

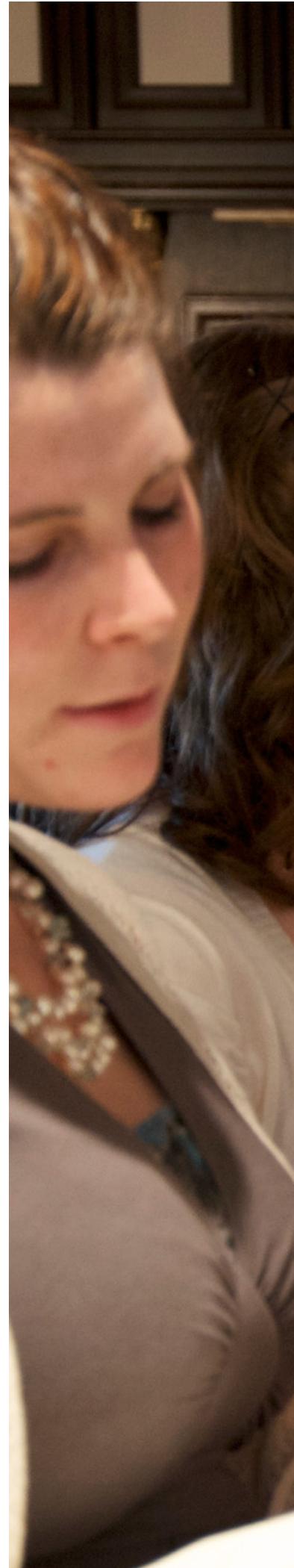
## A NEW SONG FOR A NEW EVANGELIZATION

BY CAROLYN PIRTLE, M.S.M.

# SINGING THE WORD MADE FLESH

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The encounter with the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, is the catalyst for a life of evangelization. Indeed, it is the catalyst for the entirety of the Christian life. In an oft-quoted passage from the beginning of his Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI writes, “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but an *encounter* with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus Caritas Est*, §1, emphasis added). Pope Francis takes up this reality of encounter-as-catalyst and develops it yet further, citing these very words of his predecessor in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. Pope Francis declares in the very first sentence, “The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who *encounter* Jesus” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §1, emphasis added). The Holy Father calls for the development of a “culture of encounter” (*EG* §20), in which Christians open themselves up to the possibility of discovering Christ not only in and through the world and people around them, but also—and most especially—in the Gospel, particularly as it is proclaimed and celebrated in the liturgical life of the Church.





Participants of the Echo program sing during the celebration of the Eucharist at Siegfried Hall's chapel of Our Lady Seat of Wisdom (University of Notre Dame).

Photo: Luke Slonkosky (2012), courtesy of Echo.

For those in liturgical ministry, this culture of encounter can be elusive, which is ironic, considering that their career choice seemingly puts them in a position of encountering Jesus Christ constantly. However, in many cases, the more direct responsibility one has for a particular facet of liturgical ministry, the less one may be able to enter into the liturgical celebration wholeheartedly, thereby lessening the chance for a genuine encounter with Jesus Christ. This can be especially true for those involved in liturgical music ministry. During any given liturgy, the director of music or the cantor or the choir members may not be thinking about or even listening to the words of the First Reading; they may be thinking about that tricky passage in the second verse of the upcoming Responsorial Psalm. The beautifully poetic, seasonally rich, theologically profound words of the Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer may waft in one ear and out the other of the accompanist until the mind clues in to the fact that the Sanctus is approaching as the priest mentions the angels and saints and concludes with the all-important cue phrase: “as we acclaim/proclaim. . . .” Given the number of things they have to keep track of, is it even possible for liturgical music ministers to cultivate, let alone maintain, a mindfulness that will enable them to enter more fully into the Eucharistic celebration and thus encounter Jesus Christ? Or should they just plan on going to two Masses each weekend—one in which they can focus entirely on fulfilling their specific ministerial responsibilities, and one in which they can focus entirely on participating in the liturgical celebration as a whole?

