

How Can We Sing The Lord's Song In A Strange Land

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With the exile of the chosen people to Babylon it seemed the practice of their Faith had come to an end. King Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem in the year 586 BC, destroying the temple and deporting most of the citizens to Babylon. No more sacrifices were possible on alien soil and the family of the covenant appeared to be extinguished. The chosen people were exiled in a strange land where they were disoriented and surely must have thought God had deserted them. What had happened to the promises that God made to Abraham?

For different reasons, Ireland is now a strange land. While our buildings are still standing, they are devoid of a worshipping community. The sacraments are no longer publicly available and it is impossible to know how long this strangeness will last. No-one alive remembers St. Patrick's Day not being celebrated; what is worse, we are unable to participate publicly in Holy Week ceremonies and the great solemnity of Easter

We are doing the best we can and are grateful for the means of watching the holy sacrifice of Mass streamed live. As well as this, we can follow the liturgical year and be part of the universal Church by reciting the Liturgy of the Hours, formerly the Divine Office every day. In this way, the Lord's song can still be sung although we are in a strange land just as the Jews learned to recite and sing their sacred scripture.

The Liturgy of the Hours is made up of psalms, scripture readings and intercessions, with the greatest space being given to the psalms. The psalms are sacred poems or songs designed for worship; they remind us of our Jewish roots as this was how Our Blessed Lord prayed in his day. The Book of Psalms was the prayerbook of Jesus. From the



Gospels we know of his familiarity with scripture. On the cross Jesus prayed, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" which is a quotation from Psalm 22 and Jesus also prayed, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" from Psalm 31. In his time, the Jews had set times for morning and evening prayer which was always scriptural. This is the origin of our own Liturgy of the Hours.

Many laypeople are not conversant with the psalms; this might be because in the past, our spiritual needs outside of Mass were always fulfilled by pious practices. Those who attend particular devotions and novenas, who turn out in great numbers to get blessed with a saint's relic or who gather to recite the Rosary and the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, evidently find that their need for communal prayer is satisfied this way. While these devotions are to be commended and have always formed a part of Catholic experience, they are nevertheless not the official Prayer of the Church.

What then is so special about the Liturgy of the Hours? We can perhaps answer that question by

reading Sacrosanctum Concilium or one of the many volumes that have been written on the subject over the years since the Divine Office was revised and translated into the vernacular. It is possible however to understand the importance of praying with the Church by a few observations.

Firstly, the Church praying the official prayer traditionally known as the Divine Office, is the voice of the Bride addressing the Bridegroom, Our Blessed Lord, Jesus Christ. This voice is the daily prayer of the Church united across the world at particular times of the day.

The second reason the Liturgy of the Hours is of importance is that in praying it, the laity can reach the level of "full, conscious, active participation" desired by the Council. This is brought about by means of responses, acclamations, alternating psalmody and intercessions and by the sharing of the readings. When this is done in a communal setting, it is always preferable to private prayer.

Thirdly, our understanding of the liturgy of the Mass is deepened by

our understanding of the Liturgy of the Hours which in common with Mass, has readings from both Testaments. The Old throws light on the New and the New is its fulfillment as the Mass is the sacrifice of the new law, the new and eternal covenant. The reading of scripture in the liturgy of the Mass and in the Divine Office, is of the greatest significance because it is offered by the Church universal, the Bride of Christ, and not just by an individual.

In this way, throughout the liturgical year, the entire paschal mystery unfolds. The Church's official prayer begins during the Advent weeks by preparing for the birth of the Saviour. It continues through his death and resurrection, through the Lord's ascension into heaven, the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and it looks for and expects, the return of the Lord in glory. The Prayer of the Church helps to root us in the entirety of the central mystery of salvation. It is about the paschal mystery of Christ but is permeated by the presence of the Holy Trinity. We are reminded of this by reciting the "Glory be to the Father" at the end of each psalm and canticle.

Jesus is the divine Bridegroom who listens to the voice of his Bride, the Church.

