

'The gifts of God flowing into you are gifts that the community needs you to share'

Editor's note: Dr. Aileen O'Donoghue of St. Mary's Parish in Potsdam, was commissioned as a lay minister in 1995. Here, she reflects on her involvement in music ministry.

*Since Love is Lord
of heaven and earth,
How can I keep
from singing?
-- Quaker Hymn*

By Dr. Aileen O'Donoghue

Singing is my most complete prayer. Certainly I can engage earnestly in spoken prayer, and can sense deep connection with God in contemplative prayer, but when I sing I am in prayer with my whole heart, my whole mind, and my whole body and can give this gift of joyful prayer to God and to the community.

Like all gifts of God, my gift of joyful song is not for me to keep, but is given to the community through me. All of us

are gifted, as we're told at Baptism (well ... our parents are told) and Confirmation, with the gifts of Grace and those of the Holy Spirit. Some, perhaps most, of those gifts are the quiet qualities of prayerfulness, devotion, or patience with parish meetings, that can seem as though they are not gifts all, or as though they are gifts that can be kept safe at home, wrapped in flannel and carefully laid in a walnut box. But our gifts, we're also told by Saint Paul, are not for us, but are for the community. In my singing I know this fully in that whenever I sing it is joyful, but it is when I sing in prayer with the community that my joy soars.

In the times when I've not had opportunity to sing, when there's been no parish folk choir or I've been without a parish due to moving or other changes, both my song and my prayer have suffered; atro-

phied like unused muscles. It seems the gifts of God must be given to be received.

Life in the spirit is like the Sea of Galilee into which the Jordan River flows. This large lake of the Gospels teems with life and has been a source of sustenance for shoreline communities for millennia. The Jordan flowing into the lake is certainly important, but it is just as important for the life of the lake that the river flows out! There is another lake, the Dead Sea, that the Jordan river flows into, but it does not flow out. The water is bottled up in the Dead Sea and only returns to the cycles of Earth by evaporation, leaving all its nutrients, all its pollutants, and all its salts in an ever more concentrated brine.

Many among us, I'm afraid, slowly become much more like the Dead Sea than the Sea of Galilee because the river of their gifts does not flow out.

This isn't because of greed, but because they do not know their giftedness, or think their giftedness unworthy of sharing. One of the challenges of my public gift, is that it can be used in different ways by God.

Each time I step up to sing, I open myself as an instrument of God. Most of the time, nearly all of the time, my voice and my song are pleasant. Once in a while, though, when I can't find the key, or lose the tune, or my throat acts differently than it usually acts, what comes out is awful. Many times, particularly in the beginning of this ministry (that my parish in New Mexico had to suffer through!), I have had to stop after a few notes, regroup, and start again. My thoughts in these times have been "Please, God, take me now and erase all memory of me from the planet." But I haven't run out of the church and have always managed to

recover ... something.

After a couple of these disasters, I've found out that my terribly public mistake, and my recovery from that mistake, have been consoling to someone in the congregation. One woman, a new lector, had been suffering shame for having made a mistake while reading. She came up to me after one of my disasters and said that for someone with my long experience (not all that long ... but longer than she'd been in the parish) could make a mistake, then it was OK for her to have made a mistake, too.

So, all you who think you can't sing take note: less than wonderful singing can also be a gift to the community! The point is to have faith that the gifts of God flowing into you are wonderful gifts that the community needs you to share, even if you don't think they're important or wonderful.