

Sent Forth By God's Blessing: Roman Catholic Hymn Text Writers after Vatican II

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In the New Testament, one who is sent forth on mission is referred to as an "Apostle." Following the Second Vatican Council, a definite need arose for ways to implement the renewed vision of the Church and the liturgical reforms which the Council promoted. In the United States one of the ways which catechesis about the renewal and reforms of the Council was implemented was through hymn texts. Using hymn texts to implement the insights of ecumenical councils was certainly not new; it was a technique of Christians, orthodox and heretical, from the days of the earliest councils of the Church.¹ As in those early post-conciliar days, our era needed apostles whose mission would be to send the renewed insights of the Council to the faithful.

The innovation following the Council with which most church musicians are familiar is the permission granted to celebrate the Mass in the vernacular (this was not a mandated regulation, a common misconception). Some may also be familiar with the permission—radical at the time—to use music from other Christian traditions. It's hard to believe that, with the exception of the harmonizations of a few pre-Reformation melodies, Bach was not heard in Roman Catholic churches until the mid-1960s! Another major restoration which took place was the renewed emphasis on the singing participation of the entire congregation:

... all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people" (I Pt. 2; 9, 4-5) have a right and obligation by reason of their baptism.²

What the Council most likely envisioned was the singing of the Ordinary (Gloria, Sanctus, etc.) or Propers (Introit, Gospel verse) by the congregation rather than by a choir, as had been the most common practice. The Council spoke very little about hymnody

per se at the Mass, since this was a musical form the Council fathers would have associated not with the Mass, but with the Divine Office (a source which the earliest Roman Catholic hymnals of the twentieth century drew upon). If hymnody in English was used prior to the Council, most often it had little, if any connection with the Mass. For example, at the "low" Mass (at which there was no choir to sing the Latin Ordinary), a hymn might have been sung at the beginning while the priest came in, recited the Kyrie and Gloria (to and by himself) and began the scripture reading. If the hymn ended in the middle of the epistle, so be it! Outside of Mass, hymnody was used most often at events like novenas or parish missions; for popular devotions to Mary, other saints, or to the reserved Eucharist. Hymns in this last category often addressed the reserved sacrament directly:

Sweet Sacrament! we Thee adore!
Oh, make us love Thee more and more.³

In contrast, hymn texts which spoke about the actual reception of the eucharistic elements were exceedingly rare. It was most common to speak of the eucharist as the bread or the food of angels, not humans.

In the United States, hymn singing by the congregation at the Mass was a fairly new phenomenon. There were hymnals prior to the Council, but they were few, and their entries in English were limited. A quick look at any of these hymnals will illustrate the place hymn singing had in the Roman Catholic rite prior to the Council. The texts they contain are largely devotional or pious, and contain few scriptural references.

When Pope John XXIII opened the conciliar windows to let in a fresh breath of the Holy Spirit, the breeze which came in blew in directions few expected. It became clear that the insights of the Council were going to need some "apostles" sent into the Roman Catholic Church to implement them. This article will

look at the work of three Roman Catholic hymn text writers of this time who followed the lead of their ancestors Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and whose work helped catechize the people in the pews about the conciliar reforms: Omer Westendorf, Delores Dufner and James Quinn.

Unfortunately, Roman Catholic post-conciliar music in the United States is known most widely by its weakest examples. This holds true for texts as well:

Deep the joy of being together in one heart,
And for me, that's just where it is.⁴

These pieces of music were motivated by good intentions, more by the desire to be popular and contemporary than by the renewed vision of Vatican II or a desire to catechize about its reforms. Luckily, most of these pieces have fallen to the wayside and no longer enjoy much circulation. I will focus instead on some of the best work of the generation following the Council.

Omer Westendorf (1916–1997) was an apostle and a pioneer of the post-conciliar era in many ways. For a layperson to be as involved as he was in the work of the renewal was still regarded as somewhat unusual. He turned out to be a role model, however, for increased involvement by the laity in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic rite. He assembled and published the first hymnal in English intended explicitly for use at Mass, the *People's Hymnal* (later to become the *Peoples Mass Book*).

One of the obstacles Omer encountered was the lack of Roman Catholic hymn text writers. He once attended a conference of the Catholic Poets' Society, and found that no one in attendance was writing hymn texts, nor were they interested in pursuing this "lesser" poetic form. A man of no little industry, Omer Westendorf did not let this obstacle stand in his way. He undertook the writing of hymn texts himself, with the assistance of a few colleagues. His texts included frequent references to the new insights and reforms of the Council, as well as an awareness of the relationship between the Church's prayer and its social mission to the world. He was among the first to write about such topics as environmental awareness ("Stewards of Earth") and equality among all peoples and races, incorporating this theme into his translation of the ninth-century hymn "Ubi Caritas" ("Where Charity and Love Prevail").

