

Ecumenical Service, Friday, January 20, 2017 at the Church of St. Vincent Ferrer: 869
Lexington Avenue (66th Street)

Fr. Innocent Smith, op: Only the Lover Sings

“Only the Lover Sings.” This insight from St. Augustine, a man dear to Lutherans and Catholics alike, gives us a great insight into God himself. If God is Love, then it seems likely that God is the greatest of all singers.

In one sense, God has been singing for all eternity. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1). But how does that Word sound forth? Is it merely spoken? Or is it perhaps sung?

If we conceive of the Word as being sung by the Father, another element emerges. When two notes sound together, their overtones produce further sound. The Holy Spirit, in this image, proceeds from the Father and the Son as the Harmony that exists between these two Notes. This Divine Triad, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is a chord that has been sustained from before all time.

In itself, this Divine Triad is utterly blessed and harmonious. It needs nothing else to sound more full. In itself, this Triad is complete. But in a plan of sheer goodness, God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—chose to create us to further orchestrate this triad, to fill out the sound. We add nothing to God’s glory, but God freely chooses to link us to himself, to give us, through grace, a share in the Divine Nature, a share in that divine Harmony.

Jesus Christ is the instrument by which this happens. The humanity of Christ, joined to the Divine Person of the Son of God, the ever-resounding Word, is the living instrument by which God carries out his saving plan. The word “instrument” can be used in several ways, e.g. a tool or a measuring device. A musical instrument is a tool that brings forth beautiful sounds when played by a musician. An excellent musician becomes one with his or her instrument. Someone who doesn’t know how to play the organ can sit down and make various noises, but not many of us would want to listen to it. A skilled organist, who is at one with the instrument, knows how the stops work, knows which sounds will be beautiful, or which sounds will create a dissonance that can lead to a more satisfying harmony. That organist is the one we want to listen to.

Jesus Christ takes on humanity in this way. He becomes like us in all things but sin so that we can become like him in all things, confidently approaching the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help (cf. Heb 4:15-16). He approaches his humanity not as a dilettante who knows only how to pluck a string or play a simple tune, but as one who has learned to finesse every key of this complex, wonderful creation that he himself has created. He knows every pipe, because he is the one who has constructed this organ.

Jesus Christ is the instrument of God who knows how to tune the instrument of humanity. By becoming one of us, he teaches us to join ourselves to him. He not only teaches us, but truly makes it possible for us to tune ourselves to him—to be tempered in accord with his just intonation. Jesus enables us to be in tune with the world, in tune with one another, in tune with him.

Jesus teaches us how to sing. He himself is the everlasting song that has taken on a human voice, human ears, a human face. He can truly hear how we sing—he can hear

what is already beautiful, but also what has come out of tune. He can sing back the proper melody to us, giving our faltering voices the support of his duet.

Jesus learned, in a human mode, everything about the culture he was born into. At a certain point he was taught how to sing in the mode of Jewish cantillation. In one Gospel passage, Jesus is handed a scroll of the Prophet Isaiah; after singing a certain passage, he places the scroll down, and says to those who are with him, “‘Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing’. And all spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” (Lk 4:22).

The Word who inspired the Scriptures now sings that same Word to his people, fulfilling its prophecy in his person. Jesus sings this inspired Word in the musical tones which his chosen people have crafted to be the instrument of that Word. Jesus learns this musical tradition, and becomes its most gracious practitioner.

At the Last Supper, after teaching us the greatest song possible, a song through which ordinary bread and wine become his body and blood, Jesus ends the meal with a song: “Then, after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (Mt 26:30; cf. Mk 14:26). On the Cross, Jesus cries out in a loud voice the words of a psalm: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mt 27:46; cf. Ps 22:2). Could there be a greater death lament in the operatic canon?

On the Road to Emmaus, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures” (Lk 24:27). When we look at the early scriptures of the Church, we see a continual attempt to pass on this teaching, which Christ himself did not commend to writing. Throughout the Gospels and Epistles, the sacred authors, inspired by the same Word who inspired the Old Testament, continually strive to show the harmony between the prophets and the Messiah who they prophesied.

In the Church's liturgy, we encounter an echo of Christ's conversation on the Road, his harmonization of the Old and the New. Throughout the liturgical year we sing psalms attuned to the mysteries we commemorate. We receive and pass down a mode of praying the scriptures in accord with the mind of the Church that gives us an encounter with the mind of Christ, who inspired and himself sang these same psalms. By singing in this way, we pass on Christ's teaching and harmonization of Old and New in a way that is both joyful and memorable. By joining beautiful melodies to the word of God or composing our own hymns that are in harmony with his message, we take part in the process of handing down all that we have received. As Vatican II teaches, "the Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes" (Dei Verbum, §8).

By singing, we are able to share with others what Christ has revealed to us. We are able to remember it more vividly ourselves. We are able to hear the hidden harmonies in scripture passages that may initially be difficult to decipher. Just as it takes time to become accustomed to a new genre of music or to learn a complicated melody, so too when we encounter a difficult passage in the Word of God we must let its harmony gradually emerge. We must train our ears and our voices to hear and repeat the song we have heard.

There are many monuments or instruments of the Tradition we have received from Christ through the Apostles. Throughout this church, for instance, we have many beautiful images of the mysteries of Christ and his saints. All of these are in a steady state of existence—they continue to appear so often as we choose to look at them. With music, on the other hand, we must continually renew our voices in order for the sound to continue to be heard. In God, we live, and move, and have our being (cf. Acts 17:28).

In singing, we join our provisional existence to God's celestial harmony. Ever renewing our song, ever joining it to that one heavenly song.

In heaven, according to Augustine, we will no longer have the sacraments. We will no longer have symbols. We will no longer have even the Scriptures. We will encounter God directly, without mediation. And yet, we will continue to sing: for heaven is one great song of Alleluia—"praise the Lord." For now, let us sing, but continue our journey.