

7-9-2021

Christ, Be Our Light: An Epiphany Encounter

Marie T. Racine OSB

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mtracine@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation

Racine, Marie T. OSB. 2021. Christ, Be Our Light: An Epiphany Encounter. *Obsculta* 14, (1) : 28-47.
<https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol14/iss1/6>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Obsculta* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

ABSTRACT:

Can hymn singing during liturgy affect the worshipping community's life in the world? This paper proposes that singing the hymn *Christ, Be Our Light* by Bernadette Farrell during the liturgy of the Feast of the Epiphany can help transform the hearts of the worshipping community and compel its members to the social action highlighted in the hymn. An examination of the theology of the Feast through the lens of its proper prayers, a theological and literary analysis of the lyrics and analysis of the musical setting of the hymn reveal a strong connection between hymn and Feast. A theology of hymn singing influenced by Martin Heidegger, Don Saliers, and others is presented, affirming the transformational power of congregational hymn singing.

Christ, Be Our Light An Epiphany Encounter

by Sr. Marie T. Racine, OSB

*See, darkness covers the earth,
and thick clouds cover the
peoples. (Isaiah 60:2)*

These words spoken to the Israelites by the prophet Isaiah echo in our world and church today. We live in a world troubled by violence, abuse, war, racial, ethnic, and religious tensions, political division and much more. The global refugee crisis exposes the darkness of violence, war, oppression, and persecution. Millions of men, women and children are fleeing their countries in search of a better life. Displaced, poor, hungry, and desperate for refuge, their dreams are dashed when met by hostility and rejection at the border of their hoped-for haven. Oppression and persecution continue at the border and many who enter, viewed with suspicion, distrust, and prejudice, may live in poverty and fear of deportation. Their lives are at the mercy of the country they desperately want to call home.

A blanket of darkness has covered the Catholic Church as well. The staggering reality of the clergy sexual abuse crisis has exposed a culture of secrecy and abuse of power hidden in clericalism. Victims and

families have been traumatized for life. Betrayed by their accused brother priests and bishops, faithful clergy are angered, disgusted, disheartened, and ashamed. Many faithful church-goers are bewildered and disillusioned. Disappointment, anger, and mistrust in the institution they have loved, many people, including young adults, are turning away from the Church. In this great spiritual crisis, the Church is in great need of the light of Christ.

Is there a remedy to these situations? Can the community of faith help to lighten the burden of these suffering people? In this paper, I propose that singing the hymn *Christ, Be Our Light* during the liturgy of the Feast of the Epiphany can help transform the hearts of the worshipping community so that in coming to the aid of these broken people, the light of Christ will shine through the darkness of this time. The theology of the Feast of Epiphany will be presented, followed by a theological and literary analysis of the lyrics and analysis of the musical setting of the hymn *Christ, Be Our Light*. A theology of hymn singing precedes the final section which weds the Epiphany liturgy with the hymn to suggest that when this hymn is sung during this particular liturgy, it contributes to the transformative power of the liturgy.

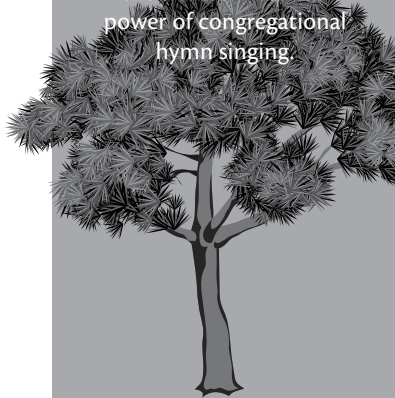
THE FEAST OF EPIPHANY

The Feast of Epiphany evolved in the East and the West between the third and sixth centuries. Various aspects of revelation that constitute its theology can be found in its liturgical prayers and Scripture readings.

As suggested by its name, a primary theology of this feast is one of "manifestation." The Collect for the Mass During the Day contains a summation of this theology.

*O God, who on this day
revealed your Only Begotten Son to the nations
by the guidance of a star,
grant in your mercy that we who know you already by faith,
may be brought to behold the beauty of your sublime glory.¹*

¹ "The Roman Missal," (New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 2011), 50.



The clause “on this day” indicates that it is not only a remembering of a past event, but the event is made real in the life of each member of the worshipping community today.² It is a celebration of God revealing his presence in his Son to all of humanity and to the church; the kingdom of God is among us today.³ This manifestation of the Son of God was aided by a star. An “earthly, temporal sign,” accessible for all to see, was used to point to the Son of God.⁴ The star was set as a guide to lead all nations to God, who desires that all people know his Son, and enter his kingdom. The invitation is universal.

