Culture
News



The St. Louis Jesuits, Tim Manion, Jesuit Fr. John Foley, Jesuit Fr. Bob Dufford, Dan Schutte and Jesuit Fr. Roc O'Connor, performing at
St. Joseph Parish Church in Seattle, Washington, in 2007. (Mike Gale)

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The phone jolted Jesuit Fr. Bob Dufford from a sound sleep. "You're gonna want to get out of bed," his publishing rep said, "and turn on your VCR. Bill Clinton's going to use 'Be Not Afraid' in the prayer service." It was the morning of Clinton's first inauguration, January 20, 1993. Dazed, Dufford turned on the VCR, thinking of all those months he'd struggled with the words to "Be Not Afraid." A fellow member of The St. Louis Jesuits, Jesuit Fr. John Foley, had said at one point, "I think this could be an important song. But it's not *you* shall cross the desert, it's you shall cross the *desert.*" For the melody's convenience, the emphasis was falling on the wrong word.

"Songs do that all the time," Dufford argued.

"Yes, they do," agreed Foley, "but then you cannot use them for prayer."

For two weeks, Dufford resisted. Then he played around a little, looking for two good syllables he could add. The salty desert? No. Sandy? Duh. Barren? Maybe. *Barren* desert. That was pretty good.

So good, Sr. Helen Prejean would choose "Be Not Afraid" to sing to a man who was about to be executed. So good, Dufford received a letter from a physician with the World Health Organization who wasn't even Catholic, yet listened to it over and over again as she grieved the loss of her husband. So good, a family in the Southwest also wrote to him, saying they played it and prayed whenever their father got drunk.

In the early 1970s, five men studying for ordination in the Society of Jesus all found themselves at Saint Louis University. They were studying philosophy or theology, but on the side, they were trying to write post-Vatican II liturgical music that would counter the smug, shallow stuff that had flooded into the void. On Sundays, they sang their songs with the college community, and people grabbed for copies of the lyrics. Because SLU was home to the Institute for Religious Formation, which drew spiritual directors from all over the world, the music spread around the globe before it was ever recorded.

In 1973, these Jesuits, who'd become a tight critique group immeasurably improving one another's work, realized they'd soon scatter to individual assignments. If they wanted to publish their music, this was the time. They recorded some of the 57 songs in dorm rooms, the chapel, or the basement of the Jesuit residence; the rest

they did at a studio in a final burst. And in 1974, North American Liturgy Resources released a four-album set, *Neither Silver Nor Gold.*

That broke the ice. Their next album, *Earthen Vessels*, sold more than 1 million copies. They wrote, critiqued, and recorded for a solid decade, then separated to do their own work. In 2000, though, they came together again to sing "City of God" at the National Association of Pastoral Ministers convention in honor of the organization's founder, the Rev. Virgil Funk. A few years later, they recorded another album together, and they began doing concerts.

This September marks The St. Louis Jesuits' 45th anniversary and their 12th and final concert. They are all musicians in their own right: Tim Manion continued recording his own work, as did Jesuit Fr. Roc O'Connor, who just recorded a new collection of original music called *All Shall Be Well*. Jesuit Fr. Bob Dufford, who became a pastor and retreat director, composed a musical guide through the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola. Jesuit Fr. John Foley wrote for musicals and symphony orchestras, founded a center for liturgy, and is the editor of the Saint Louis University Sunday Web Site. Dan Schutte, whose work has been recorded by Amy Grant and John Michael Talbot, is composer-in-residence at the University of San Francisco. The St. Louis Jesuit Mass was the most-used Mass in the States for two decades, and when the liturgy was revised, Schutte wrote a new one, the Mass of Christ the Savior.

"I almost didn't write it," he says, chuckling. "OCP, our current publisher, needed a new setting in three weeks," to test on reviewers. Schutte likes to work at his own pace, wait until he's satisfied. But a friend shrugged: "The worst that could happen is, it's not very good, and they'll recognize that."

It's become one of the most beloved and widely used masses in the English language.

That was what The St. Louis Jesuits did for each other — and thus for the world. This year marks their 45th anniversary, and they will play a final concert in St. Louis.

When people hunted down the credits to music they'd heard in "Dead Man Walking" or shows on Netflix or ABC, they assumed The St. Louis Jesuits, who'd put out their first album in 1974, were a performance group. Catholics who knew better, because they'd learned these songs in church, imagined five Jesuit priests sitting in some

Pentecostal chamber composing the words and notes together.

Instead, each man wrote his own words and music, then brought them to the group, and what they gave him was honest, careful critique.