I receive the prayer of My Church expressed in the age-old psalmody, already so familiar and so dear to My soul, and unite the prayer of the Church to My own ceaseless pleading before the Father in the heavenly sanctuary. It is this that confers upon the psalmody of My Church such impetratory power, such vehemence, such a resonance in the sanctuary of heaven. (In Sinu Jesu. p.253)

Through daily repetition of sacred scripture, we are conversant with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Here is present the same One who not alone walked our earth, who died and rose again but who as the second person of the Blessed Trinity, is one with the Father and

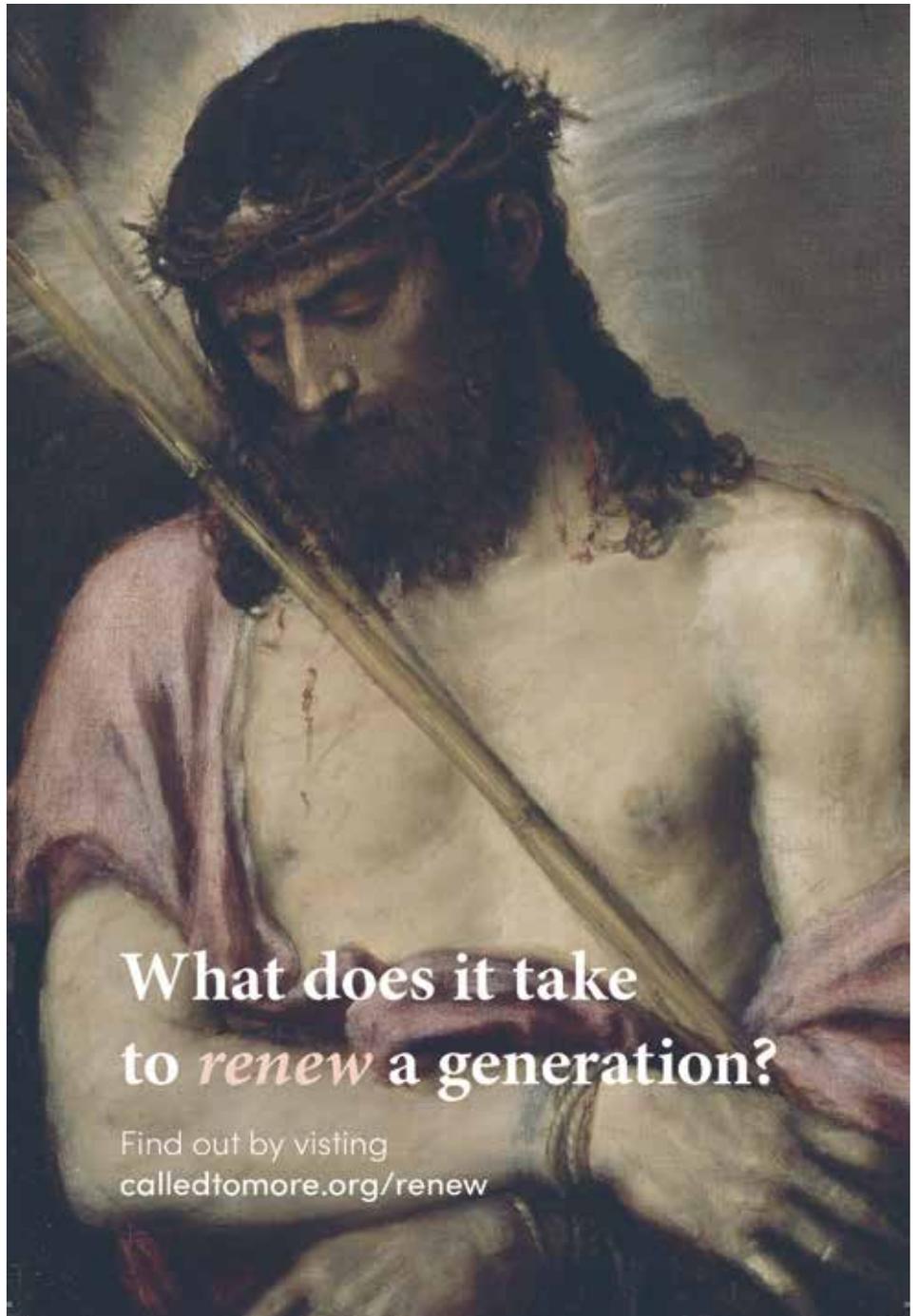
the Holy Spirit. This is the Person we speak of in the Invitatory, the first psalm of Morning Prayer: "let us bow and bend low; let us kneel before the God who made us, for he is our God, and we the people who belong to his pasture, the flock that is led by his hand."

During the seventy years of captivity, the Jews grew spiritually in their relationship with God. They learned to place all their trust in him believing that one day they would return home. The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel understood this time as period for purging the people of their tendency to combine worship of idols with the worship

of the one true God. Exile was a time of penance for them and as a consequence, their allegiance to God flourished as never before.

The present times pose a serious challenge for us when we are exiled from places of worship. Like the ancient chosen people we too can learn to place our trust in God and not in the world of materialism, consumerism and entertainment, the modern equivalent of false gods.

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