The Magi needed the guidance of a light outside of themselves to receive this revelation, whereas we, the baptized people of God, “already know [God] by faith.” The future tense of the final phrase, that we “may be brought,” may imply that God will manifest himself to us at the end of time, but God may also break into our present lives as we seek to find Christ wherever he is revealed in the world.⁵ We pray that “we walk by [the light of] faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7), led forth to finally contemplate “the beauty of [God’s] supreme glory.”

The theology of “light” pervades the prayers and Scripture of this liturgy, revealing this feast’s connection to baptism. In the First Reading from Isaiah, light is a sign of God’s presence breaking through the darkness and shining only upon the Lord’s chosen people, exercising his saving action. God’s chosen people will become a light to the nations, drawing others to God.

*Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come,
the glory of the Lord shines upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth,
and thick clouds cover the peoples;*

2 John H. Tietjen, “The History of the Epiphany Season and the Propers of the Feast of Epiphany,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 24, no. 12 (1953): 920.

3 Martin Connell, *Eternity Today: On the Liturgical Year*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (New York, NY: Continuum, 2007), 188.

4 Adrien Nocent, OSB, *The Liturgical Year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany*, ed. Paul Turner, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell, 3 vols., vol. 1, *The Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 224.

5 Daniel McCarthy, OSB, *Listen to the Word: Commentaries on Selected Opening Prayers of Sundays and Feasts with Sample Homilies* (London: The Tablet Publishing Company Limited, 2009), 14.

*but upon you the LORD shines,
and over you appears his glory.
Nations shall walk by your light,
and kings by your shining radiance. (60:1-6)*

The present tense of the first two sentences invites the Church, the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:21) to hear this good news spoken to them in the present. We, too, will become a light to the nations. The Preface furthers this idea.

*For today you have revealed the mystery
of our salvation in Christ
as a light for the nations,
and, when he appeared in our mortal nature,
you made us new by the glory of his immortal nature.⁶*

When Christ “appeared in our mortal nature,” he broke into the darkness of humanity, and God gave us a share in Christ’s divine nature. In this “divine exchange,” humanity was made new. Having received the light of salvation in Christ in baptism, the Church is made new again “today” as Christ once again breaks into our darkness with his saving light (Eph 5:8-9, 13-14).⁷

Being made “new” implies transformation, another important theological theme of the Feast of Epiphany. Psalm 72 describes the kingdom which the chosen people is called to become under the leadership of the ideal king, who will rule with justice and judgment (1-2), and justice and profound peace will prevail (7-8). In his kingdom, social and political norms will be transformed.⁸ It is the poor, lowly and afflicted that the king will hear, pity, rescue and save (12-13). This is the kingdom that the Church is called to help bring about today. Christ is our king.

Once we receive the light of Christ, and recognize Christ as the light of the world, “we have no other option than to give ourselves over to it.”⁹ The pagan Magi offer a stunning example of this. After worshipping the baby king, and

6 “The Roman Missal,” 396.

7 Nocent, *The Liturgical Year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany*, 223.

8 Irene Nowell, OSB, *Sing a New Song: The Psalms in the Sunday Lectionary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 268-69.

9 Timothy P. O’Malley, “The Invisible Light of the Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord,” <http://sites.nd.edu/oblation/2012/01/04/the-invisible-light-of-epiphany-and-the-baptism-of-the-lord/>.

giving their gifts, they “departed for their country by another way” (Matt 2:10-12), possibly suggesting that so changed by their encounter with Christ, they could not return to their former way of life. So, too, with the Church, as she prays the Prayer after Communion on the Vigil of Epiphany.

*Renewed by sacred nourishment,
we implore your mercy, O Lord,
that the star of your justice
may shine always bright in our minds
and that our true treasure may ever consist
in our confession of you.*¹⁰

Doing the work of God’s justice is counter-cultural. We need the Eucharist to renew and sustain us, to fill us with Christ’s light of justice. We beg for God’s grace to allow Christ’s light to always illumine and guide our thoughts, our discernment, and our actions, transforming us to do the work of God’s kingdom in the world. Another gift illumined by this Feast, is the revelation of our “true treasure,” that which reflects our inmost being.¹¹ This is “where our heart is” (Matt 6:21). Filled with the light of Christ, our true treasure is found in proclaiming Christ and his kingdom to all people.

The Solemn Blessing reminds us of responsibilities wrapped in the gift of Christ’s Light.

*May God, who has called you
out of darkness into his wonderful light,
pour out in kindness his blessing upon you
and make your hearts firm
in faith, hope and charity.*

*And since in all confidence you follow Christ,
who today appeared in the world
as a light shining in darkness,
may God make you, too,
a light for your brothers and sisters.*¹²

10 “The Roman Missal,” 51.

