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Music for the journey

Denise Simeone | Dec. 11, 2009

Kindergartners Emily Pomerico, left, her twin brother Kyle, Trinity Rodriguez, and Antonio Santana of St. Christopher School in Baldwin, N.Y., sing during a prayer service Oct. 30 in observance of All Saints' Day. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

I live in Kansas City, Mo., but recently celebrated Sunday liturgy with a church community in another area of the country. It was a Sunday in ordinary time with no special celebrations, religious or secular. The parish must have been in the middle of a stewardship or fundraising drive because the homilist, while touching on the scriptures, spoke a lot about the need for parishioners to share time, treasure and talent. That may be a catchy phrase, but it seems somewhat stale without being connected and anchored to any deeper images. Unfortunately I found my mind wandering. I don?t believe the homilist was unconvinced about his message, but he seemed not to know how to express it so it caught fire and came alive.

The music, on the other hand, stirred me. The various hymns we sang created images that began to burn within me. We sang about what we were called to do to create justice and peace. We sang about how God?s people would look if we took seriously the Gospel call: Share what you have with one another and offer who you are to each other. Extend the grace and compassion I have shown you. Live with my message planted deeply in your heart. I could not escape the echoes of God?s call set to melody.

As teenagers, my sister and I played and sang music for many parish events, liturgies and retreats. As I think about the music we learned, I realize that much of my imagery and language about God, the people of God, our covenant and our call to live the Gospel message -- among so many other concepts -- was born and enriched from that music. I was formed by it. I still am. When I hear or sing music in church I can be moved to tears of sadness, contrition, comfort or joy, stirred to work harder at my baptismal vocation and challenged to live a different kind of life.

Today?s liturgical music often grounds its words and images in scriptural references. Responsorial psalms set to music invite us to proclaim the Word. Scripture finds new life within us when we express it in music. Singing helps us voice our emotions, connecting us to one another as we raise our voices in unity.

Can parishes use music to engage us throughout the week? Can committees and staff members use it to deepen our inner reflection? How can we integrate music into prayer?

Find ways to incorporate music universally. Many of us listen to music in our cars and homes; church is another place we can welcome the wealth and richness of liturgical music. Play music at various functions -- as people gather for events, at outdoor picnics, as part of retreats and times of reflection. Where people gather, find ways to have them listen and sing.

Offer parishioners ways to buy religious music. Stock catalogs, make suggestions to families, have your local religious goods store or music publisher sell music at a parish event. Families love for their small children to learn songs; children are sponges! There are wonderful songs for young children that families can play in their cars and homes. Music helps children expand the concepts they will continue to learn in religious formation programs and school classrooms. There are a growing number of musical pieces for teenagers that -- while not always among the songs adults would sing in liturgy -- are appropriate for their events and retreats.

Pray using music occasionally. Use music, especially the hymns based on scriptural images, as another way to hear the Word proclaimed. Use recorded music or invite singing. Invite cantors and choir members to lead the groups of which they are members. A simple sung response can set a tone for a critical meeting where we need wisdom or God?s guidance.

Use the music you sing on Sundays. Coordinate with your parish music ministry about the songs to be sung for the week. A good way to sink the music more deeply into people?s minds it to invite them to hear it during the week, and then again on Sunday. Multiple encounters with the weekly themes bring the liturgical seasons alive, integrating the work and function of each season.

When God saved the Israelites during their exodus journey, we are told, ?the prophet Miriam, Aaron?s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: ?Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea? ? (Exodus 15:20-21). Singing and praising God nourished them for their long passage. Music will nourish us, too, in our journey as disciples.

Denise Simeone is a writer and consultant skilled at group facilitation, long-range planning and mission development. This article originally appeared in

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