

Saint Cecilia 2004

**Orpheus could lead the savage
race;
And trees unrooted left their
place;
Sequacious of the lyre:
But bright Cecilia rais'd the
wonder high'r;
When to her organ, vocal breath
was giv'n,
An angel heard, and straight
appear'd
Mistaking earth for Heav'n.**

Thus the seventeenth-century English poet John Dryden's "A Song for Saint Cecilia's Day" (1687), to which George Frederick Handel later gave musical expression. His dazzling 1739 "An Ode for Saint Cecilia's Day" enshrines the medieval legend that we owe the invention of the organ to St Cecilia. To this day, hardly an organ loft in Christendom stands without some sign of the Roman virgin whom the Church honors today. Saint John's Seminary is no exception. Cecilia remains the patroness of sacred music. She is also one of the best known heavenly intercessors, except perhaps for Saint Christopher. This ranking is not unexpected. The patron of travelers ensures the difference between life and death, whereas Cecilia only guarantees that we experience the difference between sweet harmonies and boisterous distractions.

Saint Cecilia's Day falls toward the end of the Church's year. She prepares us for a vision of the Apocalypse in which those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes burst forth with a new hymn. Once it is revealed that the Christian people are destined for all eternity to sing a new hymn, the Church envisages no alternative here and now but to deliver

herself over to singing. Singing even fools the angels, if Dryden is to be believed. Singing also doubles our worship. It occupies the one who worships in spirit and in truth. Even when we sing poorly, this exercise, like the widow's "small coins," truly merits before the Lord. He approves our offering because we give "from our poverty." There is then no option for the Christian who is bound to love with his whole being both God and neighbor. Even if we have a hard time believing that the angels may mistake our choral activities for heaven, the fact remains that the angels do gather when the Church is at prayer. For the priest no other lesson is important to learn. The angels remind the priest that he is about a supremely sacred action.

Music does not supply an adornment for prayer. None other than Saint Augustine himself instructs us that to sing is to pray twice. The principal reason for this meritorious bonus is that singing engages the whole person in a way that other forms of recitation do not. Mental prayer. Spoken prayer. Even, "Ways of Prayer." These various prayer forms enjoy status in the Church, but none of them holds the same rank in the Christian life as singing. When we sing, we give ourselves over to divine worship in a way that illuminates our creaturliness and God's majesty. To sing God's praises remains a completely gratuitous gift; remember that only the 144,000 ransomed souls know the tune. May it please God to count us among this number of singing saints.

At the heart of the Church's sung prayer stands the Psalter of David. What we did this morning—Morning Prayer, once Lauds—unites us with those holy men and women who have sung psalms in the morning since the first days of the Church. These sung praises also place this seminary community in continuity with the Synagogue, where the same

psalms have been sung for millennia as an expression of Messianic expectation. With this length of history, it is not easy to envisage alternatives. David's lyre gives way to Cecilia's organ in the way that Old Testament prophecy gives way to the full light of the revelation made in Jesus Christ.

The saints discover in sacred music a distinctive feature of the divine pedagogy. Basil the Great argues that music serves to overcome our native disinclination to draw close to divine truth: "For when the Holy Spirit," he writes, "saw that mankind was ill-inclined toward virtue and that we were heedless of the righteous life because of our inclination to pleasure, what did He do? He blended the delight of melody with doctrines in order that through the pleasantness and softness of the sound we might unawares receive what was useful in the words."¹ Music serves as a tonic for the soul. As we give ourselves over to singing, we also imbibe the content of the faith that the music envelops.

This intimate connection between melody and meaning leads us to recognize that the choice of words for liturgical music merits our most careful attention. Many spiffy tunes clothe lyrics that fall short of expressing the full truth of Catholic faith. One of the deficiencies of the liturgical renewal as it has developed in English speaking countries stems from the fact that there was very little musical composition in English produced during the post-Tridentine period. As a result, we don't have a lot of good classical Catholic music in English. The reason of course is easy to figure out. The country where English is native rejected the grace of the Petrine office. The Catholic Baroque didn't happen in English. We are left, then, to cite Dryden and Handel.

¹ St. Basil, *Homily on the First Psalm*, PG XXIX: 209.

Today's saint encourages us to move forward. Saint Cecilia belongs to the Church. She finds a place in the Roman canon. Her image adorns Catholic churches. She watches over those countless musicians who help the assembly prepare for the eschatological moment when we will all sing a new song before the throne of God. There are many things to do in the Church besides sing. However, none of these worthwhile activities will progress with grace and success without hearts that have been trained to sing a new song to the Lord. For the grace to understand this aspect of the Church's spiritual life, I suggest that you invoke the intercession of the young Roman maiden who chose death rather than unchastity and apostasy.

Saint Cecilia, pray for us!