

## Listen... God can be heard in different sounds

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The scene is in the trenches in World War I, an hour before a scheduled dawn offensive: “The priest used the packing case he had been sitting on to hear confessions for his altar, with his portable altar stone and two candles and a crucifix. As he turned and saw in the blur of the candlelight the men’s stern faces sweetly praying, he knew that this was how Mass should always be said, in a great hush and near death. There was no bell to ring at the Sanctus, so the major beat a teaspoon against a tin mug and it sounded quite holy. It sounded even holier at the Elevation, with Christ again in the Host and trembling in the shadows of the wine.”<sup>1</sup>

Another snapshot: the painting The Angelus, Jean-Francois Millet’s masterpiece, shows two French field workers marking the evening hour with prayer. A church steeple on the horizon reminds us that its bell is sounding, claiming all within earshot for the Kingdom of God.<sup>2</sup>

From a much earlier age: “Your statutes have been like songs to me wherever I have lived as a stranger,”<sup>3</sup> reminds us of the power of music to bring ideas to the memory.

Basic to all of these is the insight that human beings are hard-wired to hear and make music to express all the most important movements of their spirits. In our Rule, Benedict takes for granted that the psalms are songs to be sung, which not only makes them easier to remember, but also engages our souls at a deeper level. Joseph Gelineau<sup>4</sup> points out that the act of singing is a mystery; that is, a sacred sign, perceptible by the senses, which reveals and communicates an indivisible reality of the order of grace. He then reviews the kinds of songs that are found in the liturgy:

- The cry of fear or pain is a refusal of despair, and an affirmation that someone exists to hear and help.
- The joyful song is a sign of health and liberty. In the song of admiration, man comes forth from himself in the sound of his voice, carried on the breath from his inmost self, towards the object of his praise.
- The rhythmic recitation of wise sayings imports to the reciter an appreciation of order, a demand for justice, a love for a harmonious way of life. Just as a child will tirelessly repeat what it wants until its desire has become fact, so the person of faith, singing the word of God, transforms himself into that supreme activity which is divine wisdom.
- Singing together both manifests and constitutes a community. It shows that a community is gathered, and it binds the individuals in a renewed unity.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Marshall, The World, the Flesh, and Father Smith, 1945, p.75

<sup>2</sup> Romano Guardini, Sacred Signs, chapter on bells.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 119:54, Book of Common Prayer

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Gelineau, Voices and Instruments in Christian Worship, passim