

Mexico: Mystery, Music, and Faith

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I am grateful to Martin Jean, director of the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, for inviting me here, and am very happy to know that your entire faculty and student body will soon visit my country. I will be among the first to welcome you there.

You already know that Mexico is a profoundly Christian country, and that today all the principal religious denominations are represented. Your other speakers in this Colloquium series will address the Anglican and Protestant presence; since I am a Catholic priest I would like to speak about the Catholic Church. As visitors to my country, you will soon experience the baroque splendor of our buildings and early church music, and the colorful Catholic traditions of our people.

I also come to you as a resident of the largest metropolitan area in the Americas with a population of eighteen million people,¹ and I would like to share what the Catholic community in Mexico City does liturgically during its earthly pilgrimage. We are all fellow travelers on a journey to our eternal homeland. I would like to begin by telling you that I have had the pleasure of serving the Archdiocese of Mexico as a priest for the last thirteen years; I am now the archdiocesan Director of Worship, and every day that passes my commitment to its liturgical life is renewed.

Mexico is a densely populated country of ninety-seven million people, of whom around ninety percent are Roman Catholics, although only forty-five percent can be considered practicing. The country is divided into ninety Catholic dioceses. At the center of the country is the Federal District, which includes Mexico City. It was founded on the ancient Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, the seat of the Emperor Moctezuma II (d. 1520). At the time of its formal foundation in 1531 the Diocese of Mexico took in all of Central America, and extended south all the way to Peru, and west to the Philippine Islands. With the passing of time, of course, it has been reduced in size.

The Archdiocese of Mexico-Tenochtitlán is the largest diocese in the world, with close to eighteen million inhabitants. We have one archbishop and ten auxiliary bishops. The diocese is divided into eight pastoral regions; there are four hundred and twenty-four parishes, and eleven hundred church buildings for worship.²

Since 1992 we have undergone a serious process of re-evaluation and renewal of the evangelization process. We have sought to create a more dynamic community in which the participation and interaction of all the members may improve the experience of the Paschal Mystery—the living and dying of Jesus Christ—in every worship experience. Speaking theologically, through worship understood as the exercise of the priesthood of Christ by all of God's people, we believe that we can effectively re-evangelize our parishes. In other words: good worship evangelizes. Liturgy done well teaches and forms Christians in their identity. Through this work we hope that our parishioners and clergy will intensely experience a life of spiritual conversion. More on this in a moment.

A Lesson from History: Sacred Music in Mexico

First, let me begin with a little history. I will speak of the pre-Hispanic cultural platform of

Mexico, especially that of the Aztecs or, to use the name they gave themselves, the Mexica. They were speakers of the Nahuatl language, which is still used today in some places, even in Christian worship. I would like to address some concrete ideas about music and rituals. These can be, even to this day, applied to musical performance in Catholic churches all over Mexico.

The basic notions of music and ritual before the arrival of Europeans can be summed up in the poetic expression *in xóchitl in cuícatl*, which we might translate as “flower and song.” In Nahuatl *xóchitl* not only means flower, but refers as a metaphor to preciousness, holiness, and the heart of God. It is how beauty and truth are revealed and created through poetic insight. *Xóchitl* is also a day on the Aztec calendar,³ a day for creating beauty and truth, which speak to a heart that knows it will one day cease to beat. “Flower” reminds us of life, of how quickly life fades and passes away (see Psalm 90), and that our homeland lies elsewhere. *Xóchitl* is the call to a fuller life that, for a Christian, can only be found in the One who rose from the dead.

Song, *cuícatl* in Nahuatl, has more connotations; these depend on how it is being used, and on the context. For example: *cuícatlaça* means to tune up, give the tone; *cuícatlaçaliztli* means tuning up; *cuícatlali* means composer; and *cuícatlalia* means to compose.⁴

Thus, *in xóchitl in cuícatl*, “flower and song,” is the way in which people experience the path to actual truth, the way in which people can experience and say true words. In Christian terms we may say that it means to experience the deepest mystery of life, the mystery of Christ. *In xóchitl in cuícatl* is the expression of the human person before the God in whom we live, and move, and have our being.

We can see in the life of the ancient Mexica how this expression was vital to their relationship with their gods. The founding of cities as centers of human culture is said to have begun with drums and song. These dynamics are based on daily life, and on those emotions that we all have at beginnings and endings. In the illustrated codices that the Aztec scribes produced, we see that the poet is a musician, and the musician is a poet. He accompanies his poem on a drum. Out of his mouth come the flower—like speaking—singing glyphs. Held in the highest esteem, the Aztec poet had the responsibility of articulating the people’s “flower and song,” their deepest aspirations, sorrows, and joys.

