

Have We Come All This Way for Birth or Death?¹ **Liturgical Music as Prophetic Ministry**

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The prophet announces to the world what must die in order that the Kingdom of God be born. In its very doing liturgical music participates in this death-resurrection mystery which lies at the core of Christian identity and mission. How does liturgical music participate in the prophetic mission of the church? How can we in our ministry of music-making be faithful to this mission?

In this presentation I bring together two theological strands that stand at the heart of the mystery of Christ and of the church: prophetic ministry and the paschal mystery. I weave these two areas of thought together to build a foundation for exploring liturgy as the central prophetic act of the church. I then use this perspective as the lens through which to explore liturgical music as a prophetic ministry that challenges the church to be faithful to that death-resurrection mystery into which she has been baptized.

The Mystery of Christ

In the mystery of Christ we see fully and definitively that God simply could not stand at a distance. The God who said to Moses: “I have seen the suffering of my people, I have heard their cry, and I have come to deliver them” (Ex 3:7–8) fulfilled this divine word with an unprecedented gesture of personal presence, disrobing Self of divine trappings and taking on human vesture (Phil 2: 6–7). The Word became flesh.

By choice this Word completely descended into the poverty of human existence.² This was one meaning of Jesus’ struggle with Satan in the desert. Satan wanted him to cling to his Godhead by exercising divine power over the limitations of human existence. “End your hunger with a miracle,” Satan prodded, “Save yourself from falling to your death by a divine command; make me your god and grab the kingdoms of this world

¹Adapted from T. S. Eliot, “Journey of the Magi.”

²Johannes Baptist Metz, *Poverty of Spirit*, trans. John Drury (New York: Newman Press, 1968) 13–17.

as your own.” Instead Jesus “immersed himself in our misery and followed [humanity’s] road to the end. He did not escape from the torment of our life, nobly repudiating [humanity]. With the full weight of his divinity he descended into the abyss of human existence, penetrating its darkest depths. He was not spared from the dark mystery of our poverty as human beings.”³

Christ’s Prophetic Ministry

Fully divine, Christ knew from the inside God’s vision for the world; fully human, he knew how wantonly human beings stumble instead in darkness. Like the prophets before him, Christ was driven not by anger at human beings, however, but by anguish over their plight, which he knew to be in some ways willfully chosen and in others unconsciously programmed.⁴

Like all prophets, Jesus saw what God intended the world to be, and he saw how prevailing systems of alternative dreams and expectations generated a consciousness that co-opted this divine vision. Every culture, every language, every socio-political system, every religious ideology eventually and inevitably counters the vision of the Kingdom of God with an alternative and enticing vision of its own. The people, poor and rich alike, oppressed and oppressor alike, have’s and have-not’s together become inebriated with a prevailing and saturating consciousness that counters the promise of the Kingdom of God with the promise of an alternative satisfaction. Desperate for life, the people drink up. To appease hunger, we eat more; to overcome inadequacy, we spend more; to assuage grief, we seek revenge. Caught up in this prevailing consciousness we fail to see the falsehood of its promises. Even more, in our frenzy to obtain these satisfactions we become blinded to the consequences our choices bear for the others who share this finite planet on which we live. We are unable to see that the more we eat, the less others have to eat; the more we spend on the frivolous, the less others have for basic sustenance; the more energy we put toward revenge, the less we have available for genuine justice.

³Ibid., 17.

⁴In my remarks here about prophetic ministry I am indebted to the insights of Walter Brueggemann in his 1978 classic theological study *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978). See also my essay “Where Hearts Must Break: Pastoral Musician as Prophetic Minister,” *Pastoral Music* 28/6 (August-September 2004): 21–25.

The prophet weeps because he or she can see that the only way to salvation in this situation is through death. For the Kingdom of God to break in, the prevailing consciousness which obstructs the coming of the kingdom must die. This dying will wreak great suffering for both the poor and the rich, the have's and the have-not's, those who are oppressed and those who do the oppressing. The prophet weeps because he or she sees that this suffering and death is not only inevitable, it is necessary. Only what is broken bleeds, and only what bleeds knows, from the inside, where life truly resides.

