

Perspectives on Church Music 9

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WORSHIP THROUGH ALICE'S LOOKING GLASS (1998)

What is wrong with these descriptive words or phrases taken from church bulletins describing their parish worship: words like the plain vanilla of “traditional” and “contemporary,” phrases like the jazzier but more enigmatic “classical traditional” and “classic contemporary,” or perhaps the most intriguing “contemporary traditional?”

The simple answer is that in the topsy-turvy Alice-in-Wonderland world in which much of parish worship today seems to exist, nothing is as it purports to be, none of those terms really says what it means or means what it says. All of them reflect a distortion and misunderstanding of both the church's tradition as well as the idea of the contemporary. As a result, most conversations about parish worship start off with mis-perceptions not always easy to surmount.

The most recent voice in the conversation is the magnificent and lavishly produced four-part PBS series “The Choir.” The story by Joanna Trollope pits the choirmaster and headmaster of the choir school at the fictional Aldminster cathedral against the dean and his cronies who wish to eliminate the choir, ostensibly to pay for a new cathedral roof. The dean sees the maintenance of the cathedral's 400-year-old choral tradition as an anachronism, an archaic impediment to the church's work in the modern world, as well as to his apparent ecclesiastical ambitions.

For the dean of Aldminster, the word “tradition” seems to connote—as for many who use it in the present-day “worship wars”—stagnation, inflexibility, and resistance to an open future. In actual fact the Latin *traditio*—from which we get our English word “tradition”—is an *active* word, an *active* concept, it is an *act*, the *act* of “handing over of something from the past to the future.” It is, at the same time, the ballast providing the necessary stability and continuity as Christians move from any present to the future.

At its root, the church’s tradition refers to what the church essentially is and does—a community that baptizes, proclaims the Word, celebrates the meal. In a broader context it can include other aspects which assist and support those essentials. From the very beginning, the church’s song has been closely allied with what the church is and does.

Do we need the modern-day equivalent of an Aldminster cathedral with its choir? Perhaps. Sixteenth century Lutherans, for example, had them in the form of court chapels and the larger city churches. Luther spoke approvingly of such endeavors and encouraged princes to support them, scolding and reproaching them when they failed to do so. There is no doubt a place for such “cathedrals” today—larger churches with ample musical resources where an understanding and practice of worship and music in the historical tradition is regularly brought to life week after week.

But that tradition needs to be handed on in parishes that would never think of themselves as “cathedrals.” It is, in fact, being handed on in countless parishes of modest size and resources where faithful church musicians—quietly and without fanfare—are passing on the living

tradition of congregational song; where children are being taught the great hymns of the church on a regular and systematic basis; where with steadfastness and faithful pastors, church musicians, choirs, and organists work together to help congregations learn, experience, and grow into the richness and vitality of liturgical worship.

Where this is happening—and it is happening in more places than one might think, the tradition is being handed on and received with gratitude and thanks by succeeding generations. Where it is not, where the tradition is compromised by theologians, declared irrelevant by sociologists, or simply ignored by a variety of the well-intentioned, what is being handed on to our children is not the tradition—“the living faith of the dead,” but a barren *traditionalism*—“the dead faith of the living.”

And where that tradition is not being celebrated and passed on to future generations, we are back in Wonderland where nothing is as it seems, where words like “traditional” and “contemporary” don’t really mean what we think they mean, and where nothing is as it pretends to be.

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