Culture



(Pixabay/Gerd Altmann)



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St. Augustine of Hippo is credited with saying, "To sing is to pray twice." Though we might not know whether he was actually the one who said it, the idea that singing is its own prayer makes sense. As a lifelong choir girl and one who sings much too loudly at all times, I have always found song to be a powerful way I lift my voice to God. Listening to music or reciting song lyrics helps me to speak my inner thoughts to God in the times when I can't find the words on my own.

In my struggle with my own mental health, there are times that I am gripped with depression, grief, anxiety, lack of focus, overwhelming thoughts or hopelessness that make prayer difficult. Music is often a vital way I feel connected to God and others. Music reminds me that I am not alone in my experience.

Apparently, I am not the only one who turns to music to sing my truth at times when I can't.



Album cover to "Sanctuary Songs," released by Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries and The Porter's Gate

This September Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries, whose mission is to equip the Christian church to support mental health and well-being, partnered with the sacred arts collective Porter's Gate to release "Sanctuary Songs," an album about "mental health and faith." Having recognized the stigmatization of mental health struggles in our society and church, their goal was to create a music resource for individuals and parishes that expresses the lived experiences of such challenges.

Listening to "Sanctuary Songs" reminds me that God cares about everything I am facing; that I am not less worthy or somehow broken. The songs speak honestly to my experiences of mental health struggles and yet also feel hopeful, because the foundation of the lyrics is the truth of God's presence in all circumstances.

My favorite song on the album is "Sing Over Me" written by Kate Bluett, Paul Zach, Isaac Wardell and Matt Maher. This song captures the longing of people with mental health struggles; it speaks to the desire for people to see our suffering and wrap us in support so that despair does not pull us under. The chorus begs the listener, "Will you sing over me? Will you sing over me? Sing of the goodness I cannot see. Will you sing over me?" It is hard to ask for help, but this song echoes the longing of those who feel they are walking in darkness: the longing for others to be willing to illuminate God's light for them in that darkness.

Trailer for the album "Sanctuary Songs" (YouTube/Sanctuary Mental Health)

"Centering Prayer," written by Brian Eichelberger, Nicholas Chambers and Kate Bluett — and featuring Andrew Peterson and Leslie Jordan — invites the listener to a sense of groundedness with its calm melody. The lyrics give language to a clinically recommended practice of grounding that invites practitioners to reconnect with themselves in the present. The song, with lyrics asking for God's help to "be where my feet are," is itself a tool for calming anxieties and opening a more accessible prayer experience.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness, or NAMI, reports that "1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness each year." NAMI defines mental illness as "a condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling, behavior or mood." Even though millions of people in our country are affected by mental illness, it is still often viewed with shame, resulting in it being less supported than other sicknesses. As described on the "Sanctuary Songs" website, the album helps break stigmas "by modeling life-giving and healing ways for congregants to talk (and sing) about mental health challenges."

Video of the song "Take It Easy," by Paul Zach, Kate Bluett, Matt Maher, and Isaac Wardell, from the album "Sanctuary Songs" (YouTube/The Porter's Gate)

In 2021, in honor of World Mental Health Day (Oct 10), the Vatican issued a message imploring a call to action for the greater Catholic Church. Cardinal Peter Turkson

wrote, "We are all called to be close to our brothers and sisters with mental illness, to fight against all forms of discrimination and stigma against them."

Raising our eyes in solidarity with the world, we are invited to speak about mental illness openly and honestly, advocate for all people to be treated with the dignity they deserve and stand with those facing mental health struggles.

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Though one worship music album won't end the stigma of those facing mental illness, every small step can make a difference to the millions of people, like me, who face mental health challenges and often struggle in silence. Sharing a song can be a way to "pray twice," with both the melody and the words letting someone know they are not suffering alone. Thank God the "Sanctuary Songs" album is here to help open the conversation.

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Here are some ways to help end the stigma of mental illness:

- Introduce "Sanctuary Songs" to your friends and community. Listen to the album on Spotify here. The sheet music is available for free here.
- Visit the Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries website for more mental health resources.
- Pray with the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network that offers a Monthly Day of Prayer for Mental Health on the second Monday of every month.
- Start or participate in a parish mental health ministry with the support and resources of the Association of Catholic Mental Health Ministers.
- If you or someone near you is in emotional distress or experiencing suicidal thoughts, please dial 988 to reach the Suicide & Crisis Hotline or go to the nearest emergency room.

A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 10-23, 2023** print issue under the headline: Breaking the stigma of mental illness, one song at a time.