Two consequences result within the heart and mind of the prophet, consequences brought to their fullest expression in the actions of God-become-human, the person Jesus. The first is that the prophet loves not only the oppressed but also the oppressor. Underneath the alienation eventually experienced by every prophet is a more pervasive and generative sense of connection with the community and with the God who wills from time to eternity the authentic well-being of every member of this community. Jesus' love for the oppressor was most fully revealed when from the cross he willed not revenge but forgiveness. In his first appearance to the community of his disciples after his resurrection, it was this forgiveness that he sent them into the world to dispense (John 20:21–23).

The second consequence is that the prophet realizes the death of the prevailing consciousness necessary for the coming of the Kingdom of God will require the prophet's own death. Satan attempted more than once to talk Jesus out of this consequence, for the prince of darkness, the ultimate purveyor of every consciousness opposing the consciousness of God, knew that Jesus' descent into death would mean humanity's ascent into divinity. When his direct confrontation with Jesus in the desert failed, he hid his next attempt beneath the love and concern of one of Jesus' closest friends, Peter (Matt 16: 22–23). Jesus was not fooled, however: he named Peter for who he was ("Get behind me, Satan!") and called him to leave behind the false assurances of the prevailing consciousness and enter the mind of God. Immersed in the tradition of the prophets before him, Jesus knew he could not lead the people where he had not first himself gone. Setting his face like flint (Isa 50:7), Jesus turned resolutely toward Jerusalem and the cross.

Christ's Paschal Mystery

The prophetic ministry of Christ was summed up in the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection. On the cross the God who could not

stand at a distance was experienced by God-become-human as utterly and ineffably absent. Jesus gave himself over completely to this experience, and in so doing fulfilled the Trinity's eternally-held vision for humanity that our relinquishing would be our gain, our death would be our resurrection. Into the broken, bleeding heart of Christ, God poured new life. And the unexpected, the unbelievable, the impossible happened. This new life did not seep away through the heart's cracks but mended this heart into a new vessel capable of pouring blood and water out to the farthest reaches of the cosmos and down into its smallest nooks and crannies.

The Mystery of the Church

It is into this mystery that we, the church, the body of Christ, have been baptized. *The Use of the Means of Grace* states this so well:

By water and the Word in Baptism, we are liberated from sin and death by being joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus. In Baptism God seals us by the Holy Spirit and marks us with the cross of Christ forever. Baptism inaugurates a life of discipleship in the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism conforms us to the death and resurrection of Christ precisely so that we repent and receive forgiveness, love our neighbors, suffer for the sake of the Gospel, and witness to Christ.⁵

This fundamental understanding of baptism frees the paschal mystery of Christ from being limited to its historical confines. The historical Jesus of 2000 years ago dies no more. But the body of Christ alive in the world today continually dies and rises as it responds to its baptismal mission to complete the prophetic ministry of Christ's paschal mystery. All of this remains only high theological language, however, if we do not put flesh and bones on it. The issue becomes, how *in fact* do we experience the paschal mystery as the identifying pattern of our Christian living? The answer stretches from the farthest regions to the smallest nooks and crannies. First, the farthest regions. On February 12 of this year a seventy-three year-old member of my religious order, Sr. Dorothy Stang, met her death at the hands of hired assassins in the Amazon forest where she had labored for twenty years to protect the rights of the poorest inhabitants of the forest, as well as the right of the forest itself to continued existence. Some of you here may have perhaps read or heard of her death, for it and its aftermath have been covered extensively by international news

⁵Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *The Use of the Means of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 20:14A.

media.⁶ Dorothy Stang's indomitable fidelity to the mission of Christ and her unflagging love of the poor had made her a formidable figure in the Amazon region where land wars had generated the murder of almost 1500 impoverished people in the past twenty years. Her martyrdom has now made her a formidable figure on the international scene. In an immediate response to her death the Brazilian government declared an 8.2 million-acre region of the Amazon off-limits to uncontrolled logging and cattle-ranching. Furthermore, proceedings are underway to declare her death a federal crime to ensure that it be properly prosecuted and that the situation of oppression and injustice which catalyzed it and the deaths of so many others finally be addressed and overturned. The blood Dorothy Stang poured out not only on February 12, 2005 but on every day of her faithful years among the poor of the Amazon is bearing far-reaching fruit.

