

Reflection 18 – What We Share in Common

For a long time I have wanted to find out about the history of churches near our house in Roseville, Minnesota. A church that I have especially wanted to learn about since I came to teach at Luther Seminary is the Church of the Holy Childhood near the Minnesota State Fair grounds. I learned soon after I came to Minnesota that *Richard Proulx (1937---2010) had been there. (I referenced him in *Te Deum* [p. 307].) Retirement has been even busier than before retirement, so I had not been able to do this study. At the beginning of June, 2022, I had an unusual break from assignments, went to the office of Holy Childhood, and talked with the secretary Mary Madigan who was very knowledgeable and helpful. What I learned confirms what I have been discovering over and over for many years.

Holy Childhood was founded on March 6, 1946, by Father John J. Buchanan after he returned from being a chaplain in the Second World War. The parish in St. Paul, Minnesota, was originally bounded by Hoyt Avenue on the north, Lexington Avenue on the east, the Great Northern Railway on the south, and Snelling Avenue (the street just east of the Fairgrounds) to the west. It was meant to serve the 1450 Roman Catholic people with 250 children who lived in that area. After the church was incorporated on April 8, 1946, the first Mass was celebrated in Corpus Christi Dining Hall on the Fairgrounds. The first Mass at the Church building was celebrated a little over a year later on August 15, 1947, in a basement chapel. The land on which the Church stands was part of a pasture where Thomas Frankson, Lieutenant Governor of Minnesota from 1917 to 1921, raised buffalo—which gave the name “Bison” to the street behind the church.

Unfortunately Frankson was caught in the systemic injustice of his time and sold properties with the restriction that they could not be sold or leased “to a colored person.” So far as I can tell, the property on which The Church of the Holy Childhood was built did not have this restriction, and it may be that the Church resisted such a thing in spite of racism’s ubiquitous and often systemic nature in our country. Whether there was such resistance or not, the Mass that was celebrated in its building, like the parallel services of Word and Table in Protestant church buildings, undercut and condemned the racism of white congregations, calling them to repent whether they heard that call or not. It is instructive to note that black spirituals—sung in white churches, not only black ones—do the same thing. Simultaneously, like the song of the Church generally, they sing of God’s mercy and forgiveness even for the most heinous of our sins.

John Buchanan, who founded Holy Childhood in 1946, cared about music and designed the church and its programs to support it. The church had a three-manual Wicks organ at first. Now it has a 1994 four-manual Hoppe that its current organist, Robert Vickery, had a part in designing. He has been there since 1981. Holy Childhood had a fine boy choir and strong congregational singing before Vatican II. The boy choir stopped when the school was closed in 2010, but choral and congregational settings of the Ordinary have continued weekly. The church confirms things I keep encountering.

Growing up I was told by pastors that music was the war department. I discovered this was not always true when I started visiting and inquiring about churches in my hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio, and encountered musicians and pastors who worked together well. I also could not help but notice that denominations tended to demonize one another. I was shocked therefore when I sang with a classmate, Paul Schroeder, in our high school choir and discovered that he was the organist at a Roman Catholic church. His comments about that

church indicated that it celebrated God's grace, love, mercy, and even justification by grace through faith. I had been taught that these things were the preserves of Protestants and were impossible among Roman Catholics (though I had also noted that church musicians generally learned from each other!).

Holy Childhood bears witness to the relative smallness of our denominational differences and points, like other churches, to our shared ecumenical opportunities and challenges. I went to a funeral at Holy Childhood. Organist, cantor, and presider worked well together. This and its opposite are found across the ecumenical spectrum. Holy Childhood has resisted movie theatre screens that atomize assemblies into individual consumers and, in spite of anything that may be said, kill congregational singing altogether or maybe get some "singing along." That too and its opposite are found across the ecumenical spectrum. The ecumenical communal Gathering, Word, Meal, and Sending were there, and so were the challenges of our time. The ubiquitous eulogy was present, with positive insights into the life of the dead person, but with the normal exaggerations and their attendant works righteousness that are as present, if not more present, in Protestant churches. The assembly itself and its countercultural singing were there, with our current challenge that people in our culture no longer sing. Especially at funerals, the number of non-singers increases because more people who are not regular church goers are present.

Holy Childhood, like the whole church in its sinful yet redeemed state, bears witness to the importance of our assemblies and to the grace, mercy, and love of God expressed in their song around Word, Font, and Table. Even when our culture and the politics of "the other" teach us to hate each other, Christians, in spite of their brokenness, still sing this song and seek to live out its love.

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- For more background on Richard Proulx, see the Profiles in American Lutheran Church Music feature on the website of the Center for Church Music. The conversation between Robert Batastini and Michael Silhavy is engaging and informative.