rehearsal time seriously. Musical improvisation during the liturgy is unacceptable.

4. Be creative but don’t take on the role of a performer. Invite others in the congregation to sing along. Don’t forget that your role is not to entertain. The attention should be geared towards what is going on at the altar and not on those perform the music. It is possible that the area’s culture can be included in the moments of musical creativity.

5. Include new people, especially young people, in the choir. Choirs can sometimes become exclusive and it becomes difficult for new people to become part of it. It is important to include young people, for us older people will some day have to leave the music ministry and someone has to take our place.

6. Take some time right before the Mass to rehearse with the assembly. This is of utmost importance, especially when a new song is being introduced. It is also good to rehearse the responsorial psalm. The more I experience the liturgy, the more I see the importance in this psalm. There is no other song that has such potential to penetrate the hearts and to contribute to the contemplative aspects of the liturgy. One year we had three ordinations at our cathedral in Las Cruces. It was an unforgettable ceremony, and when I ask people how they liked the ordination, their eyes fill up with tears, they were so overwhelmed with emotions. And when I ask them what part they liked best they say, "When we sang the responsorial psalm." The reason for this was because the cantor sang with all her heart, "*qué alegría cuando me dijeron 'vamos a la casa del Señor, vamos a la casa del Señor'*". I rejoiced when I heard them say, "let us go to the house of the Lord, let us go to the house of the Lord."

7. Don't forget the children. First, we must not lose sight of the simple songs that we learned from our grandparents. How can we transmit from one generation to the next the secular songs from Pedro Infante, Lola Beltrán, Agustín Lara and José Alfredo Jiménez? We can and should also teach the sacred music to our future generations. I don't think we are taking advantage of music in our religious education programs. Through music we can teach catechism. Songwriters should be challenged to write new music for children.

8. Sing appropriate songs for specific moments of the Mass: the procession, the presentation of the gifts, the acclamations, communion, meditation, and exit song.

9. Be aware of your behavior during Mass. This was not as necessary before because the choir had its own place, the choir loft; the choir was heard, not seen. Now the choir tends to be in front, where the entire assembly can see them. Be aware of your behavior and not be reading your music, for example, during the readings or during the homily. Always maintain a semblance of piety and a reverential attention and in this way you will be a good example for all the others.

10. Pay close attention to your prayer life. For all of us who lead the faithful in the official prayer of the church, it is important that we maintain a personal and communal prayer life. We can all pay more attention to prayers. None of us is happy with the amount of time or the quality of our prayers. It is true that the more we pray, the more we want to pray, and the less we pray, the less we want to pray. In this context, I recommend that retreats be organized and that retreats with choirs from other Masses and from other parishes. As well as praying together, these can take advantage of this opportunity to sing together and enrich each other.

## **Conclusion**

We are grateful for musicians for what they do to bring their best musical gifts to the Lord's throne. They help us worship and glorify our God. I would like to repeat the words of "The Little Drummer Boy," the song about the little boy who did not have gold, myrrh or incense to give to the newborn child in Bethlehem. He only had the "pa rum pum pum pum" of his drum.

El camino que lleva a Belén  
baja hasta el valle que la nieve cubrió.  
Los pastorcillos quieren ver a su Rey,  
le traen regalos en su humilde zurrón  
al Redentor, al Redentor.

Yo quisiera poner a tus pies  
algún presente que te agrade Señor,  
mas Tú ya sabes que soy pobre también,

Come they told me, *pa rum pum pum pum*  
A new born King to see, *pa rum pum pum pum*

Our finest gifts we bring, *pa rum pum pum pum*  
To lay before the king, *pa rum pum pum pum,*  
*rum pum pum pum, rum pum pum pum*

So to honor Him, *pa rum pum pum pum*

y no poseo más que un viejo tambor.

(rom pom pom pom, rom pom pom pom)

¡En tu honor frente al portal tocaré con mi tambor!

El camino que lleva a Belén  
voy marcando con mi viejo tambor,  
nada hay mejor que yo pueda ofrecer,  
su ronco acento es un canto de amor  
al Redentor, al Redentor.

Cuando Dios me vio tocando ante El, me sonrió.

When we come

Little baby, *pa rum pum pum pum*  
I am a poor boy too, *pa rum pum pum pum*  
I have no gift to bring, *pa rum pum pum pum*  
That's fit to give our King, *pa rum pum pum pum,*  
*rum pum pum pum, rum pum pum pum*  
Shall I play for you, *pa rum pum pum pum*  
On my drum

Mary nodded, *pa rum pum pum pum*  
The ox and lamb kept time, *pa rum pum pum pum*  
I played my drum for Him, *pa rum pum pum pum*  
I played my best for Him, *pa rum pum pum pum,*  
*rum pum pum pum, rum pum pum pum*

Then He smiled at me, *pa rum pum pum pum*  
Me and my drum