Now for the nooks and crannies. My parents are in their late eighties and reside in an independent living unit in a senior-citizen complex. Dad, who is near blind and almost as deaf, has this incorrigible habit of wiping his toothbrush on his trousers after he uses it, instead of (as most people do) rinsing it out under the faucet. The many times my mother has attempted to correct this habit of his have been to no avail. So what does she do? She'd like, she tells me, to wrap a hand towel around his neck and pull it tight! But no, she instead wets a washcloth, stoops down, and wipes his trousers clean. She does this, she tells me, so that when they go out among friends (which they do every day) the dignity of this near blind, almost deaf elderly man will be intact. Every time my mother stoops to care in this way for my father she is pouring out her blood with the blood of Christ. And her blood, too, washes the entire earth with salvation.

But there is more. While Dorothy's blood has already mingled with the blood of Christ, washing the people of the Amazon in salvation, the dying necessary to bring this situation to full resurrection is not yet over. The people with whom Dorothy lived and ministered must find a new leader and a new path. My religious order, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, must pursue a just resolution to her murder, and this will entail concrete decisions that will be costly for us in time, energy, and commitment. The church as a whole must decide to remain faithful to the prophetic ministry of uplifting the poor and preserving the earth in this region of the world. For her part, my mother must deal continually with the situation of my father's increasing debilities. Every day she will have to choose again in realistic terms the meaning of her marriage vows.

⁶As of this writing, for example, a Google search of "Dorothy Stang" yields 111,000 results.

The best way to understand this fundamental aspect of the paschal mystery is to describe it as a dialectic tension between death and resurrection.⁷ I use the term dialectic here in the manner of Paul Ricoeur, who holds that the two poles in any dialectic remain ever-present and that it is their ongoing opposition which generates meaning. This is different from the approach of Hegel, who used the term dialectic to describe a struggle between opposing poles which eventually subsume one another in a new synthesis. For Ricoeur the opposing poles never disappear but continuously generate tension and meaning. As Christians we experience the tension of the paschal mystery in multiple ways in daily life; only rarely do we experience the balance. At some moments in life resurrection dominates, at other moments death has the ascendancy. Neither pole, however, ever cancels out the presence of the other. Both remain, and it is their tension which generates movement forward in discipleship and fidelity. As we struggle with this tension (in terms, for example of sin-reconciliation, unity-disunity, justice-injustice, fidelity-infidelity, etc.) the meaning of our identity and mission as body of Christ engaged in the paschal mystery is constantly clarified and becomes progressively more formative of our self-understanding and behavior.

The core of the paschal mystery *is* this tension between redemption already completed in Christ (eschatology) and the ongoing work of salvation not yet finished in us (soteriology). This dialectic provides a language for capturing what it means for the body of Christ today—the church—to participate in the paschal mystery: “The meaning of the Paschal Mystery and therefore the meaning of Christian living is uncovered by a dynamic (or dialectic) between soteriology and eschatology. Christian living is simply working out that dynamic in everyday human existence.”⁸ The promise of salvation is fully present in Christ who has already passed through death to life, but its fulfillment awaits the free choice of every Christian of every generation. On a day-to-day basis each one of us must face the choice of discipleship, that is, to live out in concrete ways the demands of the paschal mystery. The tension

⁷The notion of the paschal mystery as a dialectic tension is taken from Joyce Ann Zimmerman, *Liturgy as Living Faith: A Liturgical Spirituality* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 1993). See also Joyce Ann Zimmerman, “A Theology of Liturgical Assembly: Saints, Relics and Rites,” in *Liturgy* 14:3 (1998) 45–59.

⁸Zimmerman, *Liturgy as Living Faith*, xiv. Also, 68: “This tension gives the pattern of our possible response to the Jesus event, a pattern characterized by the dynamic functioning as a vital *dialectic* played out in the ongoing realization of the Paschal mystery.”

of Christian living is precisely the pull between fidelity and infidelity, between our resistance to dying and our surrender to it. It is this tension which defines the paschal mystery and defines our daily Christian living.⁹

This very tension is yet another way God embraces our weak and stumbling humanity as it is. God knows how we long for salvation, how deeply we desire resurrection, but also how steadily we resist the death that this fuller life requires. What we resist is the tension built into Christian living. We prefer the prevailing consciousness that seduces us with the message that tension is counterproductive, a negative indicator to be avoided at all costs. And so God marks our journey through the paschal mystery with a sure signpost. We know we are moving in the direction of the kingdom when we find ourselves struggling with the call to die to self. Only where there is such tension is there possibility of deeper transformation in Christ.

