THE DAILY BREAD

*The Daily Bread*



# Let Everything That Has Breath

A FORMATION BOOK BY

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*The Everyday Apostle*

INTRODUCTION

# A Note Before You Begin

Most men reading this book do not think of themselves as musical.

They sing along to the radio with the windows up. They mumble through the hymns at Mass while keeping an eye on whether anyone can hear them. They have a playlist for the gym and a playlist for the drive and a vague sense that music matters to them more than they could explain if asked. But musical? No. That word belongs to other people, people who can read the notes and hit the high ones and stand in front of others without their hands shaking.

This book is going to ask you to put that idea down. Not because you are secretly a great singer who has been hiding his talent, but because the idea that music belongs only to the trained and the gifted is one of the most effective lies ever told to keep ordinary men out of something that was always meant for them. The last line of the Book of Psalms, the great songbook of the people of God, does not say let everyone who is musically trained praise the Lord. It says let everything that has breath praise the Lord. That is the only qualification. You are breathing. The invitation is open.

What follows is an attempt to take music as seriously as the Church has always taken it, which is far more seriously than most of us have ever been taught. We will go back to a shepherd boy who sang his way through grief and rage and shame and became the man God called His own heart. We will look at a strange tent David pitched in Jerusalem and discover that it tells us something about heaven. We will work through the different kinds of sacred music a man encounters and learn what each of them is actually doing. We will ask hard questions about the words we sing and the music we let into our lives when no one is watching. And we will arrive, by the end, at a simple and demanding conclusion: that the man who learns to pray through music has found a door into God that words and silence alone could never fully open.

You do not need to be able to sing to walk through that door. You only need to be willing to breathe.

CHAPTER ONE

# The Song That Was Already Playing

Begin with a question most men have never asked: where did music come from?

The easy answer is that human beings invented it, somewhere back in the fog of prehistory, banging on hollow logs and discovering that certain combinations of sound were pleasing. On this account, music is a human artifact, a clever thing we made, which we then, at some later point, decided to dedicate to God the way we might dedicate a building or a painting. Music in this telling is something we bring to God. It starts with us.

The Scriptures tell a different story, and the difference matters more than it seems at first glance.

In the Book of Job, when God finally answers the suffering man out of the whirlwind, He asks Job where he was at the foundation of the world, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy. Notice what that image assumes. Before there were human beings to invent anything, before the first instrument was carved or the first voice was raised, there was already singing. The act of creation itself took place against a background of song. Music was not waiting to be invented by us. It was already happening, woven into the structure of reality, the sound the universe made when God spoke it into being.

The Psalms extend this picture relentlessly. The trees of the field clap their hands. The rivers clap their hands and the hills sing together for joy. The heavens declare the glory of God and the sky proclaims His handiwork, and they do it, the Psalm says, without speech or words, in a voice that goes out through all the earth. Creation, in the biblical imagination, is not silent matter that occasionally gets dedicated to worship. It is a standing choir, perpetually praising its Maker, and the only strange thing in the whole arrangement is that human beings, the one creature made in God's own image, are the ones who somehow stopped singing.

This is the first thing a man needs to understand if he is going to take music seriously as a spiritual reality. Music is not something you bring to God. It is something the universe was already doing, and that you are invited to rejoin. When you sing, even badly, even in a car with the windows up, you are not manufacturing worship out of nothing. You are adding your voice to a chorus that has been going since before the foundation of the world. You are doing what the stars did at creation. The trees and rivers never stopped. The invitation is for you to remember how.

There is a second truth packed into the nature of music that the Catholic tradition has always understood, and it is this: music is physical. This sounds obvious, but its implications are enormous. Music is sound, and sound is vibration, and vibration is matter in motion. When you sing, your body is the instrument. The breath in your lungs, the chords in your throat, the resonance in your chest and skull, all of it is matter, ordered and moving, producing something that reaches another person's body, vibrating their eardrum, moving through their nervous system, landing somewhere in their soul.

