

The Hymn Problem

In this issue, we present a paper each on the hymns of the Hungarian and Slovak peoples. A third is omitted partly because it covers much the same territory and partly because it poses the material of the other two as "an answer to the hymn problem". This by way of translation of the hymns of nationals to fill in for the hymns "rejected because they do not measure up to the proper textual and musical criteria".

Right off it should be said that despite the rumblings of the past ten or fifteen years, we are blissfully unaware of any serious hymn problem. The fact is that we have such a plenitude of splendid hymns that no single group will ever use all of them anyway. Mind you, no one is denying that a sharing of the hymns of the family of nations does not greatly enrich us. But it is not so easy. The problem of good English translations is not unakin to that of fitting out the chant in languages of the Anglo-Saxon family. (Some of the finest chant I have heard has been Anglican chant, but this was usually in a large Gothic church where only the lofty melodies, not the text, reached one.) Thus the *People's Hymnal* suffers from a too literal and awkward translation. And even in the lovely Slovak Memorare in *The Saint Gregory Hymnal* we are still asked to sing "that anyone who sought thee, or made to thee his moan". Why not "groan" or "bone" or even "phone"? The only thing necessary, it seems, is that it rhyme with "known"! What do you use in your parish or institution for congregational singing?—Hymn cards? There is no reason for your not having the very best. Or do you envision hymnals stacked in racks on the rear of every pew as in many Protestant churches? Then what is the matter with the English *Westminster Hymnal*? I do not think it is likely to be surpassed soon.

The following opinion is not meant to be condemnatory of any hymnal, and it is an opinion which has been arrived at earnestly through many discussions and seminars. For straight hymn tunes and good language, we choose the *Westminster* book. For a combination hymnal-choir book, we'll stay with *St. Gregory's*. We welcome all new hymns that have musical and lingual dignity. Meanwhile there are plenty to go around.

It is unfortunate that one must conclude on a somewhat negative note. In many areas of our country there has always been a good hymn tradition. The writer, for example, was not exposed to the kind of tripe Mr. Vincent Higgenson has so securely devastated until after he was ordained. In as many other areas great progress had been made—until the novenas came along. These now eat away

at local traditions of a hundred years and more. It is possible because in the main, and despite Madison Avenue, the world is less musical than it was a hundred years ago. We heartily second all efforts to stamp out an illegitimate growth that calls itself, of all things, "traditional". Is this a hymn problem? Not exactly. There is no reason at all for singing the hymns suggested. None.

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

David Greenwood teaches at Marymount College, Los Angeles. He has written on Catholic musicians at Oxford for the *Clergy Review*, London . . . Father Henry, O.S.B., hails from St. Pius X Monastery, Pevely, Mo. . . . Martin Bush continues his reviews of the Aeolian Skinner series . . . Myron Roberts, organist and composer, teaches organ at the University of Nebraska . . . Sister Remigia is a Sister of the Precious Blood, teaching in St. Louis, Mo. . . . Joseph Leahy is on the Music Faculty at the University of Notre Dame . . . Dr. Franz Plewa, formerly head of the Child Guidance Clinic in Vienna and lecturer at Oxford, is the psychiatric consultant at Boys Town . . . Father Francis Hajtas teaches in the schools of New Orleans, La.

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