11 Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: HarperPerennial ModernThought, 2008), 177-78.

12 “The Roman Missal,” 528.

The call of our baptism is renewed in the celebration of the Feast. We recommit to living the Christian life of faith, hope and charity in concrete ways, with unwavering strength. Filled with the light of Christ, we must continue to follow him and his light so that we will be the light of Christ for others. God’s constant grace and blessing will transform our hearts to do his work. This Blessing is a type of commissioning. Once we receive the gifts, are reminded of our responsibility, the Church sends us forth to build up the kingdom of God.

CHRIST, BE OUR LIGHT – THE HYMN

Christ, Be Our Light is a very popular hymn, with English and Spanish text appearing in several hymnals. Bernadette Farrell composed this hymn in 1993. She lives in the UK, and is a beloved composer in many Christian denominations “on both sides of the Atlantic.”¹³ A prolific composer of worship music since the 1980’s, she has published over 75 songs and one Catholic Mass with Oregon Catholic Press. “Drawing inspiration from Scripture...Bernadette has a gift for composing richly meaningful, often challenging lyrics and comforting, prayerful melodies.”¹⁴ As a “lead organizer of *CitizensUK*, one of the UK’s most influential organizations for social change,”¹⁵ her passion for social justice is clearly evident in many of her songs.¹⁶

Christ, Be Our Light embodies many of the characteristics of Farrell’s music. Originally composed for the dedication of a church, the hymn’s lyrics are rich in literary devices, Scriptural and liturgical references, and social concern, which all support its message. With its strong contrast between darkness and light and social concern, popular liturgical planning tools provided by Oregon Catholic Press and the National Pastoral Musicians now suggest the use of *Christ, Be Our Light* during Advent, Lent and throughout the year to support liturgical themes such as Christian life, Church, ministry/mission, hope, and the like.

13 Oregon Catholic Press, “Bernadette Farrell,” <https://www.ocp.org/en-us/artists/1092/bernadette-farrell>.

14 Ibid.

15 Catholic News Service, “Catholic Composer Works for Justice on Streets of London,” <http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2010/catholic-composer-works-for-justice-on-streets-of-london.cfm>.

16 Press, “Bernadette Farrell.”

In this section I will discuss the literary characteristics and theological content of the text, followed by a brief description of the musical composition, and how they inform one another to support the message of the hymn.

THE TEXT

The hymn is in verse-refrain form. Its text provides an expansion of the Solemn Blessing. The refrain is its centerpiece.

*Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your church gathered today.*

The connection to the Epiphany liturgy is very obvious as Christ is portrayed with the metaphor of light, reminiscent of the beginning of First Reading of the Feast, Isaiah 60:1-6. The plea, “Christ, be our light!” comes from the particular worshipping assembly “gathered today.” Its exclamatory nature is filled with emotion and confidence, with a sense of urgency in its repetition. The request is not that Christ “give” them light; its members already possess it through baptism. Rather, that Christ “be” their light, illuminating their will and desires, their very being. It is Christ the Light who radiates within his Body, the church, and outward to save us from the darkness of sin which separates us from God. The plural pronouns “our” here and “we” and “us” throughout the hymn refer to the community, the church. But, the plurality of “hearts” indicates the involvement of the individual members.

The first four verses have the following format: The first two lines are divided in half. The first half expresses a “longing for” a particular aspect of life found in Christ, in the kingdom of God. The second half contrasts with an example of the darkness of life without Christ today. The last two lines conclude with a prayer requesting that Christ “make us” more like him in order to bring others to him. Transformation will be involved. Metaphors are used throughout, stimulating our imaginations.

Verse 1:

*Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.*

*Make us your own, your holy people,
light for the world to see.*

The hymn begins with the familiar contrast of light and darkness. Christ is the light that “we” long for as “we” the Church wait in darkness, longing for the promise of Christ: “I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). It is this longing which prompts the exclamatory nature of the refrain. Truth has been concealed at times in our Church and is desperately missing from our society today, especially in the political arena. So, we long for Christ, who is the Truth (Jn 14:6), “the authentic Word of God” that will set us free (Jn 8:31-32).¹⁷ The final two lines echo Isaiah 60:3, and the Solemn Blessing of the Epiphany liturgy, “May God make you, too, a light for your brothers and sisters.”¹⁸ Though the Church is already “a holy nation, a people of God’s own...called out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9), the believers still need Christ to help them continue to be transformed.