To make representation of authors in his hymnals seem a bit more equitable, he often wrote under pseudonyms (including the two Solando "brothers" Anthony and Michael). Given the volume of work he produced in such great haste, it was inevitable that some of it would be weak, but the best of his work has remained robustly in place and continues to catechize a new generation of Roman Catholics.

One of Omer Westendorf's favorite devices was to adapt a sturdy Protestant hymn text and tune to the

needs of the reformed liturgy. Those who critique his texts outside the context of his work as a catechist often criticize him for this, but it worked effectively:

We gather together to sing the Lord's praises,
To worship the Father through Jesus, his Son,
In this celebration,
all sing with jubilation!
We are his holy people, whose freedom he won.

We greet our Lord present within our assembly;
We hear the good news announced clearly to all.
Our priest is presiding,
in Christ we are abiding,
As we invoke God's blessing and answer the call.

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In this text, he joined many themes new to Roman Catholics at the time. It was new to "gather" as an "assembly" instead of "going to church." It was new to "celebrate" the Mass instead of "hearing" it. "All singing" as the "People of God" spoke of both the conciliar vision for participation and the renewed image of the Church as "People of God" as opposed to its more common reference to the hierarchy. Hearing the scripture proclaimed, especially the "Good News" at Mass was a novelty as well as the priest "presiding" at the celebration instead of "saying" Mass. (The third line of stanza two has since been altered, as more and more Roman Catholic parishes find themselves without a priest on Sundays. It now reads "With songs of rejoicing our praises we are voicing.")

One of the major areas of change following the Council was the understanding of the Eucharist. It was also relatively new for everyone at Mass to receive the Eucharist every Sunday. Prior to the Council, to remain a Catholic in good standing one had to receive the Eucharist only once a year. Receiving communion regularly, like a meal, also meant a greater need for suitable texts. Westendorf's eucharistic texts incorporated scriptural meal imagery:

As you once fed the multitude when loaves and fish
were few,
O feed us now with bread and wine that makes us
one in you.

It was also a new practice to receive the Eucharist under the fullness of both signs, bread and cup:

O loving God, the source of life, you are the Holy
One
Who gives to us the saving cup, Jesus, your only
Son.

"O Blessed Savior" by Omer Westendorf and Jerry Brubaker. Copyright © 1990, World Library Publications. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Another of his eucharistic texts "Gift of Finest Wheat" is among his best known. He continued to write eucharistic texts throughout his life, including "O Blessed Savior" (quoted above), and his final text "Wisdom's Feast" which, a generation after the Council, is leading Roman Catholics to a still broader understanding of the Eucharist as Lady Wisdom's meal and Christ as Wisdom (in John's gospel, *Logos*), personified:

Wisdom calls throughout the city,
Knows our hunger, and in pity
Gives her loving invitation
To the banquet of salvation.

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The forward-looking energy which spurred on Omer Westendorf and the other post-conciliar text writers remained with him to the end of his days.

The work of Delores Dufner, OSB (b. 1939) is an example of the higher profile women began to assume in the liturgical life of the Roman Catholic church; she is certainly the foremost female Roman Catholic hymn text writer in the United States at this time. Today it is difficult for us to remember that it was not until 1955 that Pius XII gave begrudging and cautious permission for women to sing in the choir:

Where it is impossible to have schools of singers or where there are not enough choir boys, it is allowed that a group of men and women or girls, located in a place outside the sanctuary set apart for the exclusive use of this group, can sing the liturgical texts at Solemn Mass, as long as the men are completely separated from the women and girls and everything unbecoming is avoided.⁵

In fact, the practice of having women in choirs existed for decades before receiving Vatican approval. Even Vatican II, when it speaks of education in liturgical music, speaks only of "young men," as had Pius XII in his *motu proprio* of 1953. During the decades following Vatican II, the number of women—particularly professed religious women—entering degree programs in theology and liturgy increased greatly. Articles about the liturgy written by women began to appear, and these women began to acquire prominent appointments in theological schools. One survey discovered that professed women religious in the United States possessed, on the average, a higher level of the-

ological education than the clergy and a higher percentage of earned doctorates in theology than the US bishops. It was only natural, then, that awareness about the roles of women became important, and this awareness finds expression in verse two of Delores Dufner's text "Sing a New Church":

Radiant, risen from the water,
Robed in holiness and light,
Male and female in God's image,
Male and female, God's delight:
Let us bring the gifts that differ
And, in splendid, varied ways,
Sing a new church into being,
One in faith and love and praise.

