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Daily Reflection from the Bishop

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The Feast of Saint Hildegard of Bingen
17 September 2020

*Stay Home. Stop the Spread. Save Lives.
If you have to go out, wear a mask.
Your mask is not a chin guard.*

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

One of the losses that many of us have felt in this COVID season is not just the loss of our corporate worship; it is the loss of the music of our worship. The action of singing is a risky business in the time of an air-borne virus, and it is unclear, even when we can re-gather with relative safety for worship in small numbers, when we shall be able to sing together again.

Like so many, I was raised in a home where the air was heavy with music. Neither of my parents played an instrument, but the phonograph cupboard was like a tabernacle. My brother and I were forbidden access to this holy of holies, and the rubrics of playing records were as detailed and precise as those of the high masses that my father celebrated on Sundays and feast days: in those days records and needles were both fragile and temperamental.

From that tabernacle in our living room, as from the tabernacle next door in the church, life flowed, containing in itself all sweetness. Often when we came home, a record would be playing. And whenever my parents entertained, there would be music.

At church there was music (fabulous music); at school there was music (my brother and I were put through the torture typical of families like ours of instrumental training as well as choirs of various kinds); and, increasingly as we got older, there was music among our childhood friends, played on our little portable Victrolas. I just came across some old 45s the other day when sorting out some boxes in the closet, and I have no idea how they survived all these years. Like the pancake that fell behind an old lady's stove during the Hoover administration and was discovered years later, ossified but still recognisable.

Music makes a deep impression on us when we listen to it; but it also impresses itself on us when it is absent. In a conversation recently with one of my oldest friends (he used to sit me on his lap when I was tiny), he told me about his CD collection, and how now, in the pandemic when he cannot leave his small apartment, it has been a life-line for him, for he is surrounded and sustained by music. Our conversation made me realise that I had been missing music more than I had thought.

Some years ago I was visiting a friend who is a bishop in England, and we went to his chapel for Morning Prayer. Instead of reciting the psalms, he played a lovely recording of the psalms for the day, and we followed along in our Prayer Books. That made a deep impression on me, and so not long ago I found the same recording of the entire psalter from the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. Now on the days when I say my prayers on my own, I have music - in this case the matchless beauty of the psalms set to Anglican chant and sung by a great cathedral choir. I also got some recordings of classic settings of the canticles for Morning and Evening Prayer, so I play those too at the appropriate moments in the service. The Anglican musical tradition is unparalleled, and it is wonderful to hear it regularly again.

Saint Hildegard, whose feast we keep today, knew the importance of music, and was herself a significant composer of both liturgical and non-liturgical music. Her compositions, so deeply formed in the plainsong tradition of her time, were yet unique, and she pushed the accepted boundaries of composition. Remarkably we can still hear her music after a millennium, and it is hauntingly beautiful: as one listens one can see in the mind's eye the flickering candles of the monastic church, the dark shadows that cloak the tops of the arches and the ceiling, and the rows of the community in their stalls in the choir.

Saint Hildegard was also a mystic, and she reminds us that there is a deep

connexion between music (and the arts in general) and the mystical tradition. Music can “take us out of ourselves,” in the same way that prayer is known to do for some, and while the true mystical experience is extremely rare, we can have a glimpse of what it might be like in the music in which we lose ourselves in the arms of God.

Here is one of her prayers for today.

*Holy Spirit,
comforting fire,
life of all creation,
anointing the sick, cleansing body and soul,
fill this body!*

*Holy Spirit,
sacred breath, fire of love,
sweetest taste, beautiful aroma,
fill this heart!*

*Holy Spirit,
filling the world,
from the heights to the deep,
raining from clouds, filling rivers and sea,
fill this mind!*

*Holy Spirit,
forgiving and giving,
uniting strangers, reconciling enemies,
seeking the lost, and enfolding us together,
fill these gathered here!*

*Holy Spirit,
bringing light into dark places, igniting praise,
greatest gift, our hope and encourager,
Holy Spirit of Christ,
I praise you! Amen.*

With love and prayers,

+ *Peter*

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