Verse 2:

*Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has pow’r to save us.
Make us your living voice.*

The hymn now turns outward to our troubled world, which longs for peace, that can only be found in Christ who “is our peace,” bringing unity through the cross and in his body, the Church (Eph 2:14-16). There are many causes for despair in our world: disease, mental illness, addiction, neglect, poverty. We may put our hope in people, promises, or things. But, it is Christ alone who is our hope (1 Tim 1:1) who will free the world from despair; only Christ’s “word” has the power to save us (Acts 4:12). So we, the body of Christ, ask Christ to “make us” his “living voice.” Through the Holy Spirit working in us, we participate in God’s saving action in the world today by proclaiming the Word

¹⁷ The phrase “the authentic Word of God,” as in *The New World Dictionary-Concordance to the New American Bible*, (World Bible Publishers, 1970).

¹⁸ “The Roman Missal,” 528.

of God in the liturgy, making God's Word incarnate among the assembly.¹⁹ And, we evangelize, proclaiming the good news of salvation to all people, advocating for peace and justice, "speaking" through word, song and action.

Verse 3:

*Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others,
shared until all are fed.*

There is a longing for food and water for a rising number of people living in food deserts or suffering from undernutrition, and the millions deprived of safe drinking water in America and in our global community. But in the kingdom of God, the poor will eat their fill (Ps 22:27). Metaphorically, the spiritually hungry long for justice, affection, fair wages, adequate housing, and acceptance. Jesus, the Bread of Life, alone can satisfy their hungry hearts (Jn 6:35). The spiritually thirsty long for Jesus, the Living Water, who will satisfy their thirst and lead them to eternal life (Jn 4:14). Jesus, the Bread of Life was broken and given away for the life of the world—an act of self-sacrificing love, total self-gift. We, the body of Christ, are to be the bread of Christ, broken through concrete self-sacrificing acts of love, perpetually giving ourselves away through our time, energy, and love, to be "consumed" by those in need. As bread broken, we are transformed, uniting ourselves with the broken people we serve, sharing in their suffering. Christ will take all we have to give and multiply it so that all are fed (Matt 14:13-21) physically and spiritually.

Verse 4:

*Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
walls made of living stone.*

The longing for basic human needs continues. Homelessness and inadequate shelter reflect a dark side of a society unable or unwilling to care for all

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, "The Word of the Lord: *Verbum Domini*," (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2010), par. 7.

of its people. As proclaimed in the Responsorial Psalm for the Epiphany liturgy, in the kingdom of God, the lowly and poor will be pitied, they will be rescued from their plight (Ps 72:12-13). All will have the shelter they need. The spiritually homeless might feel disconnected from healthy relationships, rejected, unable to find a community that welcomes them, where they feel "at home." It is only in God where our soul finds its rest (Ps 62:1); we are all spiritually homeless. Lacking caring relationships, many find themselves spiritually cold. In Christ and through Christ, with each member a "living stone," the church is to be built into a "spiritual house," a "dwelling place of God in the Spirit," with Christ as the capstone, the foundation (1 Pt 2:4-5, Eph 2:20-22). In this spiritual house prejudices are set aside; all are welcomed and sheltered from the storms of life and loved in their uniqueness. This is the kingdom of God in Christ.

Verse 5:

*Many the gifts, many the people,
many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
making your kingdom come.*

The final verse has a different form. The first two lines encapsulate the longing for the kingdom of God expressed previously and give the impetus for the refrain. Upon seeing the light of Christ emanating from Christ's church, many will notice their own longing for the light, and to belong to the kingdom of God. They will come bearing their gifts to help build up that kingdom. This echoes the Gospel narrative of the Magi and the remaining portion of the Epiphany reading from Isaiah 60: "Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you...the wealth of nations shall be brought to you...proclaiming the praises of the LORD," (Is 60:4-9). In the last two lines of the verse, "Let us be" is used rather than "make us" as in the previous verses. Having given themselves over to the transformative process of becoming the body of Christ, the faithful ask for the grace to fulfill their desire to serve one another with the self-sacrificing love of Christ, with a ready willingness to go forth into the world, "making [God's] kingdom come" today.

Farrell's use of contrast and metaphor heightens the message of the text. Contrast exposes the needs and the longings of society that can only be fulfilled in Christ. The metaphors provide a lens for seeing the particular characteristics of life in Christ described in a new way.²⁰ Grounded in Scripture, the metaphors strengthen both the theology of the text and the call to transformation of the Church, individually and communally, that will enable the Church to help transform society into the kingdom of God.

THE MUSIC

The music is wedded well to the text, emphasizing and enhancing its meaning and giving it life that cannot be expressed in the words alone. The melody is intuitive and easy to sing, serving the text well. The first two lines in the verses are set in a lower vocal range, exposing the plight of the people in darkness. The second two lines are set slightly higher as the church is to take up its kingdom-building role. The pitch is raised even higher in the refrain intensifying one's emotions with the urgency of the need for Christ to be our light. Triple meter is effectively employed, using the long notes to underscore the characteristics of life in Christ in the verses, and the words Christ, light, hearts, church, darkness in the refrain. Its steady pulsing rhythm creates a forward motion, evoking the feeling of longing and the desire for transformation. Repetition of the refrain and of the words "longing" and "make us" in the verses serves to imprint this plea and these desires in our memory and in our hearts.