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Also contained in this text are references to a renewed understanding within Roman Catholicism of baptism, not ordination, as being the foundational sacrament of the Church. Indeed, in another "radical" move at Vatican II, the Roman Catholic hierarchy defined "Church" as all those who had been baptized with water, in the name of the Trinity. The refrain of "Sing a New Church" also speaks of another major concern: the awareness of the many gifts that come together to build the Church. Her texts also contain frequent references to the Church's diversity within unity.

As Omer Westendorf did, Delores Dufner pairs familiar melodies with new texts. Often these melodies have a resonance with a particular rite or liturgical season. She did precisely this with the Easter tune *Surgit in Haec Dies* for her "Gospel Responses for the Easter Season." This is the response for the Second Sunday of Easter, popularly known as "Doubting Thomas" Sunday:

When our hearts are locked for fear,
Jesus, in our midst appear!
Though we doubt, yet we believe
And, in faith, your peace receive, alleluia . . .

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Not only does this text resonate with the Easter season through its tune, but it also masterfully exemplifies the new influence that Scripture began to play in the Roman Catholic rite following Vatican II. A connection or relation to the Lectionary readings for the day became the primary criterion for selecting the congregation's music for the Mass. Delores Dufner's "Gospel Responses" feature one verse for each Sunday of the Easter season, plus Pentecost, for all three years

of the Lectionary cycle. She has also written another set for the Lenten season.

Many of Delores Dufner's texts have been written to fit pre-existing tunes, and she has likewise created new texts for some chant melodies. Her work, overall, bespeaks her insight into the overriding vision of Vatican II in its renewal of the liturgy: the Church's musical and liturgical tradition was not to be jettisoned, but worked with and adapted creatively in the current generation for the spiritual life of future generations. The life and work of Delores Dufner certainly are in harmony with this vision.

James Quinn, SJ (b. 1919) is an apostle sent—through his hymn texts—to the shores of the United States from Scotland. In Roman Catholic parishes today, his texts are the best-known of any English-speaking hymn text writer from outside the United States. He has, likewise, produced more texts in English known across denominational boundaries than any other Roman Catholic hymn text writer of our time: (e.g., “This Day God Gives Me,” “Day is Done,” “Word of God, Come Down on Earth,” “Blessed Be the God of Israel”).

To an even greater extent than Delores Dufner, James Quinn draws upon pre-existing sources from the Church's tradition for his texts. Looking through a collection of his texts, one sees that most are strophic versions of psalms, canticles, other scripture passages, chant texts, or writings from the saints, mystics and doctors of the Church. The following text, based on “St. Patrick's Breastplate,” is one of his best known:

This day God gives me
strength of high heaven,
sun and moon shining,
flame in my hearth,
flashing of lightning,
wind in its swiftness,
deeps of the ocean,
firmness of earth.

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As might be expected of a good son of the Isles, a number of his works are based upon older texts originating in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England.

Like the other authors featured here, James Quinn's texts illuminate insights from Vatican Council II. One of his best-known texts focused Roman Catholic attention on Jesus as the eternal Word of God in flesh, and the intimate connection between Jesus in the word proclaimed at the liturgy and Jesus present in the eucharist:

Word that speaks your Father's love,
one with him beyond all telling,
Word that sends us from above
God, the Spirit, with us dwelling;
Word of truth, to all truth lead us;
Word of life, with one Bread feed us.

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At the outset of this article, it was mentioned that most texts in Roman Catholic hymnals through the first part of the twentieth century were largely devotional. These texts greatly diminished in prominence following the Council, and few new ones, aside from a few to or about Mary and a very small handful about Joseph, were being written. James Quinn is a notable exception to this trend. This is fortunate, for devotion to the saints and the faithful departed is a vital component of Roman Catholic spirituality. James Quinn continued to write hymn texts to or about the saints, but always with scriptural awareness, a more balanced Christology—particularly problematic in some earlier Marian hymn texts—and greater historical skill than had been previously characteristic of these texts. Contrast this, the fourth verse of his “St. Cecilia, Loving Patron”

St. Cecilia, music's patron
alleluia is your song;
keep our voices tuned to heaven,
where our hearts and minds belong.