The encounter of two worlds had enormous implications for the native peoples of Mesoamerica, and also for the Europeans—but this is beyond the scope of my presentation today. In the New World created after the encounter, with all its tears and blood, the native people, now Christianized and baptized, maintained their sense of *in xóchitl in cuícatl*. For them to sing, to dance, to make poetry was to live. A new people was trying to survive and live in a new political-social situation.

Among the most common musical forms that arrived from Europe were the motet, the five-part Ordinary of the Mass, and the *villancico* or carol in all its variants. It was the friars who taught our ancestors how to play European instruments. The first Franciscans arrived in 1523. On the outskirts on Tenochtitlán, in Texcoco, they founded a school for indigenous young men and boys in which the learning of music was the basic subject, together with Latin. Students learned plainchant, organum, instrumental performance, and even how to make instruments, including pipe organs. With their new pupils these friars formed musical groups that performed during the sacramental plays, such as *The Story of Adam and Eve* and *The Conquest of Jerusalem*. The written records state that these indigenous musicians were quite talented. Let me quote one of

the early historians:

These Indians showed no less ability for learning. . . . They soon began to read notes and sing plainchant and also organum [which] they learned all by themselves. Among them are some very facile ones who are good cantors and chapel-masters. . . . No town of a hundred inhabitants does not have cantors who sing Mass and Vespers in harmony and with musical instruments. No hamlet does not have at least three or four Indians to sing the Hours of the Virgin Mary [in Latin or in Nahuatl]. . . . Finally, no musical genre exists in the Church of God that the Indians do not now know. . . . One thing is certain: all the kingdoms of Christendom do not have so many examples of flutes, chirimías, orlos, and trumpets as this kingdom of New Spain. The Indians make the instruments themselves and play them. . . . Furthermore, only a few years after they learned to sing they began to compose carols in four parts by their own invention, and some Masses and other works. Some professional musicians from Spain cannot believe that these were composed by the Indians.⁵

Beginning in the fifteenth century music in Iberia was developing in royal chapels, and groups of musicians were working for a patron like the king, a nobleman, or the church authorities. Specific musical forms were created to fit the diverse ceremonies of courtly and ecclesiastical life. In Spanish America that imported music turned into an extension of European culture. The earliest written music has not survived; we know of it only by way of the earliest historians, who were mostly Franciscans. Texts were not only in Latin and Spanish but also in Nahuatl and all the other native languages of present-day Mexico. We can be certain that all indigenous church musicians were at least bilingual, and some could speak several languages. We are told that there were Indian youths at Texcoco who could even read Greek and Hebrew, and compose poetry in Latin. When priests were lacking in a village the native cantors were often the ones who performed marriages, funerals, and conducted Matins or Vespers. They also had the responsibility for teaching catechism to the children because all doctrine was learned by singing.

Around 1526 some musicians in New Spain requested permission to create a school in Mexico City to teach music and liturgical dance in order “to ennoble the city.” So popular and quick was the growth of musical enthusiasm that King Philip II had to order the clergy to regulate the number and use of instruments and singers.

Cathedrals, convents, seminaries, and schools of religious education were the main musical centers during the colonial period.⁶ Also, we should remember that in missionary centers music was used in the process of evangelization of the natives in the new faith. The Indians always sang their catechism, the Ten Commandments, and all the prayers of the church. They also knew bilingual versions of the great Latin hymns of the breviary; the *Te Deum* was effectively the national anthem before the nineteenth century.

Mexico’s first archbishop, Fray Juan de Zumárraga, began an ambitious music program for the cathedral of Mexico City, for which he requested funds from Emperor Charles V. Cathedral musicians were commonly tested on their ability to perform on the organ, and also on the harp, which was used extensively in the larger churches. The principal composer of New Spain in the sixteenth century was Hernando Franco (1532–85), chapel-master of the cathedral of Mexico between 1575 and 1585.