THE INTENTION

One of the goals of congregational song is that it is transformative, "moving us from isolation to belonging, indifference to interest, interest to conviction, and conviction to commitment."²¹ This seems to have been Farrell's greatest intention for this hymn. It is a masterly crafted rendering of *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*.

20 Mark Searle, "Liturgy as Metaphor," *Worship* 55, no. 2 (1981): 106.

21 Brian Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 71.

A THEOLOGY OF HYMN SINGING

For the purpose of this paper, we will primarily consider the theology of hymn singing within a liturgical context, beginning with a brief introduction to the world of liturgy. Liturgy, in general, is creative and transformational; it is a creative act, a work of art.²² Its purpose is for the glorification of God and the sanctification of the faithful.²³ We can say that liturgy creates a realm, or a world, in the midst of the gathered assembly, where we are transported into a meeting of heaven and earth.²⁴ It is here, in this "world" that we, as a believing community, encounter the truth of God and our salvation in Christ, of the presence of Christ in the Word, bread and wine, and in the assembly.²⁵ The encounters have transformational power.²⁶ The ordinary is transformed into the extraordinary in our presence through the power of the Holy Spirit and the risen Christ.²⁷ Being in the world set up by the liturgy is meant to transform us in holiness as we live in it as who we really are,²⁸ the body of Christ giving glory to God.²⁹ Upon returning to the secular world, we see it in a new way, with the eyes of Christ, and can live as the body of Christ.

Hymn singing has a part in the transformational power of the liturgy as well.³⁰ This can be experienced most deeply if the worshiping community were to enter the "world" of the hymn, itself a work of art. This world requires full, active participation. As we fully engage in the singing and willingly "give

22 The phrase "Liturgy...a creative act," as in Susan K. Wood, "Eucharist: Sacrament of Encounter and Transformation," *Sisters Today* 66, no. 1 (1994): 44.

23 Anthony OSB Ruff, *Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform: Treasures and Transformations* (Chicago / Mundelein, Illinois: HillenbrandBooks, 2007), 10. This two-fold purpose of liturgy is contained in Adolf Adam's definition of liturgy which Ruff initially presented on page 3.

24 Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 167-70. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger talks about a temple, and explains that the work of art "sets-up" a world that connects the earth to the supernatural, setting up a work that is consecrated, where the splendor of the god comes to the presence.

25 Ibid., 176-78. Here Heidegger speaks of truth as *aletheia* – unconcealment of a truth occurs only within this work of art, remaining concealed outside of it.

26 Wood, "Eucharist: Sacrament of Encounter and Transformation," 41.

27 Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 191.

28 Ibid., 168. Heidegger states that the temple gives "to men their outlook on themselves."

29 Ruff, *Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform: Treasures and Transformations*, 11. Ruff quotes J. Michael Joncas, "God is genuinely glorified insofar as human beings are transformed in holiness."

30 Ibid. Ruff includes Joncas' caution here that in order to truly contribute to the transformation (sanctification) of the faithful, "liturgical music must be attentive both to text and to liturgical action."

ourselves over to the 'present' of the hymn," we abandon ourselves to the presence of God, and to the truth that is to be revealed, as they are "made manifest" in the singing of the hymn.³¹

Hymn singing is a visceral experience, engaging not only our physical body, but our mind, heart, soul, sight and hearing as well. We breathe deeply from the core of our being, where God resides as the source of our breath; our tone, the sound we add to our breath, comes from that same depth.³² The whole body of the community sings hymns together, breathing in unison and listening to one another, matching pitch, rhythm, and tempo, our bodies intentionally or subconsciously at times moving to the rhythm or steady beat.³³ Fully and deeply engaged in this public hymn singing, our individual voices are blended together into one; our "community voice" emerges and is heard. Thus, community bonds are deepened, identity as and unity in the body of Christ is fostered.³⁴ We are strengthened to live as the Body of Christ in the secular world.