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with the earlier “Let the Deep Organ Swell the Lay”:

Then from the world's bewildering strife,
In peace she spent her holy life—
Teaching the organ to combine
With voice, to praise the Lamb divine.⁶

Hymn Collections

Sent Forth By God's Blessing: Hymn Texts by Omer Westendorf. Alan J. Hommerding, editor. © 1998, World Library Publications.

Sing A New Church. Delores Dufner, OSB, John Finn, editor. ©1994, Oregon Catholic Press Publications.

Praise For All Seasons: The Hymns of James Quinn, SJ. ©1994, James Quinn, SJ. Published by Selah Publishing Co.

Quinn's text devotes only one out of five verses to Cecilia's role as patron of musicians, a later devotional development in her cult.⁷ The latter text, based largely upon this image of her, shows little awareness of her true life, much less the fact that the organ came into being centuries after she died!

For the most part, the texts of James Quinn show more theological and poetic finesse than Omer Westendorf's; his vocabulary pool and choice of images is more conservative than Delores Dufner's. This probably accounts for the more significant role his hymn texts are assuming as the generation following Vatican II comes to a close, and the hymn repertoire of the Roman Catholic church stabilizes a bit.

As we stand at the end of one generation of Vatican II's renewal and move into the next, we may wonder where the next generation of hymn text writers will come from, or if another generation of text writers is needed. Perhaps, like many other Roman Catholics of their time, text writers born immediately before, during, or immediately after the Council are part of the "Lost Generation" of Roman Catholicism.⁸

As editor for a Roman Catholic liturgical publisher and as a Roman Catholic who attempts the occasional hymn text, I see the landscape within our denomination as still fertile; it would benefit from another generation of text-writing apostles. The enthusiasm of the first post-conciliar decades has waned a bit, a phenomenon which Church historians agree occurs regularly after an ecumenical council. Many, however, mistakenly believe that because the ritual books have all been translated and everyone knows the correct responses, the work of the liturgical renewal is finished. But if we take the "full, active and conscious" criterion as the basis of successful liturgical renewal, a Sunday morning spent with the average Roman Catholic congregation will show that the renewal is far from implemented.

Within our denomination, much more needs to be done to promote quality hymn text writing among Roman Catholic authors. In this way, the scene has remained quite unchanged since Omer Westendorf searched for authors a generation ago. While a number of organizations promote the work of composers, the textual component of their work is seldom addressed. A renewed emphasis to affirm the ministry of text-

writers would certainly be of benefit. Authors and composers benefit as well from a cooperative approach to their arts in the writing of hymns. Many Roman Catholic composers today feel compelled to pen their own texts, which tend to be, at best, uneven in quality. Some liturgical authors and speakers oppose the hymn as a musical form for the Roman rite. I would offer that hymnody is the one musical form which best catechizes, by its very nature, a "full, conscious and active" participation by all present. The inherently catechetical nature of hymnody is something innately known by authors like Omer Westendorf, Delores Dufner and James Quinn; it is something future generations of Roman Catholic hymn text writers can inherit thankfully from these three "apostles," as they are sent forth—by God's blessing—into a new generation of liturgical renewal. ☪

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Notes

¹See *Christ in the Early Christian Hymns*, Daniel Liederbach, SJ New York: Paulist Press, 1998.

²*Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), article 14 (promulgated December 4, 1963), in *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Austin Flannery, OP, ed. Northport, Costello Publishing, 1975.

³"Jesus, My Lord, My God, My All" Frederick W. Faber, as found in *The St. Gregory Hymnal*. Philadelphia: St. Gregory Guild, Inc., 1922; *St. Basil Hymnal*. Detroit: The Basilian Press, 1935.

⁴"All I Ask of You" Gregory Norbet, OSB, as found in *Glory and Praise*. Portland: Oregon Catholic Press, 1997.

⁵Pius XII, Encyclical *Musicae Sacrae Disciplina*, paragraph 74 (Promulgated December 25, 1955), in *Papal Legislation on Sacred Music: 95 A. D. to 1977 A. D.*, Robert F. Hayburn, ed. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1979.

⁶"Let the Deep Organ Swell the Lay" C. Pisc, as found in *The St. Gregory Hymnal*. Philadelphia: St. Gregory Guild, Inc., 1922; *St. Basil Hymnal*. Detroit: The Basilian Press, 1935.

⁷For an exhaustive examination of the development of Cecilia's role as patron saint of musicians, see Thomas Connolly's *Mourning into Joy: Music, Raphael and Saint Cecilia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

⁸For more about this topic, see *Lost and Found Catholics: Voices of Vatican II* by Christopher M. Bellitto. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1999.