Columns
Spirituality



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by Tina Khan

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This is dedicated to music teachers, especially those who sowed the early seeds of our knowledge of a loving God.

I was mulling over the National Catholic Reporter's 15th Sunday of Ordinary Time reflection on "Roger" and Jesus — especially the phrase in the last line of the essay "all that God asks of us" — and wandered off on a tangent about God and love songs.

"That's all I ask of you" is a phrase that came to me from a song from the musical, "The Phantom of the Opera"; then I thought of that pop song which transformed into a hymn in "Sister Act." In more recent times, "Stand by Me" was performed as a Gospel makeover at a royal wedding. Did I mention that I was on a tangent?

Hymn singing in a convent school was, of course, at Mass. The good sisters had entrusted us to Mrs. K., who elegantly but determinedly conducted us "around the world" in our singing outside church. Among those that still echo there was the Czech "Stoddola Pumppa," songs in Tamil, the requisite English ones, and Maori.

These tunes were a charming babble among a melange of races, children of shades from beige to dark, with English the lingua franca only for pragmatic reasons. But nothing stopped a good folk song from being sung, and Mrs. K. was powered by the spirit of Pentecost. The tunes were largely fun, bringing to life even more cultures, places and people I could only imagine, and expanded the borders of the mind.

In hindsight, however, where Mrs. K. did her most enduring work (with me) was in the hymns, which were catechisms in themselves. This hymn singing was preparation for the school Masses, although depending on whoever was commanding the organ and microphone at Mass, it could all sound different on the day. At the time, too, there was nothing holy about my agenda at singing classes. They were breaks from the tedium of academic subjects.

One of the pieces we were taught began, "In the morning of my life, I will look to the sunrise. At the moment in my life when the world is new. And the blessing I shall ask is that God will grant me, to be brave and strong and true, and to fill the world with love my whole life through."

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Another that did not make it into any formal hymnal was Joyce Kilmer's poem "I think that I shall never see, a poem lovely as a tree," which came with the crescendo "Poems are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree." Though only Mrs. K. and her piano made the top notes, it remains true that only the Creator "makes" trees.

Then there was "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." How aspirational it was — the consideration that with God as common Creator, we are one, and obliged to walk in this harmony.

Yet in a time of rising intensity of threats of war and politically-sanctioned divisiveness, Roger — "the Catholic chief justice who denied some people the rights of citizenship" — is still among us.

In the last few months, we have been facilitating reflections on themes of Christian leadership and "The Different Heart of Jesus." Inevitably, discussions arise about "who is my neighbor," and servant leadership. What is it that Jesus calls us to do? What is it we mean when we say we are Christian or a Christian country? Do we think about the response-ability of such declarations? What are we asked to do in daily life? Do *I* look like Christian love?

In the tableau of the Good Samaritan, I have lived the different parts. It has only been the confrontational realization of the times I have been the beaten-up man needing *caritas* that I understand more fully the power of that parable — an outsider, a risk, nobody — whom only love will restore. Then, the obligation to go and do the same.

The last stanza of another contemporary hymn is, "In the evening of my life I shall look to the sunset. At the moment of my life when the night is due. And the question I shall ask only God can answer: Was I brave and strong and true? Did I fill the world with love my whole life through?"

The response — though I am sure it will be given in love — is not going to be easy listening!

Still, hymns have not changed; they continue to sing of God's love, peace and all those wonderful things. At the occasional school Mass that I attend, in the enthusiasm of the children's actions and combined voices, I hear the effects of the

new generation of "Mrs. K's."

So here's to music teachers everywhere, especially those who teach us to sing of love, God and neighbor, perhaps long before we begin to know its gritty reality.

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