

## Perspectives on Church Music 13

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### Ambrose, the Children, and Advent

“Where were the children?”

This partly whimsical thought crossed my mind as I pondered that serendipitous moment in the 4<sup>th</sup> century which resulted in the introduction of hymn singing into the Western Church.

As the story goes, Ambrose (340-397), the great Bishop of Milan, was having trouble with the Arians, a heretical sect which denied Christ’s divinity. When the Empress Justina, who favored the Arians, tried to get Ambrose to open one of the churches—the Basilica Portina—for her adherents, Ambrose adamantly refused. Fearing reprisal from the Empress, Ambrose gathered the faithful in the basilica, singing psalms and hymns to buoy their spirits in this time of persecution. When the soldiers sent by the Empress arrived at the basilica, so tremendous was the effect of the people’s song that the soldiers are said to have joined in the singing. The Empress finally was forced to abandon her plans.

St. Augustine, one of Ambrose’s converts—who as a young man was present with his mother at the Basilica Portina—wrote some years later in his Confessions about this moving experience and how the singing had made a profound impression on him.

But where were the children?

There were no day-care or early childhood drop-in centers. Were they back home with their grandparents? Augustine's presence with his mother gives us a clue. The children—young and old—were probably right alongside all the other faithful in the church, singing the hymns of faith as they stood with their parents and Ambrose contending for the faith against the demands of the Empress. What did the children sing? Most likely some hymns of Ambrose, those wonderfully rich and sturdy hymns, a few of which are still found in today's hymnals. The children might have been singing some words they didn't quite understand; the melodies might even have been in those "minor keys." But they sang along with all the faithful, their young faith shaped, molded, and nurtured by their song.

Contrast this with Elsie H. Spriggs' comment concerning children's hymns. "There is a modern tendency," she wrote, "to present God as what may be described as a celestial zoo man or an omnipotent St. Francis. There is a constant stream of hymns about robins, lambs, rabbits, and God's tiny creatures of all kinds."

One does not have to go far to find children's hymns in the "celestial zoo" or "praising God for the daisies" categories. Take for example:

I know that Jesus loved to see  
The big trees straight and tall,  
The animals and singing birds,  
And wayside flowers small.

I think he must have loved to play  
With kittens weak and frail,  
And laughed to see a puppy dog  
Try hard to catch his tail.

Or try this one on for size.

I love God's tiny creatures  
That wander wild and free,  
The coral-coated lady bird,  
The velvet humming bee.

Shy little flowers in hedge and dyke  
That hide themselves away.  
God paints them, though they are so small,  
God makes them bright and gay.

Singing and learning strong, solid hymns is crucial in the developing life of young Christians.

Good hymns tell the story of the faith, teach theology, and help to incorporate children into the worshipping community. They are vitally important in the shaping and forming of young Christian lives. Perhaps it is time to think again about our use of all those “celestial zoo” and “praising God for the daisies” songs that some seem to think are best for children.

Martin Luther's two hymns for children give us an idea of what he had in mind for children. The first begins:

From heaven above to earth I come  
To bear good news to every home  
Glad tidings of great joy I bring  
Whereof I now will say and sing.

The second, which he specifically called “A Children's Hymn,” begins:

Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word.  
Curb those who by deceit or sword  
Would wrest the kingdom from your Son  
And bring to nought all he has done.

No wimpy “praising God for the daisies” here. No trip through a celestial zoo for Luther.

In the weeks ahead, why not tell the story of Ambrose and the children to your children's choir. Teach them one of Ambrose's finest hymns, memorize it and sing it with your children. You'll find it in most hymnals. In Latin it begins: *Veni Redemptor gentium*.

You may know it better as

Savior of the nations, come,  
Show yourself the Virgin's son.  
Marvel, heaven, wonder, earth,  
That our God chose such a birth.

You couldn't give them a better Advent or Christmas present!

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[This essay is reprinted with permission from *First Personal Singular: Reflections on Worship, Liturgy, and Children* (1998) by Carl Schalk and is available from MorningStar Music Publishers. MSM-90-26/ISBN 0-944529-29-1]