When Dan Schutte wrote "Here I Am, Lord" (in the throes of the flu, because somebody needed a song for a diaconate ordination), his second line sounded a wee bit arrogant, the group informed him. Grumbling because he knew they were right but had no clue how to fix it, Schutte went back to work. What if it were a question? That simple change let him sum up all the eager uncertainty of a prophet's first response to God in four words: "Is it *I*, Lord?"

"Oh, my God," says Dufford, "it changes everything. Could it be *I* ? Could you have really called *me*? And then, instead of 'Take and lead me,' it's 'I will go, Lord, if you lead me.' "

The song ranked second in a National Association of Pastoral Musicians survey that asked Catholics to name "songs that have made a difference." Tony Blair used "Here I Am, Lord" to set the stage for his second term as prime minister.

The hymns go global

The St. Louis Jesuits are, figuratively speaking, rock stars. They've written 571 songs all told, done 13 albums together, received five Grammy nominations and a slew of awards. Their songs have been translated not just into Spanish and German but into Latvian, Samoan, Cantonese and Finnish, among others. Yet they started simply, as a handful of Jesuits in various stages of formation who all happened to be at Saint Louis University in the early '70s.

Less than a decade earlier, Vatican II had urged that the Mass be celebrated in a shared language with full participation by all. Latin was beautiful, but to most ears, it was "gobbledygook," Dufford says, "it didn't touch life." Nor did the old, wheezy church-organ hymns. And the new folk music that was flooding into churches sounded "like a birthday party for kids. It wore thin."

The St. Louis Jesuits raised the game. Only Foley was a classically trained musician (he's since written for orchestras and for the stage). Another, Tim Manion, was a consummate performer, his voice and guitar strong enough to blend and carry the group, and he loved Americana, traditional blues, Irish laments and sea shanties.

Jesuit Fr. Roc O'Connor understood pace and rhythm and a driving beat; his guitar icon was Pete Townsend from The Who.

Fresh from theology classes and steeped in Scripture, they realized they could now use those psalms and verses in a way the old hymns never had. Catholics were rocked in both senses of the word, soothed and blown away by the emotion in those passages. There was gentle reassurance and compassion, exhilaration and joy, doubt and search, intimacy and humility and reverence — all of it set to melodies that were musically sophisticated, yet singable.

Sometimes they quoted verbatim, Foley says, wrapping music around the syllables. Sometimes they rephrased in a way that was more contemporary and conversational (Schutte was a master of that) or smoother, with more lilt and cadence. And sometimes they took off from the *meaning* of a passage, carrying it further.

In the critique sessions, they forced each other into a discipline of rhythm, meaning and tone. Manion says it was Foley's emphasis on stress and syntax that taught him to work lyrics. "What do you mean, you don't read poetry?" the older Jesuit had snapped. "You're trying to write songs and you don't read *poetry*?" Schutte now thinks that "the words and music being so wedded together made the music seem natural to people. I think it helped people feel at home with our music."

"The whole thing was extraordinary," Manion remarks, "but the doing itself was oddly workaday. The music frequently rose out of the fact that we needed a song for the psalm response the next Sunday." So that people could sing along, they ran off "purple poop sheets" (his fond name for the tediously mimeographed copies). Soon those purple sheets were in such demand, it took an assembly line to crank them out.

After they recorded their first album (actually, a four-album set), *Neither Silver Nor Gold*, they were asked to do another, which would become the record-breaking *Earthen Vessels*. And that liturgical smash hit was also a tedious, sleeves-rolled-up undertaking. O'Connor remembers that they "went in with 37 songs and then chose the 12 that worked, that were grounded, that felt real. I don't know howmany times we attempted to record 'Take, Lord, Receive,' because it just wasn't working. We weren't there; we weren't grounded. And we gave it one more shot, and it was perfect, and we all knew it even as we did it."



The St. Louis Jesuits in Toronto, Canada, in 1978 (Michael Flecky)

Exhausted and elated, they went straight from the Cincinnati studio to see *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. "Every line in that thing was a classic. 'Your mother was a hamster, and your father smelled of elderberries' — we cried with laughter. The people who were walking out below us thanked us for making it even funnier."

Something bigger at work

Like comedy, music was about timing. "After 50 years of playing guitar with Schutte saying, 'Slow down! Slow down!' I finally realized that he has his sense of tempo, and for this song to really work, I have to find that — not just agree with it but enter into it," O'Connor says. "A lot of music directors take the slow songs too slow and the fast songs too fast. 'Holy God,' for example, is usually played at a pace that feels like 'The Light Cavalry Overture.' But Foley's version is slower than you'd believe possible; it feels like an opening up. And it's a risk to go there, because you might feel something."