This is not incidental to the Catholic understanding of worship. It is central. The Catholic faith is relentlessly incarnational. It insists that God works through matter, that grace comes to us through water and oil and bread and wine and the laying on of hands, that the physical world is not an obstacle to the spiritual life but the ordinary means by which the spiritual life reaches us. Music fits this pattern exactly. It is matter, ordered and offered, becoming a vehicle of something that transcends matter. The man who sings a hymn is not escaping the physical world into some purely spiritual realm. He is doing the most Catholic thing imaginable: taking the stuff of creation, his own breath and body, and ordering it toward God.

This is why the Church has never treated music as decoration. Decoration is optional, separable, nice when present but not essential. Music in the Catholic tradition is none of those things. It is a participation in the worship of creation and a sacramental ordering of matter toward God, and that is why the Church has fought about it, legislated about it, and taken it with a seriousness that can look from the outside like fussiness but is actually a coherent and ancient theological conviction. The Church takes music seriously because music is serious. It was playing before we got here. The question is only whether we will join in.

CHAPTER TWO

# The Man Who Sang Everything

If music was already playing at the foundation of the world, the Scriptures give us one human being above all others who seems to have heard it most clearly and answered it most completely. His name was David, and the Bible's verdict on him is staggering in its simplicity. He was a man after God's own heart.

It is worth sitting with how unlikely a candidate David was for that title. He was the youngest of eight sons, the one left out in the fields with the sheep when the prophet Samuel came looking for a king, so far down the list that his own father did not think to call him in from the pasture. He became, over the course of his life, an adulterer and a man with blood on his hands, including the engineered death of a loyal soldier whose wife he had taken. He was a flawed king, a failed father, a man whose household fractured in violence and grief. If you were assembling a list of the holiest men in the Old Testament on the basis of their conduct, David would not obviously top it.

And yet the title stands. Man after God's own heart. The question this book wants to ask is why, and the answer has everything to do with music.

David was, before he was anything else, a musician. He came to Saul's court in the first place as a harpist, the young man whose playing could quiet the tormented king when an evil spirit troubled him. There is a detail there that should not be passed over quickly. The music David played did not just soothe Saul's nerves the way a pleasant sound might. The text says the evil spirit departed. Music, in David's hands, was a spiritual force, capable of driving back darkness. The shepherd boy with the harp understood something about the power of ordered sound that the king on his throne did not.

But David's real significance for our purposes is not in the music he played for others. It is in the music he made before God. David is the central author of the Psalms, the great collection of sung prayer that became the songbook of Israel, then the prayer book of Jesus, then the spine of the Church's daily prayer for two thousand years. And what is extraordinary about the Psalms David gave us is their total, unflinching, almost shocking honesty.

David sang his joy, certainly. The Psalms are full of praise so exuberant it can be hard for a reserved modern man to imagine actually meaning it. But David also sang things that most of us would never dream of bringing into the presence of God. He sang his rage. He named specific enemies and asked God to break their teeth in their mouths, to let them vanish like

water running away, to deal with them in ways that would make a polite congregation deeply uncomfortable. He sang his despair, from the depths of a pit where God seemed absent and silent and uncaring, where the singer accuses God to His face of having forgotten him. He sang his guilt, in the great fifty-first Psalm, written after his sin with Bathsheba was exposed, a raw and total confession that holds nothing back. He sang his fear, his loneliness, his confusion at watching the wicked prosper while the faithful suffered.

He sang everything. That is the point. David did not clean himself up before he came to God in song. He did not wait until his interior life was settled and reverent and Sunday-appropriate before he opened his mouth. He brought the whole unfiltered mess of his actual interior life and he set it to music and he sang it directly to God, and God called him beloved.

This is the great liberating discovery at the heart of the biblical theology of music, and most Catholic men have never been told it. You may have absorbed, somewhere along the way, the idea that prayer requires a particular composed and reverent state, that you must arrive at God already calm, already grateful, already in the right frame of mind. The Psalms demolish this idea. David arrived at God furious and God received him. David arrived drowning in shame and God received him. David arrived accusing God of abandonment and God received him, and called the whole raw catalog of it the heart of a man after His own.

