

The Ministry of Music

Fr Liam Lawton, a priest of the Kildare and Leighlin Diocese, and a well-known liturgical composer, links music, prayer and the word of God in the Pope's intention for this month.



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Pope's Intention (evangelisation): We pray that our personal relationship with Jesus Christ may be nourished by the word of God and a life of prayer.

As a composer of sacred music, I am often asked where I get my ideas for songs. I can honestly say that I am only as good as my last piece. I never know where the next piece will come from, but I do know that I will refer always to the word of God. It might be a psalm or a stand-alone piece, or a piece based on the life of a saint, but ultimately it will be based on the word of God.

It is the word of God that nourishes and nurtures my thoughts and themes, and which gives life to any piece I write. I always say that the text is the most important thing, followed of course by the melody or music. Any composer of sacred music is only as good as his /her relationship with the living God. This is what imbues creativity in the composer. This is what, I believe, gives life to any piece of sacred music.

So, how does one become a writer

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of sacred music? I believe that we have to know Jesus, and that we have to have a relationship with him, one which will involve the usual highs and lows of any relationship. This means getting to know him, accepting that there can be periods of isolation and emptiness, but also times when Jesus is very close and understands my fears and worries, my joys and blessings. If I am asked to write a particular piece, I bring the ideas before him and I ask for his help and his blessing.

The Psalms that Jesus himself prayed, King David sang to praise God. We pray one each day during mass and also when we read the Divine Office. We also recite some of these psalms. It is these prayers that have been giving life to our spirituality for thousands of years. Such prayers nourish my prayer life each day.

I also love the ancient Irish prayers, which sustained our people for many centuries, even when it was forbidden to gather for liturgy. Generation after generation handed down beautiful prayers that were full of pathos and also full of respect for Jesus Christ and his mother Mary. The same can be said of their sacred songs. This respect came from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and his mother, who having

suffered themselves, knew what the people were going through.

Many of the prayers were spoken in the Irish language, which itself was infused with a spirituality all of its own, and held that Jesus was God but was also one like ourselves and so understood our human condition. I believe that the writers of such prayers and songs had a deep relationship with Jesus, otherwise they couldn't have written such beautiful things.

We are all called to be saints. As St Paul tells us 'there are a variety of gifts, but the same spirit' (1 Cor 12). When we use such gifts, we are building up the kingdom of God. Some will be called to be teachers, some preachers, some artists, some poets, some musicians, some as healthcare workers. Having a profound relationship with Jesus will help us to accept and put such gifts into practice.

The early Irish Christians talked about 'putting on the mind of Christ, seeing with his eyes, speaking and hearing like him'. As a writer of sacred songs, I am called to be sensitive to the voice of God around me, and to listen to 'what the Spirit is saying to the Churches' (Rev 3:22).

May we always listen with our hearts, so that we too will hear the voice of God speaking to us. 