O'Connor's tendency was to urge the beat forward, push for intensity. Yet one of his finest songs is "Jesus the Lord," an achingly slow, reverent piece he wrote for a friend who did liturgical dance and wanted something meditative that included the words "In him we live and move and have our being." O'Connor had been reading about the Jesus Prayer, and he was living "the darkest period of my life," he recalls. "And all of a sudden one evening, it was in my awareness: I knew the words; I knew the music. That had never happened before, and it's never happened since."

What Schutte finds mystifying is the way he'd write something he thought was fantastic, and it would turn into what he calls "a shelf-sitter," inert, while a song that didn't seemed like anything special zips around the world. "Maybe it's when our egos get out of the way that miraculous things happen," he says slowly. "And when our ego is too present, um, not so much."

"It's so obvious to all of us that God has had a hand," he adds. "There's been something much bigger than us at work here."

Music cuts below language, reaches something ancient and shared. It catches the very rhythm of our heartbeat, our brain waves. It can open us to God. "People would say our music helped them pray," O'Connor recalls. Dufford thinks the music showed people that "it's enjoyable to be before God. I can stand before God as a whole human being; sometimes I'll be tense, sometimes sorrowful, sometimes calm. The music helped allow the feelings."

Some of The St. Louis Jesuits' Best-Loved Songs

Here I Am, Lord

Be Not Afraid

Take, Lord, Receive

Though the Mountains May Move

For You Are My God

Earthen Vessels

Come to the Water

Blest Be the Lord

Sing to the Mountains

Turn to Me

If God Is for Us

Dufford remembers being struck by a line from the 1978 bishops' statement on liturgy: "It bears the weight of the mystery." But along with that reverence, he says, "We wanted to remember to be human."Done wrong, "music can powerfully wreck a liturgy. It can be teachy or bland, intrusive or annoying. And if it's poorly done, it actually gets in the way."

Which brings him right back to timing, and how people will sometimes punch the wrong syllable or draw a word out for convenience. "'And you'll find rest f-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-r your soul…' If I could've just gotten to that guy! 'And you'll find rest, rest for your soul.'"

But it takes craft

"It's a craft," Manion emphasizes. "Angels didn't come down and hand us the songs on pillows." Then he hesitates, because "there is an aspect of that. I generally refer to 'getting' a song rather than writing it. If you don't pay attention, the muse says, 'Well, okay, I'll go find somebody who's listening.' "

When you are listening, he continues, "and you present people with ways to sing what's already in their lives, something magical can happen. Not all the time. It's nice when liturgy takes flight, but it's like believing in anything: It's work. Hope is work. Love is work."

And so, they threw themselves into it, and they tried not to want it to be great. This wasn't music to be performed by professionals; it was music to help people pray. "If you sit down with an intention of doing nothing more than opening a door for people to step through, to step into their own depth of feeling," says Manion, "rather than sitting down to write a hip song or the finest Gloria ever sung — then things can happen."

For almost half a century, these men have been bound together by what they made, and why. They survived the ordeals of contracts (Foley watched over them like a hawk), expenses (Dufford paid the bills), the inevitable dry spells (O'Connor's enthusiasm kept firing them up again). They survived two members, Manion and Schutte, leaving the priesthood, without awkwardness, guilt trips or attempts at persuasion. They survived Manion becoming so angry with the church that he quit the group.

"It didn't have anything to do with the music," he admits now. "But when you're young, large gestures are essential. It was one of the hardest things I ever did, to tell those guys. I couldn't even articulate why I was stopping. But there was never anything but fare thee well. We know at that point we'd never be lost to each other."

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Sure enough, some years later, a reunion concert was suggested, and Foley called Manion, and he said sure. And then they did 10 more. And on September 29, they will give their last concert ever: "Coming Home," already sold out, at Powell Symphony Hall — just down the street from Saint Louis University, where it all began.

Asked his favorite bit of feedback, Foley recalls a woman introducing them by saying, "You have written the soundtrack for our spiritual lives." Schutte hoards the times he's told a song moved someone to tears: "Ignatius said tears are a sign of God's grace. They're often an indication that God is touching some deep place in your soul." Dufford thinks of the times people have asked for songs by The St. Louis Jesuits as they wed, gave birth or lay dying.

What Manion recalls is a realization that hit him during a concert at SLU's College Church: "I stopped singing and just listened for a minute, and I realized we didn't even need to be there. I spent a good half of that concert playing with my mouth shut, just listening. It was *theirs*. The people who were there totally owned that music."

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