What made David a man after God′s own heart was not that his heart was clean. It was that his heart was open. He held nothing back from God, not his sin, not his rage, not his terror, not his doubt. He sang all of it. And in doing so he discovered the thing that music does which mere speech cannot: it carries the parts of us that words alone cannot reach. There are things a man cannot say to God in flat prose that he can somehow sing. The melody opens what the sentence keeps closed. David knew this in his bones. It is why the man who could not keep himself from sin also could not keep himself from song, and why the second of those two facts mattered more than the first.

CHAPTER THREE

# The Tent in the City

There is a moment in David's story that almost no one talks about, and it is one of the strangest and most beautiful things in the entire Old Testament. To understand it, you have to understand what it interrupted.

For generations, the presence of God among the people of Israel had been housed in the Tabernacle of Moses, an elaborate tent constructed exactly according to the pattern God gave on the mountain. At the heart of it, behind a thick veil, in a room called the Holy of Holies, sat the Ark of the Covenant, the golden chest that was the very throne of God's presence on earth. Access to that presence was guarded by terror. Only the High Priest could pass behind the veil, only once a year, only after elaborate purification, and even then with a rope tied around his ankle in case he was struck dead and had to be pulled out. The whole architecture communicated a single message: God is holy, you are not, and the distance between you cannot be casually crossed.

Then David became king, and he did something no one expected.

When he brought the Ark of the Covenant up to his new capital in Jerusalem, dancing before it with such abandon that his own wife despised him for undignified behavior unbecoming a king, he did not place it back behind the veil in the Tabernacle of Moses. He pitched a new tent for it, a simple tent, and he put the Ark in it out in the open, and then he did the truly radical thing. He appointed musicians, a great company of them, and he established worship before the Ark that never stopped. Day and night, in shifts, singers and instrumentalists stood before the unveiled presence of God and worshipped continuously. The Scriptures record the names. They record the instruments. They record that this was to continue perpetually, a ceaseless offering of music before the throne of God.

This was the Tent of David, and it broke every rule. The veil was gone. The terror was gone. The once-a-year, one-man, rope-around-the-ankle access had been replaced by continuous, open, joyful song in the very presence of God. For the thirty-three years that David's tent stood, the presence of God on earth was surrounded not by distance and dread but by music that never ceased.

How David got away with this theologically is a genuine puzzle, and the tradition has wrestled with it. The Tabernacle of Moses, with all its veils and barriers, was still standing during this whole period, with its priesthood still operating. David seems to have been granted, as a kind of prophetic anticipation, a glimpse of something that would not become

available to everyone until much later: direct access to the presence of God, with worship as the atmosphere of that access. He saw ahead of his time. He pitched a tent that pointed forward to something not yet possible for the people as a whole.

And here is where it becomes electric for the Christian reading it. Centuries after David, the prophet Amos delivered a promise from God: in that day, I will raise up the fallen tent of David and repair its breaches and rebuild it as in the days of old. The Tent of David, long since gone, would be raised again. And in the New Testament, in the Book of Acts, when the early Church was wrestling with the momentous question of whether the Gentiles could be included in the people of God, the apostle James stood up and quoted exactly that prophecy. After this I will return and rebuild the fallen tent of David. He applied it directly to what was happening in the Church. The rebuilding of David′s tent was being fulfilled, James declared, in the Church itself.

Consider what that means. The thing David glimpsed ahead of time, continuous open worship in the unveiled presence of God, is not a quaint Old Testament curiosity. It is a description of the Church. When the veil of the Temple tore in two from top to bottom at the moment of Christ′s death, the terror-guarded distance collapsed for good. The access David enjoyed prophetically in his strange tent became the permanent condition of the new covenant people. And the Church recognized this. The tradition of continuous prayer, the liturgy of the hours prayed around the clock in monasteries and cathedrals and now on the phones of ordinary laypeople, the perpetual adoration chapels where someone is always before the Blessed Sacrament, all of it is the rebuilt Tent of David. Continuous worship before the unveiled presence of God. And at its heart, as it was at the heart of David′s tent, is song.

This is not a small thing for the man trying to understand why music matters. It means that when you sing before God, whether in a packed church on Sunday or alone in adoration on a Tuesday night, you are not doing something peripheral to the life of faith. You are taking your place in the rebuilt Tent of David. You are joining a song that David started and the Church never stopped, the continuous music of a people who have been given access to the presence of God and who answer that access the only way it can be properly answered: by singing.

