

## **PASTORAL LETTER OF THE DIOCESE OF BETHLEHEM:**

### **SING A JOYFUL SONG TO THE LORD**

**(1 January 1994)**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. Christian singing is unique and rather distinct from other, ordinary singing. Most people have a natural sense for this truth and they, therefore, treasure this proud heritage of their ancestors in the faith. What makes the uniqueness of our Christian singing? It is the fact that it is a solemn form of prayer, expressing in appropriate tunes our praise and thanksgiving and our deep love for God, our need for His help and our trust in Him, to mention just a few of the sentiments expressed in our hymns and songs. At the same time, while singing, we are reminded about important doctrines of our faith and deepen it.
2. The roots of Christian singing lie back in the apostolic times. Traces of it are already to be found in the letters of St Paul, for instance, in that passage of his Letter to the Ephesians (5:14), where he says: 'Wake up from your sleep, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you'. We no longer have the tune to which this short piece was sung, but one can easily recognise the similarity to the short acclamations which we regularly use in our liturgy, e.g. as responses to a psalm.
3. Christian singing has brought something new to the continent of Africa. Naturally musical and gifted with beautiful voices as most people of this continent are, it has been received with enthusiasm. At first, soon after the arrival of the first missionaries, the hymns used in church were mainly translations of hymns sung in the missionaries' country of origin. Often even the tunes were imported from there, and not always did they really suit the local traditional way of singing. Nevertheless, as time went on, many of these early hymns have become a venerable part of our local Christian tradition. However, since the late 1960s, increasingly, hymns have been composed by local Christians, using the traditional musical idiom and thus beginning to build up a repertoire of Christian hymns, which sound much more truly African and invite us to let our whole body enter into the movement of the singing.
4. Yes, from the apostolic times, beautiful singing has graced the celebration of the Holy Eucharist and other liturgical functions in the Catholic Church. St Augustine, who was bishop of Hippo in Northern Africa in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, once said on that subject: 'He who sings with his whole heart prays double'. However, to please God and to edify our neighbour, our singing in Church must be done with a deep love for and understanding of the sacred mysteries which the singing accompanies; otherwise our praying and singing may be compared to the 'babbling of the pagans' (Mt. 6:7) or like the senseless booming of a gong and the clashing of a cymbal (Cor 13:1). For this reason, soon after my appointment as bishop of Bethlehem in 1977, I organised a workshop on church music for those who were choir conductors in the diocese at the time, which was a rousing success. Many of the compositions, which were made then, are still in use today in our congregations throughout the diocese. I would to thank here all those who have helped since then to make

the singing in our liturgical celebrations more beautiful, causing the whole congregation to sing along with devotion and understanding.

5. The need for some people in each congregation making a special effort to make its singing in the liturgy beautiful has led, through the centuries, to the formation of choirs. Its members spent long hours during the week training their voices and preparing the singing for the next Sunday Mass. In the process, they learn new hymns and often even compose new ones. During the liturgies, especially Sunday Mass, they help to animate the singing of the congregation. Thus, if they understand their role properly, they can be real help for the whole congregation.
6. Emphasising the proper role of the church choir, I have often used a paragon when speaking to congregations in our diocese. I said that the choir is like the engine of a car. The car needs the engine, otherwise it cannot move. However, it is also true that the engine cannot simply travel around without the car. It would not only look funny, but it would also render the car useless. Engine and car need each other. In the same way choir and congregation must harmonise with each other. The sole purpose of the choir is to help every person in the congregation to celebrate the sacred mysteries more beautifully. Its one aim must be to make everybody join in the singing. The choir is thus the servant of the congregation not the other way round. The choir is part of the congregation; it is not something apart from it. The members of the choir are not just sound-producers, but they must be respectful, pious participants in the celebration of the awe-inspiring mysteries taking place on the altar. As such, they must be completely knowledgeable about the different parts of Holy Mass and sensitive in the choice of appropriate tunes for these different parts.
7. Thank God, many existing choirs in our diocese do make a real effort to fulfil their proper role as it has been sketched here. Some have even achieved an outstanding standard in the quality of their singing. However, unfortunately, there are also instances where it is obvious that the choir does not understand its role and function in the liturgy and vis-à-vis the congregation:

7.1 Not infrequently members of choirs display a rather irreverent behaviour, talking to each other and laughing, as if thought they only purpose to be in church is to sing and that while not singing they could do what they like. This is especially irritating if the choir is positioned right in front of the congregation, near the altar, where everybody can see it. At times, choir members annoy also by their careless, casual way of dressing.

