Opinion
NCR Voices
Choir members sing during the St. Patrick's Day Parade Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New

Choir members sing during the St. Patrick's Day Parade Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City March 16. (OSV News/The Tablet/Gregory Shemitzt)



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Bishop W. Shawn McKnight of Jefferson City, Missouri, stirred up the proverbial hornet's nest last month when he announced that certain hymns would no longer be played in the diocese, citing directives from the U.S. bishops' conference Committee on Doctrine. To his credit, McKnight reversed his decision within a week, saying, "It is now clear that an authentically synodal process of greater consultation did not occur prior to its promulgation."

First things first. Hats off to McKnight for being willing to admit he made a mistake and correcting it. In my years covering bishops, I find that among the most common flaws the episcopal culture breeds are thin skins and a fear of admitting mistakes. You can count on one hand the number of times you have heard a bishop admit he made a mistake in the past year.

On the merits of the original decision, it is not clear McKnight even made a mistake. Whether or not "All are Welcome" passed doctrinal muster with the U.S. bishops' conference committee charged with making that assessment, there is another problem: It is cringy. The tune is relentlessly sing-songy and the text is more than a little Pelagian. Each verse begins with the words "Let us build ..." but it is the Spirit of Christ that builds the church.

Rescinding the original decision and starting a genuine synodal process is also correct. This is one of the first instances of a bishop publicly proposing a synodal process as a solution to a local, ecclesial problem. That is progress, a real fruit of the synod.

Bishop McNight

Bishop W. Shawn McKnight of Jefferson City, Mo., shown in a Jan. 18, 2019, photo, is opening a yearlong process of consultation on how sacred music can be best used to encourage participation in the liturgy. (OSV News/Courtesy Diocese of Jefferson City)

Some, perhaps many, bishops think synodality is a fad, and doubt whether it will outlive Pope Francis. During the discussion of synodality at the U.S. bishops' conference meeting, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, Texas, voiced the concern that "discernment becomes so enticing, perhaps almost like tentacles, that you start discerning about discerning about discerning."

This is an old canard, reworked in different dress, about the synod on synodality being a "meeting about meetings." Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, explained that the paradigm for understanding the relationship between discernment and mission is found within their own diocesan leadership. Bishops consult the relevant advisory bodies, but they know the consultation leads to a decision which, in turn, prompts a new round of consultations and more decisions.

Back to the hymnal. The discussion about which hymns are appropriate is greatly needed. If I have one complaint about the post-conciliar liturgical reforms it is that the General Instruction of the Roman Missal follows the Roman preference for chant at the expense of hymnody. One of the great gifts of the Protestant and Anglican traditions is to recognize the catechetical value of hymnody, and it is a gift that could serve the Catholic Church well, at least here in the U.S.

Augustine said, "He who sings prays twice." We know this to be true. I cannot make it through the hymn "I Am the Bread of Life" without getting choked up: We sang it at both of my parents' funerals. The last verse: "Yes, Lord, I believe, that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world" has special power when the body of your beloved parent is resting in front of the altar. In the face of death, the church offers the grieving not only sympathy in the absolute loss that has occurred, but a doctrinal statement of hope, real hope. Setting it to music doubles the whammy.

Here is an easy test of the musicality of a hymn: Can a congregation sing it a cappella if the organist is sick that day? I find that a fair amount of modern music is impossible to sing without accompaniment, whereas a hymn like "Come, Holy Ghost" is a fine way to teach a young music student about intervals. This distinction between old and new is not true in every case. The 1906 hymn tune "Down Ampney" to which we usually set the 15th-century words of "Come, down O Love divine," has some modulations that would be difficult to manage if you didn't know the tune or if there was no accompaniment. The C natural "within" would be hard to pick out of the blue.

Think of the hymn "Amazing Grace." It is our de facto national hymn, even though the technical national hymn is the militaristic "God of Our Fathers." Every time "Amazing Grace" is sung, it is moving. Everyone knows the words and the melody, so it is also participatory. It puts the emphasis of Christian prayer on God, not on us, avoiding the Pelagianistic influences of modernity. Why are there not a dozen such hymns in our cultural repertoire?

In the United Kingdom, many hymns have acquired such a place in the culture that they are routinely sung at national liturgies: "Guide Me, O thou Great Jehovah," "Jerusalem," "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," and "I Vow to Thee, My Country" are all beautiful and whenever they are sung at solemn national events, it seems like everyone in the congregation knows them. All convey in beautiful, poetic language the truths of our faith.

Catholic hymnody has a less happy history. I have an old Pius X hymnal and it is filled with hymns, mostly to the saints and the blessed mother, that can generously be described as saccharine. There is still not a single Catholic hymnal, ancient or modern, that rivals the 1940 Episcopal one.

The conversation McKnight began is an important one. Let's hope the synodal process of consultation not only brings much needed attention to this issue, but that it yields a renewed commitment to hymn singing. Great music and great homilies are what fill a church.