Most Reverend Archbishop Smith, Most Reverend Bishops, Clergy, Sisters, President West, Platform Party, Colleagues, Graduands, Families and Friends:

It is a real honor and privilege to be here this afternoon to share some thoughts and, together with my colleagues in Kappella Kyrie and Dr. Joachim Segger, share some music with you. As Dr. Andrij Hornjatkevyc mentioned I am a professor of music at The King’s University. When I recently attended a King’s Convocation ceremony, the guest speaker came to the podium and he remarked, “let’s be honest, no one came to this event today to here the guest speaker. The majority of us are here to see a loved one receive a degree.” The crowd chuckled. I thought to myself, you know this man is completely right. No one is here just to hear him speak. Poor guy. In fact I thought it was rather funny because it was so true. Well it was not funny anymore when several months ago I received a letter inviting me to be the convocation guest speaker for Newman. Well, at least my family came today to hear and support me, much like all of your families are here to share this very important and monumental day with you.

First allow me to express my sincerest gratitude to Newman Theological College for allowing me this opportunity to not only address you as a guest speaker but also to share some music with you. I also wish to convey my utmost congratulations to our soon to be graduates and to their families and loved ones who supported and encouraged them, and to their professors who nurtured and instructed them. You have much to be proud of today. You have worked hard and have accomplished much. Today you cross over an important threshold. Today represents a new beginning and a change in your life. The one thing that will not change in this process is the fact that you are never alone. Your Creator is guiding your steps. The Lord our God accompanies us on this journey. In Proverbs chapter 3 we hear these reassuring words: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

I have been asked to reflect on a specific topic; namely, “the value of music in Liturgy.” Let me open with these words by Pope Benedict: “From the very beginning, liturgy and music have been quite closely related. Mere words do not suffice when man praises God. Discourse with God goes beyond the boundaries of human speech. Hence by its very nature the liturgy has everywhere called upon the help of music, of singing, and of the voices of creation in the sounds of instruments” (Ratzinger 1985, 1).

Music communicates an enthusiasm and a conviction that a spoken liturgy simply cannot evoke (Ratzinger 1985, 4). Even as a child I recall realizing this while in church. The parish that I currently work at is the parish I grew up in. My family would occasionally attend the 5 p.m. Liturgy on Sunday. At that time this Liturgy was completely recited apart from 2-3 very significant sections that were sung. The prokeimenon is a short phrase taken from the psalms and it is uttered just before the epistle reading. It is part of the Propers, meaning that it changes in accordance with the church calendar. When it is tone 3, the prokeimenon has one of my favorite quotations from the psalms; however, when this phrase is quickly spoken by a cantor with absolutely no inflection in their voice, even as a child I realized how unfortunate it was to hear it proclaimed this way, “Sing to our God, sing; Sing to our King, sing. Clap your hands, all you nations; shout unto God with the voice of joy” (Psalm 47: 6, 1). In 2002 I became the music director and cantor at St. Josaphat Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral and now it was up to me if I wanted the prokeimenon in tone 3 to sound different.
The Ukrainian Catholic Church belongs to a much larger entity known as the Eastern Christian Church. One important characteristic of their worship services is that they attempt to awaken and appeal to our senses. We are creatures capable of perception; thus our Liturgical services are supposed to be full-body experiences that try to beckon our sense of sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste. If you have ever stepped foot in an Eastern Christian Church it is impossible to overlook the means for visual stimulation. The English word icon is derived from the Greek word eikona, which means image, likeness, or representation. In a religious context, icons are representations of holy people and sacred events. The word Iconostas is derived from the word icon, and it is the icon screen that separates the altar area (the sanctuary) from the section where the congregation stands (the nave).

Fr. Alexander Schmemann, a very well regarded Orthodox scholar considers the purpose of the Church to be for heaven and earth and all creation in Christ to come together. “The Temple is our heaven on earth.” The church building is a place where a group of people who share a common goal can assemble. The icons evidence the Incarnation and thus the Iconostas witnesses that the Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near. It should encourage, inspire, and unite people, not separate them from the altar as it may appear (Schmemann 1987, 3). All our worship services are an ascent to the altar and a return back to this world for a brief encounter with “what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, [that which] God has prepared for those who love him” as St. Paul expressed in chapter 2 of his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 2:9).

