

# Response to the Frederick R. McManus Award

By Richard Proulx

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Dear Colleagues,

It is an honor to be named by FDLC as the recipient of your 2008 McManus Award for which I am most grateful. The pleasure of being with you in person is prevented by a number of pesky health issues for which I ask your understanding. I am grateful to my friend Michael Silhavy for presenting this response to receiving the award.

The thoughts I have to offer are from a composer's point of view - the principal identity of my work and, some might say, notoriety!

In my early 20's, I was privileged to serve as an apprentice at a Saint Paul, Minnesota parish filled with commissioned art works, the best stained glass, vestments and music - all reinforcing a progressive liturgical practice, carefully displaying the best the Church had to offer. This was a parish with its own annotated congregational hymnal dating from 1946 and its own choir school with daily rehearsals. This was my lucky background and it built both a love for liturgy and an eager anticipation of the English Mass texts and rite to come. It was my good fortune to feast on and learn from such a wealth of liturgical practice. We assumed, as did so many, that the new texts of 1963 and 1970 would only enrich the practice. We composers began writing immediately.

Much has happened in the 40 years since. Everything traditional was abandoned and the new texts proved difficult to set to music. But despite hundreds of failed attempts, composers produced by trial and error congregational settings of the new Mass texts, some of it of enduring value, some even of amazing innovation.

Over these 40 years, little by little, American Catholic congregations have begun to sing. It is a small repertoire, but the best of it has proven to be singable and durable, often extending beyond mere call-and-response. Liturgists and musicians working together have indeed produced a good thing!

So here we are again, anticipating another new text but this time with dread rather than joy.

After convincing our congregations to participate actively in singing the Mass, now we propose yanking away 40 years of musical settings. Composers will tell you that the new texts are clumsy and unmusical, especially the Gloria and Memorial Acclamations. It is possible that these new texts will be recited only, not sung.

Among the riches the present 1970 text has brought us is the ecumenical dimension. By sharing a common Eucharistic text, Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists and

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others have been able to share musical resources. Composers in the US, Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand have produced musical settings in English of international value and mutual benefit. Moreover, the resurgence of SELECT Latin works, including some chant) have gradually been re-introduced to the present rite, enriching our musical diet with the best of both worlds. And, while I agree that various levels of singing participation are always possible, I find that, as a composer, I have no interest in a widespread return to a Latin Mass.

Composers who will be expected to produce settings for difficult new texts are only beginning pieces in the coming puzzle. The critical tasks of preparation and learning will fall to talented, well-trained parish musicians.

Where to find them? Good luck! This is a field that is nearly non-existent in a professional way. Any future pastoral musicians taught how to encourage strong community singing, to train choirs and to lead hymn singing with solid, rhythmic organ playing will need to be created. Catholic training institutes and apprentice programs barely exist. And we are still too mousey to send (and pay for) talented students to study with Lutheran, Anglican and Methodist colleagues, who have, after all, become expert at congregational song after 500 years! If we cannot solve this problem, will our liturgical future resort to pre-recorded music? It is already growing in some areas!

Except for cathedrals, most of our parishes have abandoned use of the organ, usually because they are unable to find someone to play it well. And yet the pipe organ remains the most perfect and effective instrument for leading (rather than accompanying) congregational song if we follow the classical rules about how an excellent organ is built, where it is best placed in a proper acoustic and a well-trained player. A lot of "if's" - but the results can speak for themselves.

Composers are usually better at composing than talking about it. So permit me to conclude by restating a few practical points:

1. The challenge ahead will be formidable and we will need to encourage each other's best work.
2. Have faith in the excellence of the best liturgical arts - they will serve our mission well, remembering that it is still possible to inspire people with the very best. Liturgy needs beauty.
3. Be selective in adopting the flood of new material to come: 5% of it will be of enduring value.
4. Rely on talented musicians with innovative ways of introducing, teaching and strengthening the best new music for congregational use.

Renewed thanks for the honor of the 2008 McManus Award. Please know of my gratitude as well as my sincere wishes that the Lord will continue to bless you all in every way. PAX ET BONUM!

*Richard Proulx*