CHAPTER FOUR

# The Streams of Sacred Music

A Catholic man in the modern world encounters an almost bewildering variety of music that all claims, in one way or another, to be sacred. He might attend a Latin Mass on Sunday morning where the choir sings Gregorian chant that has not changed in a thousand years, then catch the end of a contemporary praise service Saturday evening where a band with drums and electric guitars leads worship that would not sound out of place at a concert. He might hear a Black gospel choir on the radio and feel something stir that the hymns at his own parish never touch. He might have a playlist of broadly Christian artists that he listens to in the car without ever quite knowing whether it counts as worship or just music with religious words.

The temptation is to rank all of this, to decide which kind is the real sacred music and which kinds are lesser imitations. This book is going to resist that temptation, not because all music is equally suited to all purposes, but because the more useful thing a man can have is not a ranking but a lens: an understanding of what each of these traditions is actually doing, so he can engage all of them with intelligence rather than either uncritical absorption or reflexive suspicion.

Start with Gregorian chant, because it is the oldest and because the Church has always given it pride of place. Chant was the primary musical language of Western Christianity for the better part of a thousand years, and the Second Vatican Council, even in the midst of opening the liturgy to the modern world, explicitly said that Gregorian chant should be given first place in liturgical services. This is worth pausing on, because most Catholics assume chant is a relic the Council swept away, when in fact the Council named it the Church's own music, suited above all others to the Roman liturgy.

What is chant actually doing? It is a single melodic line, unharmonized, sung in unison. There is no beat in the modern sense, no rhythm you could tap your foot to, no harmony, no instruments required. To a man raised on contemporary music, it can sound at first like nothing, like the absence of all the things that make music exciting. But that absence is the entire point. Chant strips away everything that might call attention to itself, every emotional hook, every rhythmic drive, every harmonic richness, and leaves only a single voice moving with the breath and the words, directed entirely upward. There is no place for the ego in chant. You cannot show off in plainchant. You cannot perform it as an individual. It dissolves the singer into the text and the text into the prayer. Chant is musical humility. It is the sound of a man getting out of his own way, and that is why the Church has

treasured it for a thousand years and why a man who spends time with it finds it doing something to his interior life that flashier music cannot.

Then there is sacred polyphony, the soaring choral music of composers like Palestrina, Victoria, and the great tradition they founded in the sixteenth century. If chant is a single voice undivided, polyphony is many voices woven together into something none of them could produce alone. Multiple independent melodic lines move at once, weaving in and out of each other, creating a texture of sound so rich it can feel like the music is coming from everywhere at once. The theological content of that form is the communion of the Church itself. In polyphony, individual voices remain distinct, each singing its own line, irreplaceable, and yet they offer themselves into a unity larger than any of them, a harmony that exists only because each voice surrenders its independence to the whole without losing its identity. That is the Church. That is the Body of Christ, many members, one body, each indispensable, all united. Polyphony is ecclesiology you can hear.

Hymns occupy a different place again. The Catholic hymn tradition runs from the ancient office hymns of Saint Ambrose in the fourth century through the great congregational hymns of the centuries since, and what defines a hymn is that it carries its theology explicitly, in its words, set to a melody the whole congregation can sing. The best hymns are catechesis you can sing. When a congregation sings Holy God We Praise Thy Name, they are singing a meditation on the Trinity and the communion of saints. When they sing the Tantum Ergo at Benediction, they are singing Saint Thomas Aquinas′s own Eucharistic theology, the doctrine of the Real Presence in poetic form. A man who actually attends to the words he is singing in the hymns at Mass, rather than running on autopilot while his mind wanders to lunch, is receiving theological formation every single Sunday, absorbing doctrine through music in a way that goes deeper than any lecture could reach. This is the practical payoff of taking hymns seriously: they are teaching you, and you get to decide whether to actually listen.

