

Perspectives on Church Music 11

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Again, and Again, and Again ...

“Tell me again,” children say, as we repeat a familiar story for the hundredth time, “Tell me again!” Some stories they know so well that they can say them right along with us. Changing even a word or two brings the instant response, “That’s not how it goes.”

How do children learn to throw a ball, to jump rope, to tie a knot? Repetition! Not mindless repetition, to be sure, but repetition which ultimately liberates them from concentration on the mechanics and frees them to focus on the joy of doing whatever it is they are doing.

How do children learn to ride a bicycle? By practicing over and over, again and again. Then suddenly—it all falls into place. They are riding! No longer consciously thinking about pumping their legs, keeping their balance, or watching where they are going, all at once it has come together—and they are riding! Free to enjoy the experience without thinking about the individual actions that make it possible.

This is how all of us—children and adults alike—learn to worship. Worship is best when the actions of worship are second nature, when we don’t have to consciously be asking ourselves “What do we do now?” As long as we are thinking “What comes next?” or “Do we stand or sit or kneel?” we are not worshipping. We are still learning to worship.

But what would happen if a child who has learned to move the pedals clockwise, suddenly encounters a bicycle where the pedals work counterclockwise? Confusion, frustration, and the prospect of having to learn all over again how to ride that bicycle. That is why the Church wisely uses the same basic forms and the same wording in its worship again and again. Once learned, they become the stable framework within which both children and adults are set free to concentrate on what they are doing, saying, and singing.

When children—or adults—have learned that their response to the Kyrie bids is “Lord, have mercy,” or that they answer the petitions with “Hear our prayer,” they participate with confidence. When children—or adults—are confronted each Sunday with new and different forms, there is bound to be confusion. They don’t know what to say or do, or whether they should stand, sit, or kneel. In the attempt to fashion liturgies that seem to adults to be “more interesting” or “meaningful,” we often place a significant stumbling block in the way of truly meaningful worship.

Children—and adults as well—need a framework for worship which is stable and unchanging. Many so-called “creative” liturgies only foster confusion by constantly changing what we do and how we do it. What some promote as the way to greater participation in worship usually serves only to diminish or squelch participation altogether.

So three cheers for doing worship in the same way week after week. Rather than a numbing monotony, such repetition actually provides a framework within which both children and adults

are set free to give full attention to the content of the liturgy, and to catch its fuller impact, significance, and meaning.

“Tell me a story,” children say. In the liturgy of the Church we do—the most important story they will ever hear or learn.

And we tell it in the same way—again, and again, and again.

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