While an honest answer to these questions depends entirely on individual discernment, I believe that there is a way in which liturgical music ministers can cultivate a mindfulness throughout the Eucharistic celebration that will enable them to enter into it more fully, allowing them to experience an authentic

encounter with Christ, even in the midst of myriad ministerial responsibilities. Liturgical music ministers must, with every breath and every note, remember that their very song is a form of encounter with Jesus Christ, for, indeed, their song *is Jesus Christ*. As then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger so beautifully wrote, “Faith becoming music is part of the process of the word becoming flesh.”<sup>1</sup> In liturgical music itself is the opportunity to encounter the Word made flesh in all his glory, and it is well worth contemplating the mystery of him whom we encounter in our song.

In the mystery of the Incarnation, the hymn of the Father’s love—begun in creation, fractured in the fall, echoed faintly in the Law, and murmured mysteriously by the Prophets—is at last heard in its full-throated glory as the cries of the newborn King shatter a silent night in Bethlehem. The infinite *Logos* who “composed the entire creation into melodious order, and tuned into concert the discord of the elements”<sup>2</sup> becomes for us an infant—the wordless lullaby of God’s eternal love, so that we “who were once far off” (Eph 2:13) might draw near to him who is “meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11:29) and learn how to become little as he became little, so as to live as children of God.<sup>3</sup> Jesus Christ is not only the Word, he is the “new song” longed for by the psalmist, awaited by patriarchs and matriarchs, and foretold by prophets, and the Word became flesh precisely in order to reveal to us the melody of this “new song.”<sup>4</sup> It is the song of humble service and compassionate forgiveness, the song of prayer and communion, the song of a life offered in perfect love and obedience to the Father through the Spirit—so that we who follow his example and take up his song even as we take up our crosses may share by grace in the glory that is his by nature, “the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). Jesus Christ is the One who perfectly enfleshes the self-giving love of the Father by offering his life in a hymn of unbroken

praise. Moreover, from now until the end of the age, he is the One who takes flesh in the hearts of the Church at prayer as our song becomes one with his own in our offering of praise to the Father in unity with the Spirit.

It is in their very ministry that liturgical musicians are able to encounter Jesus Christ, who is not only the reason for their song, but, as we have seen, is the very song itself. Singing the hymn of Christ cultivates an encounter of great depth, for it taps into who we are at our most human. Augustine knew this well when he wrote, “Singing is for the one who loves.”<sup>5</sup> To express great love, mere words are not enough, and so we sing our love for Christ by singing Christ himself. As we allow the Word to become flesh within our hearts by pouring out our faith in that Word as music, we cannot help but become infused with the joy of the Gospel, and this joy proclaims the presence of Christ to all present at the liturgical celebration. In this way, liturgical music ministers truly become evangelists, proclaiming Christ as the “new song,” witnessing to the reality that, “evangelization is first and foremost about preaching the Gospel to those who do not know Jesus Christ or who have always rejected him” (EG §15). As Pope Francis affirms, “Evangelization with joy becomes beauty in the liturgy, as part of our daily concern to spread goodness. The Church evangelizes and is herself evangelized through the beauty of the liturgy, which is both a celebration of the task of evangelization and the source of her renewed self-giving” (EG §24). By recalling that it is Christ whom they sing, liturgical music ministers can rediscover in the beauty of their ministry the joy of the Gospel and the very means of sharing that joy with “[whomever] has ears to hear” (Mk 4:9).



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## NOTES

- 1 Joseph Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord: Faith in Christ and Liturgy Today*, trans. Martha M. Matesich (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 122.
- 2 Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks, I*. Trans. G. W. Butterworth. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1919, p. 11.
- 3 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), §526.
- 4 Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks, I*, 17. See also Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), 138.
- 5 Augustine, *Sermo* 336, 1 (PL 1844–1855, 38, 1472).