

### Occasional Reflections 3

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#### To Be Human Is To Sing

In the last set of Reflections I referenced congregations that sing in spite of poor leadership. It might be well to explore what lies under that apparent curiosity.

Humanity longs to sing. Babies cry, we groan in pain, we laugh, and we hum. All of this is incipient song. It takes more ordered and communal shape in the hands of composers and musicians. We long to do this in groups. We want to sing with joy at birthdays, weddings, or when a war ends; and we yearn to cry out together in pain when tragedies occur. In a culture largely controlled by individual greed, where music is the sales pitch and where professional (often solo) music-making as the only thing ousts the people's voice, however, the song disappears, and the folks go silent. That is why some parts of the church, perceptively noting that people controlled by the culture do not sing in community, have opted to have small groups sing for them, even in church.

But the human longing to sing won't go away. It is set on a new plain in worship and invariably emerges, even if it is sometimes momentarily tentative, as we sing praise, prayer, and proclamation. Then the gospel stands what looks like our doing on its head. We think we are praising, praying, and proclaiming – and of course we are, but something more basic is going on: God addresses us in word and sacrament, and the Holy Spirit breathes in us a song. And in a lovingly counter-cultural moment of cultural embrace, the song pours forth from the body of the baptized and cannot be stopped. This is the story of the church. It will not be silenced. It will sing, no matter what.

However, in every generation the church's song is at risk. Forces inside or outside the church, knowingly or unknowingly, consciously or unconsciously, with good or evil intent, silence it. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, priests and choirs pushed the people toward silence.

In sixteenth century Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli silenced all music in church. Adolf Hitler sought to subvert it. Visionless leaders without understanding fail to support or even destroy the study and practice of the church's song. As Joseph Swain says, weapons of mass destruction, the microphone and amplifier, kill congregational singing. Mountains of poorly crafted texts and music (sometimes quite well-intended) are created in every generation. And poor leadership does not help.

But *Leisen* developed in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Psalms were sung at worship in Zurich by the end of the sixteenth century. A confessing church sang in response to Hitler. Centers like the one behind this column spring up. Groups like the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians and individual church musicians stand into the breaches. Oases in virtually every population of Christians throughout the world, as in the early church, refuse the desert's silence even where it is deafening, and sing with the acoustic wonder of the church's unaccompanied communal voice. The mountains of poor craft disappear quickly as mirages, not worthy of repetition (in William Benbow's words, what "people will love most readily and afterward loathe most heartily.") And, as I noted before, some congregations sing in spite of poor leadership.

In short, even when it has to go underground, the church invariably joins Mary in her singing. Or, to say the same thing another way, the church knows that to be human is to sing and that to sing around Word, font, and table is *to be*. And it knows that the Holy Spirit can be trusted to help us in our weakness.