The prophetic ministry of the church is the choice to live in this tension, trusting all the while in the promise of God that every dying will be fraught with resurrection. Our participation in the paschal mystery is our prophetic ministry. Marked in baptism by the cross, we have been imbued with God's vision for the world, immersed in the consciousness and compassion of Christ, and empowered to lay down our lives for the salvation of the world.

Liturgy As the Central Prophetic Act of the Church¹⁰

The central prophetic act of the church is the liturgy. This is so because liturgy enacts in the church the new consciousness proclaimed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Over and over the liturgy calls the community of the church to enter new life in Christ through the doorway of death. In the ritual of *anamnesis* the memory of the past challenges whatever in the present impedes God's work of salvation and generates hope for the future. The memory that God brings life out of death energizes the courage of the community, unleashing within it the passion needed to embrace death in order to end suffering and open the human heart to God's justice, freedom, and salvation.

⁹See ELCA, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 23:17: "By God's gift and call, all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus are daily put to death so that we might be raised daily to newness of life."

¹⁰The text in this section is adapted from my article "Where Hearts Must Break: Pastoral Musician as Prophetic Minister," *Pastoral Music* 28:6 (August–September 2004): 21–25.

Liturgy is the repeated, ongoing immersion in the mystery that, having been made one with Christ in baptism, the Christian must die and rise with him for the salvation of the world. The liturgy keeps the members of the church *conscious* of who they are, the body of Christ continually dying to old ways of being so that new ways in Christ may be born.

In the eucharistic rite this dying and rising unfold ritually in numerous ways that bring the dialectic tension of the paschal mystery into complete and liberating balance. What I suggest here is a profound “why” behind the principle articulated in no. 34 of *The Use of the Means of Grace*: “The two principal parts of the liturgy of Holy Communion, the proclamation of the Word of God and the celebration of the sacramental meal, are so intimately connected as to form one act of worship.”¹¹ The “one act of worship,” expressed ritually through the structure of the rite, is the conscious surrender of the gathered body of Christ to the paschal mystery, which defines their identity and shapes their service of God. The very structure of the eucharistic rite brings the two poles of this mystery—the dying and the rising—into perfect balance. Thus the community of the church sees the entire picture and is given the hope it needs to continue its arduous journey toward a kingdom so far in the future.

The proclamation of the word enacts an encounter between Christ and the church who, like the deaf-mute whose ears and tongue Jesus touched (Mark 7:31–37), needs the touch of Christ to open her perception that she may hear and follow a Christ who announces suffering and death as the only way to life. As a human institution caught up in whatever current consciousness is shaping values and perceptions, the church will always resist this revelation in some way. Sometimes she will counter it, as did Peter, with self-defensive denial of its necessity (Mark 8:31–33). Sometimes, like the first disciples, she will allow desires for self-aggrandizement to side-track her from its demands (Mark 9:30–37). Sometimes, like the rich young man, she will simply be unable to give up her current situation (Mark 10:17–22). In the midst of these hedges and hesitations the liturgy persists in the prophetic ministry of proclaiming God’s Word that to gain life we must lose life (Mk 8:35).

In the celebration of the meal the community hears the words of Christ: “Do this in memory of me.” Do this: allow yourselves to be broken apart that the hungry be fed. Do this: allow your lifeblood to be shed that sins be forgiven. In every celebration the ritual calls the community to the prophetic ministry which is never about self, but always about the other;

¹¹ELCA, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 38:34.

never about preserving, but always about pouring out; never about avoiding death, but always about freely embracing it for the sake of salvation.

These are moments of dying, moments when the community is confronted with the need to let go of the current consciousness which endorses self-absorption, self-centeredness, and self-protection. The eucharistic rite never leaves the community in this dying, however, but always takes the community to the messianic banquet, where it encounters and embraces in the fullest way possible its consciousness as body of Christ. Having surrendered to Christ in the proclamation of his word, the community processes to the table of the Lord, eats and drinks his flesh and blood, and becomes one body, healed and whole. Over and over in the liturgy the community learns how a broken body can be glorified.

Thus, within the liturgical rite itself, God's promise of life from death is fulfilled. The ritual fully enacts what all of Christian living is about: conscious surrender to the paschal mystery of death and resurrection. Liturgy forms the community of the baptized in the consciousness that recognizes this mystery as *the* prophetic proclamation.

