

Ecumenical Service with Fr. Innocent Smith
7 p.m. Friday, January 20, 2017
St. Vincent Ferrer: 869 Lexington Avenue (66th Street)
<http://www.svsc.info/>

Music As Handmaiden of Theology

I love the title Fr. Innocent Smith suggested to me for our talk this evening: "Music As Handmaiden of Theology." That is exactly the right and lovely way to look at things for Martin Luther and for the Lutheran tradition in general. We cherish sacred music for its power to help proclaim the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Music can be a good servant, a good handmaiden of theology and of proclamation. Now, I serve Immanuel Lutheran Church up Lexington Avenue at 88th Street. What is true at my church is also true at yours: Your Music Director, Dr. James Wetzel, your choirs, your own voices raised in congregational singing: you all join Fr. Innocent, Fr. Walter C. Wagner, your Pastor, along with all of the priests here in being the preachers in this place. You and your cantors and choir members, I say, are part of the college of preachers here. The sacred music you sing helps proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and helps praise our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And sometimes the sermon you all preach through your singing is one of the most powerful of sermons and lifts many hearts. Music is indeed a handmaiden of theology and proclamation.

My plans for this brief talk is to take one of Martin Luther's many fun comments on sacred music and to use it to organize my talk. The Luther quote I have in mind goes this way:

I am not satisfied with him who despises music, as all fanatics do; for music is an endowment and a gift of God, not a gift of men. It also drives away the devil and makes people cheerful; one forgets all anger, unchasteness, pride, and other vices. I place music next to theology and give it the highest praise.¹

So, first off let me speak of this matter of the fanatics despising music. Luther did not despise sacred music, nor the long catholic tradition and glorious accomplishments in sacred music. Perhaps nothing demonstrates the fundamentally *conservative* nature of Lutheranism better than the Lutheran liturgy and sacred music. Luther and the reformers sought continuity with the

¹ *What Luther Says*, 3091 Music a Gift of God. W-T 6, No. 7034 - also in SL 22, 1541, No. 5.

ancient faith and liturgy of the church. This was not so for other Reformers of that generation. One scholar puts the point this way:

In contrast to both Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), who allowed no music of any kind in his services, and John Calvin (1509–64), who would have none of the art and artifice of music in worship except for unaccompanied congregational song, Luther encouraged the most sophisticated music of his time—Gregorian chant and classical polyphony—together with the simpler congregational song of the chorale.²

To this very day, the Lutheran liturgy and sacred music have an ancient feel to them. I bet that if you were to worship at my church, Immanuel Lutheran Church, you would have a sense of orientation, a sense of being at home. You would recognize the Mass. This is not because of a lack of imagination on the part of Lutherans for five hundred years now, but rather a deeply held instinct and reverence for the ancient faith and for the unity of the church.

So, that is the first point: Luther did not despise sacred music. Luther himself was a fine musician and hymn writer. The report on him goes this way:

Luther was an accomplished musician, a singer, and a player of the lute. He had come to love the richness and splendor of Gregorian chant throughout his education and especially in his service as a priest. The great polyphonic music of the time was part of his cultural heritage, and he was acquainted with at least some of the great music and musical figures of his day.³

Luther understood the catholic tradition of sacred music and cherished it.

Next point: Luther says that “music is an endowment and a gift of God.” I think that many of us recognize the mystery of music. We recognize that for many of us, the making of music begins in heaven and goes beyond our own abilities. I mean, I could work a lifetime and never compose a song like Neil Young could compose in a morning, to say nothing of a Beethoven piano concerto, or a Bach cantata. There is something mysterious about music. It goes beyond the command of most of us. For Luther, music is indeed a

²Schalk, Carl. *Music in Early Lutheranism: Shaping the Tradition* (Kindle Locations 117-121). Concordia Publishing House. Kindle Edition.

³ Schalk, Carl. *Music in Early Lutheranism: Shaping the Tradition* (Kindle Locations 128-130). Concordia Publishing House. Kindle Edition.

mystery — a divine mystery. He says that music is a gift from God. Imagine this sad thought: our Maker *could have* so constructed us that music would be beyond us. But no, God has given the gift of music to humanity.

Why? That leads to my third point. Luther says that music “drives away the devil and makes people cheerful.” God has given us music for many reasons. In his kindness, he gives us music that we might enjoy some more beauty on earth. But also, he gives us music to lift our spirits and to help us contend against the devil. Another Luther quote goes this way:

Singing is the finest art and practice. He who is singing has no quarrel with the world and is not concerned with contentions in a law court. Singers are neither worried nor sad but shake all cares from their souls.⁴

As a piece of pastoral advice, Luther urged people to turn to sacred music if they should be tempted or discouraged. He said that the devil, “the author of depressing care and distressing disturbances, almost flees from the sound of music as he does from the word of theology.”⁵

From a Lutheran point of view, sacred music is a handmaiden of theology and a servant of the church. Sacred music can encourage the heart, help fight temptation, proclaim the gospel to weary souls, and give humanity some means for praising our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Hastening on, the Luther quote concludes with these words:

I place music next to theology and give it the highest praise.

Theology and sacred music, at their best, are wonderful servants of the church, worthy of the highest praise. I, for one, can seldom preach a sermon better than certain hymns. I mean, if we were all gathered together at Immanuel Lutheran Church on Reformation Sunday next October 27, we would join in singing one of Luther’s most famous hymns, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” When we reach verse four, Luther speaks of the enemies of humanity: sin, death, and the devil. Think of all those things that set us back, discourage us, break our hearts, and then sing out that verse along with the choir and all the instruments in the choir loft:

God’s Word forever shall abide,
no thanks to foes, who fear it;

⁴ *What Luther Says*, 3099 Singing Frees the Heart (W-T 2, No. 2362 -SL 22, 1539, No. 2)

⁵ *What Luther Says*, 3104 The Devil Detests Melodious Music

for God himself fights by our side
with weapons of the Spirit.
Were they to take our house,
goods, honor, child, or spouse,
though life be wrenched away,
they cannot win the day.
The kingdom's ours forever!

I tell you, it is enough to convert a stone into angel, a discouraged person into a bright shining person, a frightened person into a bold one. Such is the power of sacred music, a great "handmaiden of theology and proclamation." Thank you.