



## Hymns at Church

by David Beresford

The revolutionary elements in our epoch do not mark the beginning, but the end, of an epoch of revolution. —G.K. Chesterton, "The End of the Moderns"

Church music is something that I know nothing about, other than I know what I like and do not like. I am a child of the 1960s, so my experience is perhaps a little biased. When I was very young, I can just recall singing hymns like "Holy, Holy, Holy," "Faith of Our Fathers," and "Immaculate Mary." Then came the big change, and much against the wishes of the Council Fathers who wrote that we (the laity) had the right to sing our hymns in Latin, we became part of large-scale experiments testing how long it would take to empty the parishes.

First came the tambourines, wielded by earnest young ladies who were trying to get everyone to sing "Cum-Bye-Yaw." Then, once this gateway music was no longer achieving the requisite high, our parish advanced to folk Masses complete with lead and bass guitars, electric piano, and drums in front of the altar. The following songs were sung during Mass on a regular basis: "One Tin Soldier," "Share The Land," "Imagine"—yes, by John Lennon—"The Rose," "You Light Up My Life," "Let It Be," and "Blowin' in the Wind." I do not know why these were chosen out of all that was available on the radio at that time. I can see no reason why we did not sing "Convoy," or better yet, "A Boy Named Sue." In fact, a good argument can be made for singing "A Boy Named Sue" at any church that would allow us to sing "Blowin' in the Wind" or "Imagine." "A Boy Named Sue" has all the elements that the modern innovators

like: a non-traditional family, ambivalence about gender, and the implicit message that girls (and by extension, men with girl's names) are subject to societal oppression.

By the end of the 1980s and early 90s, the worst of these excesses had begun to subside and the preposterous was replaced by the banal. Instead of singing old Beatles songs at Mass, we were given insipid, gender-neutral translations of the psalms set to saccharine melodies. Now I am not against such modern hymns as "Peace is Flowing Like A River" *per se*, these are perfectly fine around a youth-group campfire or during a sensitivity-training session. But not at Mass.

My main concern is that these hymns are now private property, and I cannot escape the suspicion that the Mass is not supposed to be carved up by copyrights into private enclosures in which we are only allowed to sing or pray "with permission of the publishers." I am of an older, more robust school, that believes prayers and hymns can be used by anyone who wants to pray or sing. I secretly suspect that this privatization of prayers and hymns is a modern phenomenon. Consider the "Salve Regina," which was written by a monk named Herman the Cripple in 1054. The "Salve Regina" was one of the battle cries of the knights who crusaded in the Holy Land. I am not convinced that they were advised in their *Crusaders*

*Hymn Book* (c) that the "Salve Regina" was printed with permission of Brother Contractus, all rights reserved.

I have assessed this trend in the Canadian hymnals, the *Catholic Book of Worship* (CBW) put out by the CCCB (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops). There have been three such hymnals, *CBW I* (1972), *CBW II* (1980), and *CBW III* (1994), each with 192, 296, and 402 hymns respectively. I counted the ones with copyrights, those "with permission," and those in the religious public domain (see Figure 1). The proportion of hymns with copyrights has increased steadily with each edition, eroding those held in common. What is interesting is that many of the hymns that now carry copyrights originally did not do so. For example, "Immaculate Mary" has a copyright because verses two to five were replaced.

In light of this, I have decided that while at Mass I will no longer sing hymns with copyrights attached to them. And if we are assigned a hymn that has been translated into inclusive language, I sing the old words out loud (very loud), complete with *thees*, *thous*, and *thys*. It is plausible that I will miss out on one or two modern songs that are actually good, but I will take this risk. The real payoff is that I do not have to decide if a hymn is good or not; my system settles that problem for me. And, in so doing, I am simply following the teachings of my Catholic religion—that we have all been given the gift of a working brain and are supposed to use it. ☸

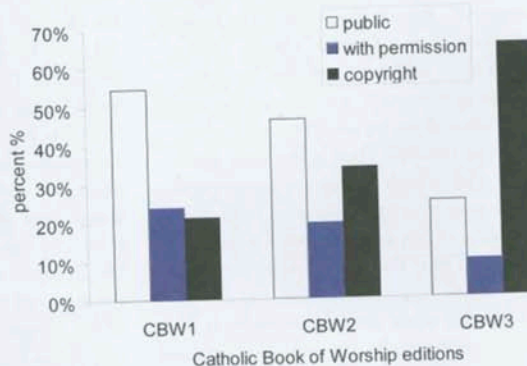


Figure 1. Percentage of hymns in the three editions of *Catholic Book of Worship* that are encumbered with copyrights or "with permission."