Contemporary worship music is the tradition most modern Catholic men encounter most often, and it deserves honest treatment rather than either dismissal or uncritical embrace. Its strengths are real. It is emotionally direct in a way that can break through the autopilot that afflicts so much Catholic worship. It is accessible, singable, immediate. At its best it creates genuine encounters with God, moments where a man who has been spiritually numb for years suddenly finds his throat tight and his eyes stinging, surprised by a presence he had stopped expecting. That is not nothing. That is the Holy Spirit using a form that reached a man the old forms had stopped reaching.

But contemporary worship music also has real limitations that a thoughtful man should hold in view. Its lyrical theology is often thin, heavy on emotional response and light on

doctrinal content, sometimes repeating a single simple phrase many times in a way that produces feeling without necessarily producing understanding. And there is a genuine question, which the honest practitioners of the form ask themselves, about where the line falls between genuine worship and emotional manipulation through musical technique, the swelling bridge, the key change, the carefully engineered build that produces an emotional response that can be mistaken for a spiritual one. None of this makes contemporary worship music bad. It makes it something to engage thoughtfully, taking what genuinely lifts the heart to God and remaining aware of the difference between being moved and being manipulated.

Finally, there is gospel music, a tradition most white Catholic men have almost no access to and which has more to teach them than they might expect. Black gospel music flows from the spirituals, the songs the enslaved sang in the fields and the secret meetings, and to understand gospel you have to understand what those spirituals were. They were, all at once, coded communication, survival mechanism, and genuine theological reflection, and their theology centered on the Exodus, the conviction that the God who brought Israel out of bondage was present with His suffering people and would deliver them too. Gospel music carries that conviction forward. Its emotional power, which is immense, is not emotion for its own sake. It is the sound of a people declaring, often in the very midst of suffering rather than after it has passed, that God is present, that God is good, and that the suffering does not get the last word. A man who learns where gospel came from and what it is doing will never again mistake it for mere musical enthusiasm. It is one of the most theologically serious musical traditions in all of Christianity, forged in a furnace most of us have never had to enter.

The point of surveying these streams is not to send you off to rank them. It is to give you ears. Each of these traditions is doing something real and distinct. Chant teaches humility. Polyphony embodies communion. Hymns carry doctrine. Contemporary worship offers immediacy. Gospel proclaims God′s presence in suffering. The man who understands what each one is for can walk into any of them and receive what it has to give, rather than standing outside it confused or dismissive. That is musical literacy in service of the spiritual life, and it is available to any man willing to listen with attention.

CHAPTER FIVE

# What the Music of the Mass Is For

Every Sunday, in every Catholic parish in the world, there is music. And for an enormous number of Catholic men, that music is the single most taken-for-granted element of their entire week of faith. It happens. They half-sing it or do not sing it at all. They have opinions about whether they like it. And they have almost never been given a framework for understanding what it is actually supposed to be doing, which means they have been standing in the middle of one of the most extraordinary realities available to a human being while thinking about the parking lot.

Here is what the music of the Mass is for, and it is not what most men assume.

The music of the Mass is not the warm-up. It is not the atmosphere management that happens before and around the real event. It is not there to fill the silence, cover the movement, or get people in the mood. The music of the Mass is a participation in the worship of heaven itself, and to understand that claim you have to go to the Book of Revelation, because Revelation is, among other things, a description of the heavenly liturgy, and it is soaked in music.

In the fourth and fifth chapters of Revelation, the apostle John is given a vision of the throne room of heaven, and what he sees there is worship. Around the throne, four living creatures never cease, day or night, singing Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty. Twenty-four elders fall down and cast their crowns before the throne and sing. And then John sees something that staggers him: thousands upon thousands and ten thousand times ten thousand angels, an uncountable multitude, joining in a single song, worthy is the Lamb who was slain. The whole of heaven, in Revelation's vision, is a continuous, overwhelming, unceasing act of sung worship around the throne of God.

Now hold that vision next to the Mass. The Sanctus, the Holy, Holy, Holy that the congregation sings or says at every single Mass before the Eucharistic Prayer, is taken directly from that heavenly scene. When you sing the Sanctus, you are not singing a nice introductory hymn to the consecration. You are joining your voice to the four living creatures around the throne. The Mass makes the heavenly liturgy present on earth. The veil between heaven and earth, the same veil that tore at the death of Christ, is thin to the point of transparency at the altar, and the music of the Mass is the earthly expression of the song that the angels and saints are singing on the other side of it, right now, without ceasing.