Hymns are poems of faith set to a melody; we sing what we believe, are growing to believe, or hope to believe, declaring what we and the Church aim and hope to be.³⁵ It is commonly said that music is the universal language, or the language of the soul, perhaps it even touches the core of our being where God resides. Thus, when we share in the singing of our faith, these words have more power, and can reach greater depths than when speaking them.³⁶ When we engage the text with intentionality and openness, its truth can penetrate deep into our souls, resonating with the essence of our being. Then, sung communally and repeatedly over time, hymns can become engrained deep in our hearts, shaping our faith, our attitudes, our lives, the way we relate to God, to others, and to ourselves, conforming our hearts to Christ. Don Saliers, a professor of theology and worship, when interviewing a group of older church-going women about their favorite hymns discovered that their current faith

represented far more than intellectual agreement with the message in the words. Their music was "by heart," in the heart, and sung from the heart. Through the practice of singing, the dispositions and beliefs expressed in the words of the hymns – gratitude, trust, sadness, joy, hope – had become knit into their bodies, as integral parts of the theology by which they lived. This knitting of an embodied theology happens whenever Christian congregations sing.³⁷

This understanding suggests that the Christian community will live the truths that were revealed within the world of the hymn when living our daily lives in the secular world, exemplifying *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*.

We know from experience that hymn singing can also tap into the wellspring of our emotions, "voic[ing] not only what we do feel but what we could or perhaps should feel."³⁸ Through the text, the shape of the melody, tempo, and instrumentation, the makeup of the particular assembly, and the liturgical action with which the hymn is associated, the emotions touched or discovered in hymn singing can affirm and inspire our faith, enliven our praise of God, or give meaning, comfort and support for our life situation. But there is more. Some hymns are meant to awaken us to "recogniz[e] the huge gap between the IS and OUGHT TO BE of this world,"³⁹ the already-and-not-yet of the Kingdom of God. These hymns call us to follow more closely the Scripture teachings of justice and peace, to "active solidarity" with the suffering, oppressed and poor in our world.⁴⁰ When the truths of these texts are revealed in our singing, faith can be combined with emotion, convicting us, moving our hearts to conversion, and empowering or even compelling us to social action. Yearning is transformed into action, "'mov[ing] the soul' and hence the social body."⁴¹ Returning to the secular world, the community is empowered to social action that will help build the kingdom of God.

31 E. Byron Anderson, "The Measure of Our Song: Liturgical Music and Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi," *Liturgical Ministry* 11 (2002): 74. Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship, no. 2 also states "singing together in church expresses the sacramental presence of God."

32 Cynthia Bourgeault, "Chanting the Psalms," (Boston, MA: New Seeds, 2006), 32-33.

33 Anderson, "The Measure of Our Song: Liturgical Music and Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi," 73.

34 Martin E. Marty, "The Phenomenology of Hymnody: What Is Going on When Christians Sing Hymns in Congregation?" *The Hymn* 59, no. 3 (2008): 14.

35 Anderson, "The Measure of Our Song: Liturgical Music and Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi," 77.

36 Don Saliers, "Singing Our Lives," in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Pub, 1997), 180.

37 Ibid., 184-85.

38 Jeremy S. Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 302.

39 Don Saliers, *Music and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 53.

40 The phrase "active solidarity," as in Don Saliers and Emily Saliers, *A Song to Sing, a Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 148.

41 Saliers, *Music and Theology*, 47.

Can hymn singing truly transform the Christian community to live the faith they have sung and actively participate in social justice issues? Let us turn to the secular world for an example. A psychological study was conducted to determine if the playing of music with prosocial lyrics would lead to prosocial behavior.⁴² The study conducted at a local café revealed that people exposed to hearing music with prosocial content were more likely to act in a prosocial manner – in this case by purchasing fair trade coffee – than those who were exposed to music with neutral lyrics. The results indicated that “music with prosocial lyrics evokes empathy and prosocial thoughts that lead to a positive appraisal of prosocial action.”⁴³ This prosocial behavior was prompted by simply listening to music sung in the background in a secular setting. One can presume that the worshiping community actively singing hymns concerned with social justice within the context of liturgy, receiving the call to justice within the sacramental presence of God, could have an even greater potential to be compelled to participate in acts of social justice. Of course, any affect the singing will have on individuals and on the community depends first on their disposition, degree of participation and openness to receive the truths to be revealed.

Sing to the Lord gives further support, “Charity, justice, and evangelization are the normal consequences of liturgical celebration. Particularly inspired by sung participation, the body of the Word Incarnate goes forth to spread the Gospel with full force and compassion.”⁴⁴ This is the ideal that will be more fully realized when a worshiping community enters the world of a hymn, within the context of the world of a liturgy. With hearts open to encounter God and receive the truths to be revealed in the singing of the hymn, our hearts will be transformed in unity in the body of Christ, to embody the faith that shapes our lives, and in commitment to building the kingdom of God, empowering and propelling us to social action as Christ’s body in the secular world.

42 Nicolas Ruth, “Heal the World: A Field Experiment on the Effects of Music with Prosocial Lyrics on Prosocial Behavior,” *Psychology of Music* 45, no. 2 (2017): 302.