Liturgical Music as Prophetic Ministry

Having laid the theological foundations in the previous sections, I now offer some pastoral applications to the ministry of music within the liturgy. I do this in three sections. First, I identify some concrete aspects of the prevailing consciousness which impede our entrance into the liturgy and therefore our doing of our prophetic ministry, and I propose ways of dying to self that can take us beyond these false satisfactions to the consciousness of Christ. Second, I raise some reflections meant to help us identify the paschal mystery tensions built into the doing of liturgical music. My purpose here will seem perverse to anyone who does not understand that these tensions are necessary for our salvation. They are part of the dying side of the paschal mystery, and we need to celebrate these tensions as gifts of God's grace. We also need to move through them for their grace to become available to us and to the church. Third, I apply the theology I have developed here to some of the principles pertaining to the use of music as a means of grace found in the ELCA working document *Renewing Worship 2: Principles for Worship*.¹² Time

¹²Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Renewing Worship 2: Principles for Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002) "Music and the Christian Assembly," 23–46.

constraints preclude my addressing all of the principles given in the document, but I hope that what I share here provides a fruitful model for your own further reflections.

Dying to the Prevailing Consciousness

One of the greatest challenges we face in terms of celebrating liturgy well is the current love affair our culture has with noise. We fear silence, perhaps because we intuit that if we allow silence into our personal space we might hear the word of God spoken there. Liturgy, however, requires silence if the community of the church is to hear this word and be challenged by it.¹³ Entering into silence is a way of dying to self because it opens our consciousness to a level of personal presence not possible outside of silence. When we are silent, we lay to rest all our self-preoccupation in order to receive the presence of the other, be that the Other who is God or the other who is the community of the church. For us who lead the music of the liturgy the challenge here is twofold: first, to establish a right balance between the sounding of the music, whether it be the song of the assembly or the music of instruments, and the need for silence; and second, to find the silence that is in the music itself and to allow this silence to inform our manner of doing the music. (I can say a great deal more about this, but that is a whole other presentation.¹⁴)

A second aspect of the prevailing consciousness that impedes our entrance into liturgy is the extreme value our culture places on “busy-ness.” We may complain about having to work sixty- and seventy-hour weeks, but underneath our complaint is actually a boast. Because, you see, we are saving the world with all this work. We canonize clock time as a means of grace. But the prophetic call of the liturgy is to surrender to time beyond the clock, which means surrendering to the salvation of God offered us from the beginning to the end of eternity in Christ. Bottom line, we must die to the image of ourselves as the Messiah. We must move from the agitated busy-ness generated by this self-image to the timeless groundedness offered us in Christ. For us who lead the music of the liturgy, this means putting our work schedules in order by placing them into the hands of the true Messiah.

A third cultural trap that sidetracks us from the prophetic demands of the liturgy is the assumption that more is always better. By contrast

¹³This is why the 2002 revision of the document regulating Roman Catholic celebration of the Mass, *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, contains pointed directives about moments of silence in the liturgy.

¹⁴See my “The Silence of Music,” *Liturgical Ministry* 10 (Spring 2001) 93–100.

prophetic consciousness knows that enough satisfies. We who lead the music can load the liturgy with so much music, so much instrumentation, so much choral embellishment that the presence of Christ never emerges within the rite. The music which is meant to support encounter with the word supplants the word. This is a tricky trap to assess, because for you Lutherans music is proclamation of the word. I think the way out is to do our musical planning always within the broader context of the liturgical year. The liturgical year unfolds sequentially the whole mystery of Christ. During seasons such as Christmas-Epiphany and Easter, that mystery calls for our most elaborate musical proclamation. During seasons such as Advent and Lent, on the other hand, the mystery itself calls for musical restraint.

Living the Paschal Mystery Tensions

To begin, let me repeat that every community, every generation, every culture, every religion eventually accommodates God's vision for the world. What complicates our assessment of this accommodation is that the alternatives offered are always in the name of what is good—thus their appeal. For us who lead the music of liturgy, the question becomes in what ways might we be unconsciously accommodating the prophetic, paschal mystery nature of the liturgy? For example, do we offer only the assembly music that makes them feel good, that is easy for them, that requires no conversion to paschal mystery living? The tension here is the struggle to make the liturgy accessible to the community without accommodating its demands. There will never be a final resolution to this tension; the way to salvation is to keep dealing with this tension honestly, compassionately, and with a willingness to second guess ourselves almost every week.