This changes everything about how a man might show up to Mass. If the music is filler, then whether you sing or not is a matter of preference and mood. But if the music of the Mass is your actual participation in the worship of heaven, then your silence is something else entirely. It is standing in the throne room of God, surrounded by angels and saints in full voice, with your own mouth closed. Not because you cannot sing well, the angels are not grading your pitch, but because you have not understood where you are standing.

The Church's official teaching on this is more specific than most Catholics realize. The Second Vatican Council, in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, taught that sacred music is not an optional ornament added to the liturgy but an integral part of it, bound up with the liturgical action itself. The Council gave pride of place to Gregorian chant and held up sacred polyphony as a treasure, while making room for other worthy forms. The vision the Council articulated was high and serious: music as a constitutive part of the Church's worship, drawing the faithful into fuller participation in the sacred mysteries.

What most parishes actually deliver often falls short of that vision, sometimes far short, and that is a real frustration for men who have come to understand what the music of the Mass could be. But the answer to mediocre liturgical music is not to disengage further. It is to bring more attention, not less. Even when the music at your parish is not what it should be, the reality underneath it has not changed. The Sanctus is still the song of the living creatures around the throne, however imperfectly your parish sings it. The Mass is still heaven on earth, however ordinary the musicians. A man who understands this can bring a quality of participation to even a poorly executed liturgy that transforms his own experience of it, and over time, men who understand what the music of the Mass is for tend to become the men who help their parishes do it better.

The invitation is simple and demanding. Sing at Mass. Not because you have a good voice. Not because anyone is judging your performance. Sing because you have finally understood where you are standing and what song is already underway. The angels have been singing it without ceasing since before you were born. The least you can do, standing in the throne room with the veil worn thin, is open your mouth and join them.

CHAPTER SIX

# Listen to What You Are Singing

There is a saying attributed to Saint Augustine that has been repeated so often it has nearly worn smooth: he who sings prays twice. It is usually quoted to encourage people to sing, and it does encourage that. But buried inside it is a claim that most people never stop to examine, and the claim has a sharp edge.

If singing is praying twice, then the words you sing matter twice as much. Music does something to words. It carries them deeper, fixes them in the memory, attaches them to emotion, plants them in the soul in a way that spoken words do not achieve. This is why you can still sing every word of songs you have not heard in twenty years, while you cannot remember a sentence of last Sunday's homily. Music is the most powerful delivery system for words that human beings have ever discovered. Which means that the theology contained in the music you sing is being delivered into the deepest part of you, repeatedly, with the full force that melody adds to meaning.

This is wonderful when the theology is true. It is a problem when it is not.

Most Catholic men have never thought about the lyrics of worship music as a theological issue. They evaluate songs, if they evaluate them at all, on whether they like them, whether the melody moves them, whether the song makes them feel something. The question of whether the song is true, whether it says accurate things about who God is and what He asks and what the world is for, almost never comes up. And yet that question matters enormously, because a man who sings a particular vision of God week after week, year after year, is being formed by that vision at a level far below conscious thought.

Consider a concrete example. A great deal of contemporary worship music presents God as overwhelmingly, even exclusively, a God of comfort, affirmation, and unconditional emotional warmth. He is the God who is always pleased with you, always embracing you, always making you feel loved and accepted exactly as you are. Now, there is real truth in this. God does love you. His mercy is real and vast. But if that is the entire portrait, if the God you sing about every week has no holiness that makes demands, no justice, no specific claims on how you live, no capacity to call you to repentance and change, then the cumulative effect of singing that portrait for years is a distorted understanding of God. You will have sung yourself into believing in a God who is essentially a warm feeling, a God with no edges, a God who asks nothing. And that God does not exist. He is a comfortable idol assembled from selectively true lyrics, and the man who worships him will be unprepared for the real God, who loves us far too much to leave us as we are.

