

A Coffee with Alessio



Christmas Time

Before I continue, apologies in advance for the longer column today, but since it's the final one for the year, there are a few topics I need to include. Those of you who know me well will know that I'm a bit shy and normally I don't have much to say (or write) but today is an exception. :)

As I mentioned at the end of last week's column, school broke up on Friday for the staff. It goes without saying that 2020 went in a completely different direction than anyone could have imagined. Here at the Centre for Liturgy (CFL) we grappled with preparing and delivering workshops using on-line platforms. Using on-line platforms for music workshops does not always deliver the best results, but it was a way of keeping in touch with our parish musicians. The on-line platform meant reorganizing our workshop topics and in some cases cancelling some topics for this year. As I look back on this year, the last workshop we had with people in attendance was the Music Reading Course way back in March. We just got the last workshop of that series in before everything began to shut down rapidly. That series of workshops gave us much joy here at the CFL, as we worked with people who came to us with little or no knowledge of reading a music score. When the course finished the participants had grown in confidence and their ability to read and understand musical notation. We hope they have been able reinforce the skills and knowledge learnt in this course back in their parish communities. We didn't get out to parishes as we had hoped to, but that will be something we would like to do next year to better assist parish musicians with their various needs.

Our major project for 2020 which came out of the COVID-19 shutdown was to prepare prayer resources for the various feast days, including prayers and readings from the Missal, together with a biography about the saint and a practical application of that saint's example to our current time and place, combined with a hymn text that is about the saint or feast day that contains a practical application to our lives. For the most part we set these hymn texts to existing tunes, and then we had them recorded. There are even hymns for some of the feast days within the Octave of Christmas and other feasts of the Christmas Season. Next year we aim to write an original Christmas Carol – text and tune. Whilst there has been a tight turnaround with these resources and hymn texts it has been a privilege to be able to undertake this work. We will continue that work next year and hope to have an opportunity to refine the work we did this year. There is always room for improvement and with some reflection time we aim to streamline these resources. They are available on our website for

you to use. Writing hymn texts for feast days where there was no set text is something I always wanted to do.

I always aim to be better prepared when it comes to the end of the year, but somehow this year seems to be busier than last year. The final weeks of the school year have many events in them and then of course outside of that are rehearsals to prepare music for Christmas and various other liturgies and events. At the same time of wrapping this year up we are making sure things are in place for the beginning of next year so that we aren't starting a new year with everything being organised at the last minute.

As I am writing this final column for 2020, I am mindful of three things: giving thanks to God for the blessings of this year, looking ahead to next year with many hopes and aspirations, and reflecting on what have I learnt from this year particularly in those situations when things did not go to plan. Recently, I was having a chat to a friend who told me they knew God was present in their life when they were saved from disasters happening. That is so true for all of us. Thanksgiving is an important part of prayer. In disastrous situations we need to take a step back and see that the Lord is present to us. That is not to say we don't struggle or find things challenging or that we won't be overwhelmed by certain events, but rather to give thanks to God for what we have received rather than thinking about what we haven't.

Looking ahead to next year, we will continue with our Zoom workshops and also our prayer resources that I mentioned above. We will soon have to start thinking about Lent. Lent, you say. We haven't got to Christmas yet. Yes, Lent is only two months away, so we hope to have some resources out by the beginning of February. Looking ahead to next year, I think something that is important that we are open to the unknown possibilities. That is, if something unexpected happens let see where it may lead us. New friends may be made and new skills may be learnt. I always aim to make new friends each year. New friends bring so much to our life and in turn if we are a new friend to someone hopefully we can enrich and bless their lives also.

This year I have had to learn be to more trusting, especially when everything was in upheaval earlier in the year. I really have been blessed with good family and friends. There are friends who really do look out for me and who do pastoral care for me and to them I am most grateful. It is good to know that people care! God's hand is at work in those people and are a reminder of the blessings the Lord bestows on us.

So, as we again prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ and liturgical musicians work hard to prepare good quality music for the Christmas liturgies, let us combine this work of liturgical music with our prayer to make the music we enact in Church to be part of our prayer. Hopefully, our music will inspire someone to believe in Jesus and proclaim His Good News in our world. Speaking of preparation, when I finish writing this column it will be deep-clean time here at the CFL, which includes wiping surfaces down with eucalyptus oil. Eucalyptus gives a pleasant fragrance and kills all the bugs. People always complain to me about using it and how it spoils their day, but I continue to use it anyhow.

Before I get onto my coffee and cake suggestions, I can't ignore the fact that last Wednesday (16 December) was Beethoven's 250th birthday. Whilst he is better known for his

symphonies than his liturgical music, we often sing various texts to his "Ode to Joy". That tune has become a staple of our liturgical music repertoire. Happy birthday Beethoven!

Speaking of birthdays and Christmas, Christmas Eve marks the 245th anniversary of the foundation of the Presentation Sisters, when Nano Nagle and three companions took vows and formally began the work of this Religious Order. At some time in the future, I will go into the whole story of Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters, but to cut a long story short, Nano became known as the "Lady of the Lantern" as she carried her lantern at nighttime in the streets of Cork attending the needs of the poorest in society. Just as Christ was born to bring light into a darkened world, so too did Nano bring the light of Christ to those who found themselves in less than pleasant circumstances. To the Presentation Sisters, we wish you a happy anniversary day for 24 December. We continue to pray that God blesses you all and your ministries.

Now to a coffee and cake. I am hoping to try a few different cafes during the Christmas break. The café that is coming to mind for Christmas is The Coffee Club – "Where will I meet you?" is the question they ask and that is the same question that the Christ Child is asking you and me. Hopefully he will meet us in the liturgy this Christmas and then at our various gatherings and meals as we celebrate his birth with great festivity. The pancakes at the Coffee Club are on my "to-do list". If you have a favourite place that is worthwhile please let me know. In the meantime, the pancakes at the Coffee Club will help me celebrate the Christmas Season.

As we prepare for the sun to set on this year, let us give thanks to God for the blessings he has given us in so many ways, including the people around us who support and care for us. Let us be thankful for the gift of music – what would Christmas be without Christmas Carols. We can use Christmas Carols in the liturgy until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (Sunday 10 January) which closes the Christmas Season.

The column will be in recess for a few weeks and will return when school goes back next year. It has been a privilege to share my ministry here at the CFL with you all and I thank all of you for your engagement and positive feedback. Well done to you as you serve God and neighbour faithfully in your various ministries. I look forward to doing the same next year. I hope and pray you have a very blessed Christmas and that just as the Wise Men were guided to the Christ Child by a star, may others be guided to Christ by the witness and kindness we show. There are a few native Italian speakers who read this column, so to them I say: "Buon Natale e buon anno!"

Till next year enjoy your coffee and cake!

Alessio Loiacono
Music Field Officer

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