

FEBRUARY 20, 2018 / SONGS OF PRAYER, STORIES OF FAITH

MY LORD AND MY GOD

Lord, here is my prayer to you.
Lord, help me to be close to you.
For you are the one who protects me.
You are the one who sets me free.

Lord, help me to find you.
Lord, help me to see you
as a God who is loving and a God who is kind,
and a God who will help me find my mind.

Lord, help me to follow you.
Lord, help me sing this song to you.
A song that will give me a brand new start,
and a song that will keep you in my heart.
My Lord and my God.

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Not counting "Mimi's Song" that I wrote when I was in the ninth grade several years earlier, this was the very first religious song of any kind that I ever composed. Its story begins in the summer of 1977 (40 years ago), and I was sitting in the office of the vocation director for the Diocese of Saginaw (in Michigan), Fr. Bob DeLand. I was having that first meeting about the possibility of me entering the seminary. After talking a bit and finding out that I was a musician, he got on the phone right then and there and called one of his other seminarians, Jimmy Bessert, and put me on the line with him. After about a five-minute discussion, Jimmy told me that two days later he was going to be driving to Baltimore to attend a national liturgical music workshop, and that I should go with him. So, without ever meeting him before, here we were in his Chevy Vega on our way to Baltimore. On the drive along the way with my guitar in tow, we talked a lot and got to know each other very quickly; there was a connection that we both felt immediately. We talked about music, about the church, and shared with each other our stories as to how we got to this point in our lives; and we *laughed* a lot, harder than I ever had before! Jimmy has a very quick and clever wit, and this was the beginning of a life-long friendship that remains to this day.

The workshop was amazing, and its impact on me would dramatically change the course of my discernment. The event was held at St. Mary's Seminary and was called "Summersong," co-sponsored by what was at that time the primary publisher of contemporary Catholic liturgical music, North American Liturgy Resources (NALR). Throughout that week, I met and went to workshop sessions by people I had mostly never heard of before. With the exception of Joe Wise, who was there, these were brand new names to me: Ed Gutfreund, Tim Schoenbachler, Tom Conry, Robert Twynham, Bernard Huijbers, and Grayson Warren Brown. During these sessions we sang through brand new music from these composers. I remember Tom passing out photocopies of hand-written scores to two new songs that he had just written, "Ashes" and "Anthem." Ed led us in his arrangement of a Quaker song that I had never heard before, "How Can I Keep from Singing." Bernard Huijbers conducted music for a liturgy that included pieces like "When from Our Exile," "Awake from Your Sleep," and "Even Then."



Bob Twynham presented an organ recital of music by Messiaen and Langlais—I had heard a lot of organ music from my Dad over the years, but these were amazing sounds and astonishing harmonic structures that were brand new to me. Grayson led what could have only at the time be described as a revival meeting with brand new and exciting gospel hymns. Tim, who happened to be a classmate of Jimmy, sang "Lord of the Dance" and his arrangement of "Speak, Lord," and Joe Wise shared songs like "Watch with Me," "This is my Gift," and yes, "Take All the Lost Home." There were other workshops about liturgy planning, the sacraments, techniques for encouraging congregational participation, and instrumental skill-building, and lots and lots and lots of jam sessions where we would get out our instruments and sing for hours. Suffice it to say, I was completely taken in. The 100 or so participants were joyful and filled with an overwhelming zeal for liturgical music and ministry. These are my kind of people, I kept saying to myself, and I began to see how and where God was taking me. I wanted to be a part of, what was for me, this new energy and excitement that, with the risk of sounding hokey, truly inspired me.

During one of the evenings after most of the people had been asleep, I walked outside with my guitar and stood in this beautiful grotto area outside the seminary chapel, and prayed for a while. When I began to play my guitar, and a chord progression that I just learned in one of the sessions led to me coming up with this song, "My Lord and My God." It was a painfully simple song (again, like many of my early liturgical "folk-style" songs, it sounds a lot like John Denver), and it reflected the fact that I did not know much about writing lyrics, but even so, what I wanted to say was so true. I felt God's presence in my prayer. I was seeking guidance for what I wanted to do in this chapter in my life, asking God to "help me find my mind." I was looking not at this point to be a prolific liturgical composer, far from it. But I did know in those moments, and during that week, that I wanted to sing and play and pray to God "a song" that would "give me a brand-new start, and a song that will keep you in my heart." For whatever reason, the final words were my echo of Thomas after he experienced the risen Lord, "my Lord and my God."

I knew at that time that this was not an incredible song by any means. But I knew something new was stirring. And it was humbling, powerful, and very cool.

After that conference and upon returning home, I started to write a few more songs. Jimmy went on to be ordained a priest soon after and I went on to Minnesota, and well, as they say... (11.27.17)



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