This is not an argument that all contemporary worship is bad or that only ancient music is safe. It is an argument for theological literacy applied to whatever music you sing. The traditional hymns are not automatically immune from this scrutiny, and the contemporary songs are not automatically guilty of it. The point is to develop the habit of listening to what you are actually singing, of letting the words pass through your mind rather than just your mouth, of asking whether the vision of God and man and the world contained in this song is true.

A simple framework can help, three questions to ask of any song you are about to sing or that you find yourself absorbing. First, who does this say God is? Does the portrait of God in this song match the God revealed in Scripture and taught by the Church, the God who is both infinite mercy and perfect holiness, both tender Father and consuming fire? Or has the song selected only the comfortable attributes and quietly dropped the demanding ones? Second, what does this ask of me? Does the song call me to anything, to repentance, to surrender, to transformation, to mission, or does it only offer me a feeling and ask nothing in return? Third, is this consistent with what the Church actually teaches? Not just is it broadly Christian, but is it true in the specific, careful way the Catholic faith is true?

These three questions are not a prohibition and they are not an invitation to become the kind of person who ruins worship for everyone by critiquing the song selection. They are a formation tool, a way of staying awake during the act of singing rather than letting the music carry theology you have never examined straight into your soul. The man who learns to listen to what he is singing has taken control of one of the most powerful formative forces in his spiritual life. The man who never asks these questions has simply handed that force over to whoever wrote the songs, and trusted that they got the theology right. Sometimes they did. Sometimes they did not. You are praying twice. Make sure you know what you are praying.

CHAPTER SEVEN

# Praying Through Music When You Are Not a Musician

Everything in this book has been building toward a practical question that the man who does not think of himself as musical has probably been waiting to ask. All of this is fine, he might say, for people who can sing, for the choir, for the musicians, for the gifted. But what about me? I cannot carry a tune. I do not read music. When I sing at Mass I keep my voice down so no one has to hear it. How does any of this actually apply to my prayer life?

The answer begins by demolishing the premise hidden inside the question. The premise is that musical prayer belongs to musicians. It does not. It never did.

Return to David one last time. Yes, David was a skilled musician, a harpist whose playing could drive out evil spirits. But the Psalms he wrote, the songs that became the prayer book of the whole people of God, were not written for skilled musicians. They were written for everyone, for shepherds and farmers and soldiers and kings, for the entire community to pray together regardless of musical training. The Psalms are the great equalizer of musical prayer. They were composed to be prayed by people who could not read music, because almost no one could read music, because the entire point was that this was the prayer of the whole people, not the performance of a trained few.

And here is the liberating thing about the Psalms: they are songs even when you only speak them. A Psalm has cadence. It has movement. It has a musical logic built into its structure, the rise and fall, the parallelism where each line answers the one before it, the rhythm of Hebrew poetry that survives even in translation. When you pray a Psalm slowly, even silently, even in flat spoken words, you are praying something that was made to be sung, and the music of it works on you whether or not a single note ever leaves your mouth. The man who takes up the practice of praying the Psalms, a few of them, regularly, with attention to what the words are actually doing, has entered the musical prayer tradition of the Church through a door that requires no musical ability whatsoever. He is doing what David did. He is singing his whole interior life before God, even if no one would call the sound of it singing.

This is the first practical path: pray the Psalms. Start with a handful. The twenty-third, the shepherd Psalm, when you need to be reminded that you are cared for. The fifty-first, David's confession, when you have failed and need to bring it to God. The one hundred thirty-ninth, the Psalm of being fully known, when you feel invisible. The twenty-second,

the Psalm of abandonment that Christ Himself prayed from the Cross, when God seems absent. Pray them slowly. Let the words be your words. You will find, over time, that the Psalms have given language to parts of your interior life you did not know how to express, and that praying them is itself a form of the musical prayer David pioneered.

The second practical path is to let music prepare the ground for prayer in ways that silence alone cannot. There are dimensions of the human soul that music reaches before words can get there. Every man knows this experientially even if he has never named it. You have had the experience of a piece of music saying something you could not say, reaching something in you that no conversation could touch, opening a door that had been stuck shut. This is not a trick or an illusion. It is one of the things music is for. Music loosens what is rigid in us, opens what is closed, names what has no other name.