7.2 Even more frequently one finds choirs grabbing every conceivable opportunity to burst out into singing, even when this is totally inappropriate and unliturgical, like taking the 'In the name of the Father...' at the beginning of Mass out of the priest's mouth, singing the 'I confess' before he has a chance to say it, taking away the congregation's right to give thanks for the Word of God after hearing the readings and shortening its time for the prayer of the faithful by using endlessly repetitive responses after each petition. This is just to mention a few of the abuses, which I have witnessed in person. The list could be easily extended.

7.3 Other choirs have a penchant for using deliberately difficult tunes as if to want to make sure that nobody else can sing besides them, thus turning the congregation into passive and silent listeners.

- 7.4 Still others seem to believe that the beauty of their singing is gauged by the loudness with which it is produced. They remind one of the incident on Mount Carmel where the prophet Elijah mocked the priests of the idol Baal, telling them to shout louder because maybe their god was asleep and needed to be woken up. (1Kings 18:27).
  - 7.5 There have also been cases where a choir seeks to monopolise the right to sing, claiming that it alone has a mandate to sing during Holy Mass and even opposing the priest when he wants other groupings in the parish to be given a chance to animate the Sunday liturgy.
  - 7.6 Not seldom is there also a tendency to turn the choir into a money-making business, taking its members on expensive trips to raise money through giving concerts elsewhere. In this pursuit it can even happen that the choir is not available on a Sunday because it is out of town. Conversely, once a choir has embarked on this course, it happens that it invites other choirs to sing in church on Sunday without the priest having been informed beforehand and even less, been asked for his permission.
8. In order to eliminate these abuses and to impress on our choirs throughout the Diocese of Bethlehem what is their proper role in the liturgy, I hereby issue the following guidelines:
- 8.1 All present and future members of choirs must study this Pastoral Letter carefully and learn from it their proper role in church. Where they find any of their present attitudes or practices at variance with these guidelines they must take the necessary steps immediately to implement the latter.
  - 8.2 I urgently repeat my plea to the young priests in this diocese to plan and conduct a music workshop for all present choir conductors.
  - 8.3 Priests must frequently impress on the choirs in their parish their role of being at the service for the whole congregation.
  - 8.4 Choirs cannot simply appoint their own conductors. Each person, before taking on the charge of conducting a choir during the sacred liturgy, needs the approval of the parish priest.
  - 8.5 Likewise, just having a good voice does not mean that any person may become a choir member. He/She must be in good standing and have the approval of the parish priest for his/her membership in the choir.
  - 8.6 Priests must assiduously watch over proper, respectful behaviour of choir members during the liturgy as well as before and after. Choir members must also display worthy conduct during choir practise in church and on church premises.
  - 8.7 The choir is bound to timeously inform the priest celebrant before each Mass about parts which are to be sung and to accept any alteration he may ask for in view of the constraints of time etc.
  - 8.8 Priests are to give helpful advice to conductors regarding the choice of tunes fitting the different parts of Mass.
9. No choir has a monopoly over the singing in its congregation. If a priest judges it pastorally desirable, other groupings in the congregation chosen by him have a right to lead the singing during Sunday Mass and other liturgical celebration. However, it is understood that these groups must prepare

themselves very well for the occasion and observe the same rules as have been outlined here for the choirs.

10. Under no circumstances shall a choir be allowed to see itself as a sodality. Membership in a choir must be seen as a community service, in line with the service rendered by other lay ministries. For this reason, as from Pentecost 1994, choir conductors will have to express publicly their commitment to witness and service, together with the other community leaders in their parish. No choir in this diocese is to refer to itself as 'Ma-Cecilia' or any other name conjuring the impression that it is part of an association or sodality.

This Pastoral Letter is to read to all congregations within each parish throughout the diocese for the general information of all Catholics in the Diocese of Bethlehem. Specifically, it directs itself to all priests and members of church choirs, for their careful study and immediate implementation.

+HUBERT BUCHER  
Bishop of Bethlelehem