43 Ibid., 45.

44 “Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship,” in *The Liturgy Documents: Volume One* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 2012).

CHRIST, BE OUR LIGHT – A HYMN FOR EPIPHANY

Within the world of the Epiphany liturgy, the celebration not only remembers, but also actualizes the mystery of the manifestation of Christ as the Son of God for all nations; that past event is made present to us.⁴⁵ We experience its truth in the proclamation of the Word and in the hymns that are sung, many of which recall the proclamation of Jesus’ birth, the star, and the manifestation of the newborn King. These hymns invite the worshiping assembly to join in the adoration and praise once evoked in the characters of the nativity narratives, especially the Magi, when they encountered the Son of God.

In the proclamation of the Word of God, the light of Christ pierces the darkness of our world in that moment, shines on us, his Church, that we may be “a light to the nations” (Is 60); this is the truth of who we are and called to become.⁴⁶ We also hear the narrative of the Magi who, bearing gifts, search for the newborn king. Pope Francis describes a “holy longing” manifested in the Magi:

*The Magi did not set out because they had seen the star, but they saw the star because they had already set out. Their hearts were open to the horizon and they could see what the heavens were showing them, for they were guided by an inner restlessness. They were open to something new. The Magi thus personify all those who believe, those who long for God, who yearn for their home, their heavenly homeland.*⁴⁷

Their longing led them to a transforming encounter with the baby King, the Son of God. After giving their gifts, the Magi “went home by another way” (Matt 2:10-12). We are the Magi today. What are we to do after our awesome encounter with the Son of God on this great Feast? How are we transformed?

45 Nocent, *The Liturgical Year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany*, 15. We could apply the understanding of anamnesis here. We are not simply remembering, but the act in the present is the unconcealment of the truth so we don’t forget. (Martin Connell, Lecture 10/1/18.)

46 Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 78. When speaking of language, Heidegger sees the logos as letting something been seen and understood, something that is already at the basis of every discussion, and allows for understanding. This resonates with the *logos spermatikos*, in which we all carry the seed of the Logos in us. The light of Christ and grace received at our baptism may also play a role here.

47 Pope Francis, “A Holy Longing for God: In the Footsteps of the Magi on the Feast of the Epiphany,” *L’Osservatore Romano (Online)* 2479 (2017): 5. This article captures the homily Pope Francis gave during the liturgy of the Feast of Epiphany in 2017.

The hymn *Christ, Be Our Light* suggests our response. Though this hymn has no mention of the Magi or nativity narratives and is not included in some lists of recommended hymns for the Feast of Epiphany, it is supremely fitting for this Feast. As previously noted, it contains strong echoes of Epiphany theology, especially Christ our Light, and the invitation to transformation hinging on a “holy longing.” The longing is for the kingdom of God to be made present in our world today. Thus, guided by faith and inspired to social concern shaped and inspired by the Word and the hymn, we can sing *Christ, Be Our Light*, allowing ourselves to be transformed into the light of Christ, compelled to build up the kingdom of God, inviting the world in.

The questions lie before us: How might this transformation occur in the context of singing this hymn during the Epiphany liturgy? What could happen to us in our experience of singing this hymn that wouldn’t happen without it? What difference could it make to our experience of this particular liturgy?

Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi is at work here; what we believe is shaped by what and how we pray, which should then shape how we live our Christian lives in the secular world.⁴⁸ The hymn would be most efficacious when sung to accompany the Communion Procession with the assembly fully engaged in singing it, entering into its world, and opening our hearts to the truth it has to reveal. Having already heard the proclamation of the Word, the singing of the hymn can strengthen our call to be the light of Christ as the sung text reaches the depths of our being, bringing deeper meaning and greater commitment to the truths revealed, opening our hearts to be transformed.

We sing together as we process together – the old and young, frail and strong, grieving and joyful, tired and energized, hungry and satisfied, fearful and confident – a profound expression of our unity and of growing more united in and as the body of Christ. We are propelled forward with longing and anticipation by the steady rhythm of the hymn, awaiting our encounter with the Son of God made manifest to us in this Feast – not as the baby King, but in the Eucharist.

As we sing and engage the text with intentionality and openness, its truth will penetrate deep in our souls. We are confronted with the reality that there is

48 Kevin W. Irwin, *Models of the Eucharist* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 29.

a wide gap between the world as it is and the kingdom of God described in the Responsorial Psalm. If we receive this truth, we are filled with empathy and compassion for the many of whom we sing and open our hearts to hold their brokenness and longing alongside our own. Thus, we process forward, our voices rising in our plea for Christ to break into the darkness of our world, to be our Light.