A second paschal mystery tension built into music ministry is generated by the musical "style wars" that rage in one way or another within every congregation. This, too, is no new struggle, nor does it have an easy, final solution. While many styles of music are accepted in worship, we must nonetheless keep assessing whether every style, or every text, or every manner of performance is capable of supporting the prophetic, paschal mystery demands of the liturgy. The music is meant to collaborate with the rite in calling the community to its own death and resurrection. When a particular style or a specific piece or a certain performance idiom interferes with this liturgical purpose, we must let it go no matter how loudly the community clamors for it. The paschal mystery tension here will sometimes be within yourself as you struggle to make

appropriate musical-liturgical assessments and other times between yourself and someone else who holds a different assessment. You will also experience this tension as you struggle to know when to say “yes” and when to say “no” to a specific musical request. Either answer can be an act of fidelity to the liturgy and to Christ; knowing which answer is the faithful one in a given situation requires careful discernment.

A third paschal mystery tension built into liturgical music ministry results from the need within the church today for greater multicultural sensitivity. The tension resides between the need to ground the local community in those cultural-linguistic forms which enable it to enter into the liturgical rite and the call to lead this community beyond its limited boundaries to the horizon of the universal church. As with the previous tensions I have identified, there is no simple solution to this issue. What I do know is that we cannot paste one community’s culture onto another. The temptation is to use music in facile ways which seem to broaden a local community’s involvement with the universal church, but which in fact condemn that community to live on the fringes of the liturgy. The issue is complex because for generations this dynamic is precisely what many minority groups in the church have experienced at the hands of the majority. Addressing the multicultural needs of today’s church, however, is far more complex than simply using multicultural, multilingual music within the liturgy, and the church as a whole has not yet begun to address these deeper complexities.

Reflecting on the Principles of Music

Principle —5 of the ELCA’s *Renewing Worship 2* document states: “The assembly’s song contributes to the spiritual formation of the assembly itself and its individual members. Used carefully and consistently over time, the song forms communal and individual memory and serves to nurture the faith from one generation to another.”¹⁵ The theological foundation I have presented suggests that the primary spiritual formation of the members of the assembly must be in terms of their ecclesial identity as body of Christ and their baptismal call to adopt the prophetic consciousness of Christ and to live it out in the paschal mystery of their daily lives. Thus the memory to be formed by the assembly’s song must go beyond what is private and individual to encompass the memory of the whole body of the church. This memory is *anamnesis*, that ritual remembering in which the community of the church actualizes in the

¹⁵ELCA, *Renewing Worship 2: Principles for Worship*, 30.

present the saving event of Christ and appropriates this mystery as its own.

You will know if your choice of assembly song “used carefully and consistently over time” is fulfilling this mission when, over time, you see the assembly behaving in ways more and more fully conformed to the mystery of Christ.

Principle M-7 states: “Music serves the word of God by bearing it in audible patterns and forms. Music proclaims and illuminates God’s word, helping it resonate in the hearts and memory of the community and the individual.”¹⁶ How notable that the ELCA’s articulation of the ministry of music gives primacy to the word of God. Clearly, music is the servant, not the master. In terms of the theology I have presented, the overriding pattern and form communicated to the church through the word of God is that of the cross, the paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection born on the brow and within the heart of every baptized Christian. It is this pattern which the patterns and forms of the music must make audible. The overriding question those of you who lead the music of the liturgy must keep asking yourselves is this: Does this music, this song, this style shape this community in the defining pattern of the paschal mystery?

Principle M-13 states: “Those who plan, compose, lead, and make music are called upon to offer their very best to God and the assembly.”¹⁷ This principle addresses the commitment of the church to quality in her music ministry. It calls you who are musicians to hone your craft, maintain your proficiency, and remain conscientious in your planning and preparation. I would add another unspoken but implied layer to this commitment: the “very best” you as a musician can “offer ... to God and the assembly” is your own faithful practice of prophetic, paschal mystery living. It is this way of life which must be the groundswell of any music making in the liturgy. Without this foundation all your music-making will be nothing more than tinkling brass and sounding cymbal.

Have We Come All This Way for Birth or Death?

We have traveled a long road in this presentation. I can think of no better way to sum up than to read to you selections from T. S. Eliot’s poem “Journey of the Magi.” This is the text which inspired my title and, hopefully, now will inspire all of us to continue our paschal mystery journey through death to life.

¹⁶Ibid., 32

¹⁷Ibid., 41.

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory ...

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we lead all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.¹⁸

¹⁸T. S. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi," in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), 68–69.