We can say that the most important contribution of composers during the colonial period was in regard to the carol or *villancico*, and hymns of praise in the vernacular. During the seventeenth century both carols and hymns experienced the influence of African and indigenous elements that are very important in considering what Mexican music is today. When you are in Mexico City you may want to visit the archives of the cathedral and see examples of the Mexican carol found in a hand-written book with over three hundred polyphonic compositions, most of them signed by Gaspar Fernández (c. 1570–1629). Other prominent composers of New Spain were Fabián Pérez Ximeno, Francisco de Vidales, Francisco López y Capillas, José Agurto y Loaysa, and Antonio de Salazar.

The baroque period favored the development of important dramatic expressions, such as operas, operettas, and other smaller works. This period also saw the flourishing of new instrumental music, cultivated in churches as well as in the courtly life of the upper classes. In the seventeenth century we see a fully consolidated Mexican musical expression. In the cathedral, Matins effectively became the “concert hall” debut for modern musical premiers. Two of the most famous names that are remembered from this period are Manuel de Sumaya and Ignacio de Jerusalem. I understand that you will have speakers here at Colloquium who will tell you more about their music, so let me turn now to present-day Mexico City and speak about our challenges and possibilities.⁷

The Present Moment

First of all, I have to say that the sky is not as blue as we would like it to be. By this I mean that the current state of liturgical music and worship needs much improvement. The present reality of liturgical music is a matter of concern for all of us who have a responsibility in the church.

As you will note when you visit, it is obvious that God’s people in Mexico enjoy celebrations with song, instrumental music, and art. In this we are in a privileged position because of our long and rich musical traditions, our splendid buildings, and the Mexican’s instinct for vivid color and sound. Mexican Christians are happiest when they sing and play instruments to the Lord in worship. At the same time situations exist that make good liturgy very difficult.

The diverse economic, social, cultural, and political realities of Mexico make it hard for people who are well prepared academically to make a living in the church. We have to take into consideration factors as diverse as economic survival, political instability, polarization in social and economic contexts, and a strong national identity. All of these factors are huge challenges to our religious leaders, including, of course, our liturgical ministers of song and music.

Let me be more specific about the realities of pastoral musicians and liturgical ministries in my archdiocese. You will notice a sharp difference between us and the more affluent churches of Europe and the United States.

Even though pipe organs were legion in Mexico from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, only two hundred of the eleven hundred church buildings in Mexico City have an organ today, either a pipe organ or an electronic one. For better or worse this has necessitated some replacement by other instruments, principally portable electronic keyboards and the guitar. The guitar currently holds a dominant place in liturgical music-making. This is not strange when we consider that this instrument has long been embedded in the very core of the Mexican musical tradition. It has the advantage of being easy to learn, and, of course, is much more economical

and friendly towards the limited resources of the parish in terms of space and maintenance. What would you do if you were a pastor without any money?

In my opinion our professional cantors are well prepared in the Institute of Liturgy, Music and Sacred Art of Mexico City, which is affiliated with the Institute of Sacred Music in Rome. It has existed for thirty years. A class, averaging twenty-five musicians, graduates every year from this school. Their formation takes on average six years for a master's degree in their specialty. Some church musicians have also come to us from the National Conservatory of Music, where they receive either a bachelor's degree or a master's in music.

But the reality after graduation is not very happy. Most parish communities do not have the resources to finance even the most basic things, let alone good music-making. Professional musicians, regardless of their love and dedication, are forced to survive on the little that communities can give them. In general terms, these musicians receive a "compensation" of between twenty and thirty dollars per service; in a month they certainly do not receive more than five or six hundred dollars, and they frequently have to supplement their income by performing in restaurants or bars. This endangers the development of good liturgical music.

In very few places are musicians well paid for their services. Only in the metropolitan Cathedral and the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe—these have two or more organists, and a school of boy singers—is the pay adequate. I am the master of ceremonies at the Cathedral for all of the archbishop's events, and I frequently assist in the Basilica. In my opinion, to take part in a musical service in one of these places is to experience heaven on earth: beauty, harmony, liturgical environment, art—everything comes together to put us in touch with the Divine. At the Basilica, for example, for the cantor to lead six thousand people in song at just one of the many daily Masses, and without any hymnals, is not uncommon. If you were the music minister at the Basilica, what would you do, and how would you do it?

Amateur musicians, on the other hand, make up the largest and most complex group in the four hundred and twenty-four parishes of the archdiocese. In many cases choirs form spontaneously, and what they care most about is being able to sing in a celebration, even if their preparation has been minimal. Their lack of formation about liturgy, as well as music, almost ensures that their good intentions will produce a disastrous performance. But they sing and play with enthusiasm and joy. They are always available for the different events, and, although they do not receive any kind of monetary compensation, they are faithful in serving their parishes.

