

Perspectives on Church Music 8

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TEACHING THE SONGS OF FAITH

Who will teach our children the traditional songs of faith?

Past generations did it with a combination of home, school, and church. Songs of faith were learned where families gathered around the piano to sing, in devotions in the parish school and Sunday School, and in church where the treasures of the hymnal were continuously explored.

Today, families seldom gather around the piano anymore, children, we are repeatedly told, can't learn the church's basic treasure of hymns because they are too hard, not particularly suited to children, or just plain not fun enough, and churches are told to get rid of their hymnals in the name of more effective marketing and growth. The result is that in many parishes the historic treasure of the church's song is falling into disuse through neglect and, in some instances, by design.

In both public and parochial schools, many children don't even know the standard Christmas carols. In their place children learn "I saw mommy kissing Santa Claus," "Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer," and other secular songs of the season apparently more suited for children.

The simple reason for this situation is not that hymns and carols are too hard or not enough fun. The church has failed children by simply neglecting to teach those songs which best nourish and nurture the faith. Their place has been taken by a variety of “children’s songs” which do little or nothing either to nourish the faith or prepare children for participation in the worship of the congregation.

Every teacher knows that there are concepts and skills that children need to be taught at successive stages of their growth. A mathematics teacher worth her salt would hardly say, “Let’s skip adding and subtracting this year and do something more fun and more meaningful.” She knows that without a solid grounding in basic skills and understandings nothing else will be very meaningful, useful, or even, ultimately, much fun.

One of the most significant things the church can do to pass on the faith to the coming generation is to teach them a basic core of hymns which the church uses to confess and celebrate the faith. With good reason, that canon should consist of hymns largely taken from the church’s treasure of song from its past, hymns which have stood the test of time, enriched by examples from the church’s present. The place to start is with the hymnal. This book reflects a large degree of agreement on the basic core of hymns to be used in worship. But they need to be taught to and learned by each new generation. And they need to be used regularly in congregational worship.

Who will teach our children the songs of faith? Home, school, and church all have a part to play. And unless we are ready to give up a generation with no strong roots in the church's treasury of song, we had better get busy.

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