As we sing this text, we also deepen our faith and understanding of who we are called to be as the body of Christ. We ask Christ to make us into his light, living voice, bread broken, and building of living stone.⁴⁹ “Entering into” each of these metaphors emphasized by the rhythm, and contemplating its image, we trust our imaginations to discover the depth and vastness of its truth.⁵⁰ Singing this hymn “helps us express a believing response in a self-committing way.”⁵¹

Our longing is fulfilled as we receive Christ in the Eucharist. In this encounter, we receive the Body of Christ to be transformed more into his body so that his Light may shine in and through us. The truth proclaimed in the Scriptures and prayers for this Feast is realized in this encounter, intensified by the empathy and compassion evoked in the singing the hymn. We now see things differently; “we cannot go back and pretend” we do not know.⁵² It is a moment of transformation; a “loyal obedience” to the revealed truth is the response.⁵³ As did the Magi, we must return in a different way. We now have the obligation to be the light of Christ in the world.⁵⁴ Moved with pity and concern for the suffering of which we sing, our hearts are roused to conversion. Sent forth with the Solemn Blessing of this liturgy, with our hearts transformed and filled with the Light of Christ, we leave the world of the liturgy compelled to seek concrete ways to bring relief to the suffering and to building up the kingdom of God.

49 Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 230, 40. Heidegger refers to language as a medium to truth (*aletheia*). It is an openness to revelation and aspires for transcendence. As we participate in language, in this case, in the metaphors, we are given a better understanding of reality. We come to know who we are in that reality.

50 Searle, “Liturgy as Metaphor,” 110.

51 Anderson, “The Measure of Our Song: Liturgical Music and *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*,” 70.

52 Searle, “Liturgy as Metaphor.”

53 *Ibid.*, 111.

54 Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 144-45. Chauvet speaks of the obligation of the “return-gift” upon receipt of the grace of the Eucharist, that we must work out in our ethical lives

In wedding this hymn to the Communion Procession and reception of the Eucharist, the full significance of the rite is revealed, and in turn, the full meaning of the hymn is derived from the liturgy.⁵⁵ Thus, the singing of *Christ, Be Our Light* participates in the transformation of the faithful.⁵⁶ Repeated over time, the hymn shapes our communal memory and theology, weaving its theology into the fabric of our being, which informs our way of being in the world, committed to striving to be the light of Christ in the ways taught by this hymn, and more.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that singing the hymn *Christ, Be Our Light* in the liturgy of the Feast of Epiphany has transformative power. For, if in a secular setting, as described previously, one can be prompted to prosocial behavior in simply hearing a song with prosocial lyrics, surely actively singing a hymn of social concern will also be transformative. This hymn reinforces the truth revealed in the liturgy that the church, this community, is called to be the light of Christ in the world today, and compels us to live it. With its lyrics confronting us with the suffering that is present in our world, singing the hymn evokes feelings of empathy and compassion that lead to conversion of heart. The significant contribution to the liturgy is the singing of the hymn as one processes to and receives the Eucharist. With hearts moved to compassion for the suffering in the singing of the hymn, we receive in the Eucharist the light of Christ that we long for and made real in this celebration of the Epiphany. This encounter has the power to transform our hearts to the commitment to become the light of Christ through the many ways suggested by the hymn.

Hearing each other's voices along with our own, and commissioned by the Solemn Blessing, we are empowered to remain loyal to these truths. Inspired, transformed, and compelled by our singing of this hymn, we go forth as the body of Christ "to spread the Gospel with full force and compassion" through acts of charity, justice and evangelization.⁵⁷ Renewed and transformed in the light of Christ, we can shed light in the darkness of our world. As Christ's

⁵⁵ Anderson, "The Measure of Our Song: Liturgical Music and *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*," 72. Anderson states that "Music which weds itself to the liturgical action, serves to reveal the full significance of the rite, and in turn, derives its full meaning from the liturgy."

⁵⁶ See footnote 30.

⁵⁷ "Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship," no. 9.

"living voice," we can speak out against the injustices placed on the refugees at our borders and in our cities. We can call for change in the clericalism of our Church. Volunteering in food pantries, homeless shelters or soup kitchen opens our hearts to be "bread broken" for others. Many suffering from the sex abuse crisis are spiritually hungry and homeless. Breaking ourselves open to listen with compassion, as "living stones" we can offer a safe space for the many who need to share their stories and to welcome our immigrant neighbors.

The needs and the longings are many. But in the celebration of this Epiphany Feast, our hearts are transformed in the light of Christ, and our faith is shaped and affirmed by the prayers and the singing of the hymn. Thus, we offer our lives with illumined hearts to make the darkness of this time aglow with the light of Christ, helping to make God's kingdom come today.