The Liturgy is filled with joy and expectation and this must be expressed in singing and ritual, in vestments and incensing, and the entire overall beauty of the Liturgy (Schmemann 1973, 29-30). Music communicates to the spirit. It brings something very transformational and emotional to our services. As church musicians we must strive to give people an opportunity to sense God’s majesty and help provide an environment conducive to prayer within which they can express their adoration. If a service goes well it is surely possible for people to feel the power and presence of God and potentially obtain a glimpse of heaven (Perry 1995, 6).

Music has tremendous power to inspire and music directors have an obligation to use their God-given talents to bring people closer to God, to uplift them with the music they hear, to allow their souls to be touched and their spirits roused so that they experience the presence of God in the Liturgy. Is it any different for non-musicians, for people working outside the church or for those who have non-musical roles within the church? We all have an obligation to use our God-given talents to bring value to our life and to the lives of those around us. We are called to exemplify the likeness and image of God to all whom we meet, work with, and minister to. The only difference is that you may not have to sing and you might instead be ministering as a teacher when two children require your help to work through a disagreement on the playground. Or it might be directly related to your bedside manner as a doctor working at the Cross Cancer Institute.

In 1 Peter, chapter 4 we hear these words which are so applicable, particularly as our graduates journey beyond today’s convocation: “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ...” (1 Peter 4:10-11). We must strive to recognize and realize our God-Given gifts and talents.
We must care for these gifts graciously bestowed upon us and we must recognize them, not only in ourselves, but also in others. It is our obligation to continually strive to find God’s will for us.

The message I am sharing with you today is closely linked to the music I chose for this Convocation. At the conclusion of my speech Kappella Kyrie will share a brief program. Please allow me to introduce our selections. Our first song is a setting of Psalm 134, entitled “Come, Bless the Lord,” originally in Church Slavonic but careful adapted to an English translation of this psalm. The text reads: “Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord, in the courts of the house of our God. Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the Lord. May the Lord bless you from Zion, He who made heaven and earth.”

The priests or Levites were in charge of watching over the temple throughout the night. They were there to remain awake and on guard to ensure the temple was free from any harm. They not only kept watch, they also prayed throughout the night. While the city was dark and in silence, and people were nestled into their beds in a deep sleep, the duty of these priests was to praise the Lord, to lift up their hands to the holy place and bless the Lord. So many people in today’s world live in darkness and silence, completely unaware of these priests or Levites. They are in a deep slumber far removed from this temple. We who have been baptized into the body of Christ are called to be the Levites, the priests who are awake and alive, who have a duty to bless the Lord. We pray that our songs of praise will wake those who are asleep and call them to His holy dwelling. We also hope that those who are in the church with us are brought closer to God through our music ministry. This is the value of music in Liturgy; namely, to try wake those who are in a deep slumber and encourage them to follow that sound into the church, and to uplift those who are already inside the church and help them further recognize the beauty of God’s dwelling. To uplift them, encourage them in their faith, and bring them closer to God.

How can we render praise? Do we have to be in a sanctuary to praise God? Absolutely not! Service is also a form of praise. We can bless the Lord with verbal thanksgiving, but we can also praise Him through the work of our hands, or with our hearts and minds in our thinking. God can be present in our occupation, and in the patience and care we offer our children or an infirmed parent, or in our loving devotion and service to our spouse. Inviting God into all aspects of our life is the ultimate way to praise and serve Him. Is it easy? Not at all, but it is the goal and calling of our Christian pilgrimage and it has been a goal for centuries. The text of our third song is a medieval prayer from the Sarum Primer, which is a book of prayers developed in Salisbury, England in the 13th century. The song is entitled, “God Be in My Head” and English composer, John Rutter, wrote it. This prayer has been used by countless people over hundreds of years and it is very simple and as applicable today as it was centuries ago. These ancient words that invite God to be present in our lives and to guide us in a variety of ways give us a strong sense of the timelessness of the Christian people.