For both groups, professionals and amateurs, we provide technical training in a one-month summer course during July. In this way the archdiocese organizes and supports the work of young people who are sent to us by their pastors. The parishes or participants pay the equivalent of one hundred dollars in order to cover the expenses of the workshop. Improvement can easily be seen. Every year we have around sixty new ministers of music, but the needs are still great. We do not give up, but we are unable to do as much as we wish. If we had at least a pair of choirs in every one of the eleven hundred churches, with ten members each, we would have twenty thousand liturgical musicians in Mexico City alone! Then again, not all of them might be properly educated musically, liturgically, and spiritually. The challenge is great. What would you do if you had my job as archdiocesan director of worship?

Much of our work in past years has been to translate and adapt music from Europe. For example, today we want a Spanish version of the Latin Gregorian chants found in the *Graduale*

Romanum. This will take time, but will be worth it.

Mexican experience in the use of hymnals and songbooks has been altogether varied. After the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council collections arrived from Spain that proposed a practical solution to the use of Spanish in liturgical song. Thousands of compositions (of unequal quality) have appeared in every one of the seventeen Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America. Hundreds of books, booklets, and leaflets are available, sometimes without proper musical notation. The National Department of Liturgical Music has tried some practical solutions. We are working on a National Liturgical Hymnal, which will appear in five volumes. It will, I hope, provide the best hymns and songs currently available. I know that the United States has more than one Spanish-language hymnal for use in parishes here.

On a yearly basis a National Congress of Sacred Music is held somewhere in our country. Focusing on a particular theme, the participants work throughout the week in lectures, discussion groups, and workshops. The last congress was held in February of this year with the theme "The Spirituality of the Liturgical Musician." The goal is to follow up with a topic like "The Mystical Body sings the Glory of God."

Certainly good liturgy and good liturgical music cannot exist without the cooperation and support of an educated clergy. For that reason we have developed workshops every two months just for priests and deacons. At first few came, but now the workshops are well attended. Priests are beginning to realize that good liturgy evangelizes, and that they need the support of trained laymen and laywomen in order to have good worship experiences in their parishes.

Spirituality of Liturgical Ministry

Finally, I would like to say something about what we are trying to form in our pastoral musicians in Mexico, that is, a spirituality of the musician, and indeed of all liturgical ministers.

Here are the principals out of which I do my daily work, and which I commend to our good and generous people of Mexico City. As I see it,

The liturgical musician or artist is a minister of the glory of God, and makes something of that glory experienced in worship.

He or she is a servant, always at the service of God and the People of God.

The musician, artist, or poet is first and foremost a contemplative mystic who stands in awe before the mystery of the living God.

Liturgical prayer, and above all the Eucharist, must be the font of all inspiration and the apex of all Christian action.

A true liturgical spirituality converts the musician, artist, or poet into a translator and communicator of the mystery that is celebrated and sung.

With his or her gifts, the minister advances and anticipates the doxology that will be sung before God throughout eternity.

The liturgical minister lives fully and joyfully his or her "Amen."

We know that in the early church persons entrusted with the role of singer in the liturgy were instructed in these words: “See to it that what your mouth sings you also pray; that what you pray, your heart also believes; and that what you believe in your heart is shown in your daily life.” My hope is that all of you will find your own calling in music, art, poetry, or theology, and use it for God’s glory and for the life of God’s people. May you all be *in xóchitl in cuícatl*, living “flower and song.” Amen.

Welcome to Mexico!

ENDNOTES

1. The total population of the greater Mexico City area, known as the Federal District, is estimated at 28.5 million people.
2. See <http://arzobispadomexico.org.mx/>
3. See www.azteccalendar.com/tonal/Xochitl
4. See Remi Simeon, *Diccionario de la lengua Náhuatl o Mexicana* (México: Siglo Veintiuno, 1997).
5. Jerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana*. Facsimile ed. (México: Porrúa, 1971), 410–14.
6. See Robert Stevenson, “La música en el México de los siglos XVI a XVIII,” in *La música de México*, ed. Julio Estrada (Mexico: UNAM, 1986), and Lourdes Turrent, *La conquista musical de México* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993).
7. For more on the liturgical and musical “conquest” of Mexico, see Jaime Lara, *Christian Texts for Aztecs: Art and Liturgy in Colonial Mexico* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

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