



Duccio de Buoninsegna;
*Discourse After the Last
Supper* (1308-11);
Museo dell'Opera del Duomo
(Siena)

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A NEW SONG FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

BY CAROLYN PIRTLE, M.S.M.

TEACH US TO PRAY



I recently spent a year of my life as an elementary music teacher. When I began, I had no idea what I was doing. Although I had majored in music and had even gone on to graduate study, I had never taken a single course in music education. I had no theories to help me, no mentor to guide me. Yet, there I was, on the first day of school, standing in front of 22 kindergartners, teaching them about melodic direction and rhythmic duration (or, in kindergarten terms, “high-low” and “short-long”).

Over the following months, as I pored over books and websites looking for resources and ideas, I discovered new levels of admiration for the exceptional teachers of my past, and found myself longing for someone to teach me how to teach. I sought advice from more experienced colleagues at my school, and as I listened, I noticed a common thread of wisdom beginning to emerge: classes and theories and mentors are invaluable, but you *really* learn to teach by teaching. I believe that this holds true for many other fields as well—musicians learn to play by practicing their instruments, athletes gain dexterity and coordination by running drills, scientists perfect formulae through experiments of trial and error. We can study theories and analyze best practices, but in the end, we usually learn best by doing.

Jesus knew this better than anyone. When His disciples begged Him, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1), He didn’t respond with a dense theological discourse on the nature of prayer or even with a definition of what prayer is. He taught them to pray by praying. “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name” (Lk 11:2). We learn to pray by praying, and the liturgy is our school of prayer *par excellence*. In the celebration of the liturgy, we offer our prayer to the Father through the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit. In the very act of joining our prayer to that of Christ, we learn to configure our prayer more authentically to His. Our prayer is formed in the very act of praying, and this is so because the words that we pray in the liturgy are not words to which any person can claim ownership or copyright. Therefore, we can fumble our way through the liturgical celebration, offering our prayer in the midst of distraction, confusion, even sorrow, and in that process, we are learning to pray. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI explains the phenomenon this way:

[In the liturgy,]...words must precede our thought. It does not usually happen like this

[in conversation] because we have to think and then what we have thought is converted into words. Here, instead, in the liturgy, the opposite is true, words come first. God has given us the words and the sacred liturgy offers us words; we must enter into the words, into their meaning and receive them within us, we must attune ourselves to these words; in this way we become children of God. We become like God. (General Audience, September 26, 2012)

Thus, the liturgy itself becomes our school of prayer, the locus where we lift up our hearts, imperfect, fearful, and distracted though they are, and offer them to God the Father united with the perfect prayer of Christ the Son. As we do so, “the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings” (Rom 8:26). Indeed, “the liturgy is...a participation in Christ’s own prayer addressed to the Father in the Holy Spirit. In the liturgy, all Christian prayer finds its source and goal” (CCC, §1073).

Within this participation of the liturgy, then, how is one specifically formed in this school of prayer? Benedict XVI speaks of the Scriptures and the words of the liturgy themselves as the primary means of entering into the prayer of Christ to the Father in the Spirit, yet there is one more fundamental layer often joined to these components of the liturgical celebration in which the faithful can give voice to their prayer in a unique and beautiful way: music. As then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger attests, “When man comes into contact with God, mere speech is not enough. Areas of his existence are awakened that spontaneously turn into song. Indeed, man’s own being is insufficient for what he has to express, and so he invites the whole of creation to become a song with him” (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 136). And again, the words to this song have been given to us.

The Paschal Mystery of the Incarnate Word of God provides the Church, the Bride, with the “definitive new song” of Christ, her Bridegroom; thus, at the liturgical celebration, during which we enter into the heavenly liturgy, the wedding feast of the Lamb, “the singing of the Church comes ultimately out of love. It is the utter depth of love that produces the singing. ... In so saying, we come...to the Trinitarian interpretation of Church music. The Holy Spirit is love, and it is he who produces the singing. He is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit who draws us into love for Christ and so leads to the Father” (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 142).

We learn to play by playing, we learn to teach by teaching, and we learn to pray by praying. The prayer of the Church is suffused with song as, moved by the Spirit, she “responds to God’s love made flesh in Christ, the love that for us went unto death” (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 149).

Our participation in the liturgy is challenging. Sometimes, our voices do not correspond to the convictions of our hearts. At other times, we are distracted or preoccupied by the cares of the world. Christ always invites us, however, to enter into song, to rise above our own preoccupations, and to give our entire selves to the hymn of his Paschal Sacrifice for the honor and glory of the Most Blessed Trinity (USCCB, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, §14).

The education that takes place in the liturgical school of prayer is one that spans a lifetime. Nevertheless, united in Christ by the grace of the Spirit, we continue to lift up our hearts to the Father in the sung prayer of our liturgical celebration, and in so doing, we learn to conform our prayer more perfectly to His.



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