The text prays:
God be in my head, and in my understanding;
God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;
God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;
God be in my heart, and in my thinking;
God be at mine end, and at my departing.
Both Liturgical texts and non-Liturgical texts have the power to indoctrinate, touch our hearts and rouse our souls, but they need to be understood in order to do so. Between 1545-1563 the church held a very important council in northern Italy, called the Council of Trent. I hope they had at least a few coffee breaks during this conference that lasted for 18 years. If you ever find yourself at a meeting that goes a little long, count your blessings and consider the Council of Trent. There apparently were numerous intermissions over the course of this 18-year period. Church music was one of many subjects discussed. The council addressed the increasingly secular spirit impacting church music. Moreover, polyphonic compositions were becoming so complicated that the words were not understood, and there was also criticism of excessive use of noisy instruments in church, as well as the generally irreverent attitude of singers (Grout and Palisca 1988, 319). Composers would intentionally imbibe a secular song into the sacred composition, such as a mass movement. Congregations were able to identify these popular tunes and the church understandably deemed this compositional practice unacceptable. The Council of Trent put out a “Canon on Music to be Used in the Mass” which sought to cleanse church music of these problematic issues that were considered lascivious or impure (Grout and Palisca 1988, 320).

There is a wonderful legend that the composer, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina saved church music at the time of the Council of Trent. There was a desire to completely abolish polyphony at this time. Polyphony means “many sounds” and it involves numerous independent melodic lines sung simultaneously. At this turbulent time for church music Palestrina composed a six-voice mass, the Mass of Pope Marcellus, to demonstrate that it is perfectly possible to compose polyphonic music where the text is intelligible and the music has an appropriate reverent spirit for worship. The extent to which this particular composition influenced the decisions of those presiding at the Council of Trent is largely unknown. Nevertheless, this legend does demonstrate that Liturgical texts have the power to teach and stimulate emotion; thus, it is very important that they are understood, allowing them to serve this role. Because Palestrina’s “Pope Marcellus Mass” is such a monumental piece of music in the history of church music we will sing the “Kyrie” movement from this Mass. You will hear what polyphony sounds like and I am certain you will agree that it was a challenge for composers to have the text remain intelligible when textures became this thick and complex.

The final song of our set is “You are the New Day” composed by Welsh rock musician, John David and originally written for the band Airwaves in 1978. It is a song of hope and new beginning and tomorrow will be a new day for our graduates. You will start to journey down a new path. John David wrote this song after he suffered a huge blow in his personal life. Near the conclusion of the day he sat down to watch the news and in 1978 at the peak of the Cold War there was talk of a potential nuclear war. It was at this time John composed this song. He was desperately reaching out for a new day. He writes, “If the sun came up and the birds started singing as usual then I could believe that it really was the new day in which life would go on, and in which hope would survive.” Every single one of us will have challenging times on the road ahead and we must keep hope as our philosophy and like John David we need to reach for that new day when things might start to appear brighter and our acceptance of the situation might begin. We also need to remind ourselves that as Christians there will always be a new day. It will never be our last day because our Lord and Savior has prepared an eternal home for us. Isn’t that the most amazing hope to hold in your hearts?
There is no question that the value of music in Liturgy is infinite. It adds an exciting manner for rendering praise and glorification. It is true that a Liturgy can be celebrated without music; however, then something very significant and emotional is missing. It is true that one can live their life without much service or devotion to God or awareness for others; however, again something very meaningful is lacking. We become like those in a deep sleep unable to be woken by the sounds of those praising the Lord throughout the night in the temple. As Schmemann expressed, the temple is our heaven on earth. So, go to it and get a glimpse or experience a foreshadowing of what has been prepared. Let God function is all aspects of your life as the ancient prayer from the Sarum Primer requests. I have paralleled the value of music in Liturgy with living one's life in service to God and their neighbor, and employing one's talents for glorifying and rendering praise. This brings a deeper purpose and meaning to one's life just as music beautifies and strengthens a Liturgy. As music brings more depth and devotion to a service so too will your life have more purpose and fruitfulness if it is lived for others. Let me conclude with these words of St. Paul to the Colossians: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Colossians 3:16-18).

Bibliography