This has direct application to prayer. The man who sits down to pray and finds himself rigid, distracted, unable to settle, walled off from his own interior life, can use music to do what his own willpower cannot. A piece of sacred music played quietly before prayer, a chant, a Taizé refrain repeated gently, a piece of Bach, even an instrumental worship recording, can loosen the soul and prepare it for the encounter that prayer is meant to be. This is why monasteries are full of music, why adoration chapels often have soft chant playing, why the Church has surrounded its prayer with music for two thousand years. Music opens the door. Then the prayer of words and silence can walk through it.

The third practical path is the one most available to the ordinary man in his ordinary day, and it connects directly to the deepest truth this book has been circling. Music is forming you all the time, whether you are intentional about it or not. The music in your car, your earbuds, your home, is shaping your interior life with every hour you give it. This is the no neutral ground principle applied to sound: there is no music you listen to that has no effect on you. It is all either ordering your soul toward beauty, toward longing, toward God, or it is ordering it toward cynicism, toward numbness, toward despair, toward appetites that lead away from the man you are trying to become.

This does not mean a man should listen only to sacred music, or that all secular music is spiritually dangerous. It means he should bring the same awareness to what he listens to that this book has asked him to bring to everything else. Some music genuinely points toward God, even when it never mentions Him, music that captures beauty, or love, or grief honestly felt, or the deep unresolved longing that Augustine said could only finally be answered in God. That music is doing good work in a man′s soul. And some music does the opposite, music that degrades, that coarsens, that cultivates contempt or numbness or rage, that trains the heart in exactly the directions a man of faith is trying to grow out of.

The man who fills every hour with the second kind and wonders why his interior life feels arid and cynical has not connected a cause he could easily see if he looked.

So here is the practical invitation, and it is not a burden but a freedom. Pay attention to what you are listening to. Notice what it does to you. Build, gradually, a soundtrack for your life that is doing the work you actually want done in your soul. Keep the music that points toward beauty and longing and honest feeling. Become suspicious of the music that leaves you a little more numb, a little more cynical, a little more empty each time. And weave into your ordinary days, not as a religious obligation but as a genuine good, the music that has lifted human hearts to God for centuries. You do not have to be able to sing a note to do any of this. You only have to listen with the awareness that the music is forming you, and to take some responsibility for the direction of that formation.

That is musical prayer for the man who is not a musician. Pray the Psalms that were written for you and not for the trained. Let music open the door to the prayer your own willpower cannot force. And pay attention to the soundtrack of your ordinary life, because it is shaping your soul whether you have been paying attention or not. None of this requires talent. All of it requires only what the last line of the Psalms requires: breath, and the willingness to use it.

CLOSING

# The Song You Were Made to Join

Go back, at the end, to where we began. The morning stars sang together at the foundation of the world. The trees clap their hands and the rivers sing and the heavens declare the glory of God in a voice without words that goes out to all the earth. Creation has been singing since before there was anyone to hear it, and the strangest fact in the whole arrangement is that the one creature made in God's own image is the one who somehow forgot the tune.

This book has been an invitation to remember it.

You were made for this song. Not the performance of it, not the trained and polished version of it that belongs to choirs and professionals, but the song itself, the continuous worship of a creation in love with its Creator, the song David heard so clearly that he pitched a tent to make sure it never stopped, the song the angels are singing around the throne at this very moment with the veil worn thin between their world and yours. You were made to join it. The only thing that has ever kept you out is the lie that it was for someone else.

It was never for someone else. The last line of the great songbook of the people of God does not set a single condition that you cannot meet. It does not ask for talent or training or a good voice or the ability to read a note. It asks for one thing, the one thing you have been doing without thinking since the moment you were born and will do until the moment you die. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

You have breath. That is the whole qualification. Tomorrow morning, before the day takes you, sing something. A line of a hymn in the shower. A Psalm prayed slowly in the car. The Sanctus on Sunday, out loud this time, in the throne room where you have been standing silent for years. It does not matter how it sounds. The stars are not grading you. The angels are not waiting for you to hit the note. They are only waiting, as they have always been waiting, for you to remember that the song was always meant to include your voice, and to finally, after all this time, open your mouth and join in.

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