

A NEW SONG FOR A NEW EVANGELIZATION

BY CAROLYN PIRTLE

JOINING THE SONG OF THE SAINTS

*And so, with the company of Angels and Saints,
we sing the hymn of your praise,
as without end we acclaim:*

***Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts. . .*¹**

In every liturgical celebration, at the end of every Eucharistic Preface, we acknowledge that we as a congregation are not offering this liturgy by ourselves, in this isolated community, at this one particular moment in time. As members of the Mystical Body of Christ, we celebrate the liturgy in union with every Catholic community at every moment throughout the world, but even that profound realization does not encompass the cosmic magnitude of the liturgical celebration. In his Death and Resurrection, Christ has broken through time and space and opened the way to eternity, and in our celebration of the liturgy—the re-presentation of the great Paschal mystery—we, too, break through time and space and, in Christ, we are caught up in the eternal liturgy that is always taking





Fra Angelico, *Last Judgment*, detail
(c.1450); Gemäldegalerie der
Staatlichen Museen (Berlin);

Image courtesy of SMBDigital, reproduced
under Creative Commons Attribution-
NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Germany.

place before God in heaven. We acknowledge this mystery, perhaps obliquely aware of what we are saying when we make such an assertion, but understanding it is another matter altogether. Indeed, if we really understood what it means to sing the hymn of God's praise with the company of the angels and saints, if we really understood what takes place when we celebrate the liturgy, we would perhaps be more inclined to adopt a manner of celebration recommended by Annie Dillard in her essay "An Expedition to the Pole" from the famed collection *Teaching a Stone to Talk*:

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.²

It is a staggering thing to proclaim that we join our song to the angels and the saints, that we offer our worship to the Father in and through Christ himself in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Our human finitude cannot truly grasp these mysteries in their fullness. We can only acknowledge them joyfully and fearfully as we dare to raise our voices "with Angels and Archangels, with Thrones and Dominions, and with all the hosts and Powers of heaven,"³ and with all those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith, those who now sing the new hymn before the throne of God and the Lamb (cf. Rev 14:1–5): the saints.

We join this great cosmic chorus, and surrounded as we are by "so great a cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1), sing our praise to God "in the presence of the angels" (Ps 138:1) and in the very company of Christ. When our voices are joined to theirs, our song takes on a strength far beyond our imagining. Many times in my life of liturgical celebration, the heart that I have "[lifted] up to the Lord" has been filled with anxiety or broken by sorrow. Yet, in the mystery of this celebration that is both in time and beyond time, the song of the angels and saints becomes my song as well. The words are not of my own making, yet they allow me to become what God has called me to be, to live my truest vocation as a creature who offers praise to her Creator. Some days I may sing with a voice I scarcely recognize as my own, yet, when my feeble hymn of praise is joined to the swell of voices I hear around me and voices I cannot yet hear, it becomes a canticle of gratitude beyond my capacity to offer. Jeremy Driscoll, O.S.B., beautifully articulates this mysterious reality in his book *What Happens at Mass*:

We want to sing with the angels and saints because we are conscious of our hearts being on high. We know we are where they are [in the presence of the Lord], and we are going to act like it by singing their song. Theirs is a song of continual praise . . . From our daily cares and anxieties, with our hearts lifted up to where angels and saints are, we share in their continual praise. When this liturgy is over and we must return to life "here below," there will be a sense in which we remain in heaven by means of this song we have joined, a hymn that never ceases.⁴

The hymn of the angels and saints *never ceases*. No matter where I am in my daily life, no matter what stresses or sorrows may be before me in any particular moment, I can call to mind the song of the angels and saints forever taking place before God, raising my heart with theirs until the time when I am once again able to strap on my crash helmet and life preserver and lash myself to the pew so that I can raise my voice with great cosmic chorus in the celebration of the liturgy.



NOTES

1 See Eucharistic Preface IV of the Sundays in Ordinary Time, Eucharistic Preface of Holy Pastors, and Eucharistic Preface IV for the Dead in *The Roman Missal*.

2 Annie Dillard. “An Expedition to the Pole” in *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 40.

3 See Eucharistic Preface I and II of Advent, Eucharistic Preface I of the Nativity of the Lord, Eucharistic Preface of the Epiphany of the Lord, Eucharistic Preface I of Lent, Eucharistic Preface I and II of the Sundays in Ordinary Time, Eucharistic Preface I of the Most Holy Eucharist, Eucharistic Preface I of Apostles, Common Eucharistic Preface I, Eucharistic Preface I for the Dead in *The Roman Missal*.

4 Jeremy Driscoll, O.S.B. *What Happens at Mass* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2005), 79.



Carolyn Pirtle is the Assistant Director of the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy, a composer of liturgical music, and assistant editor of Church Life.