

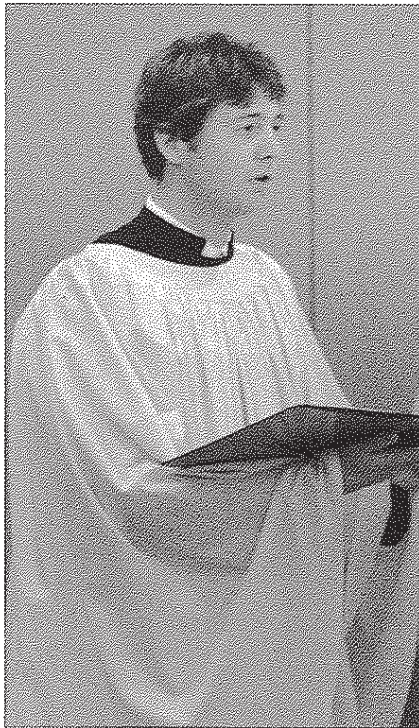
If You Want to Sing about Justice, Live Justly

BY DENISE M. GANNON

As a songwriter, I grow increasingly sensitive to the unethical way church musicians, in particular, abuse copyright law. Instead of purchasing music, many pastoral musicians photocopy material without permission from the publisher. This abusive practice makes it difficult for publishers to pay writers what they truly deserve for their work, thereby depriving authors of a just wage. A domino effect follows, occurring not only at the cost of the writers but also of their families. When musicians (or anyone else!) steal material, writers go without income for their work. Some cannot pay mortgages or rent, and some have trouble feeding, educating, and affording health care for themselves and, in some cases, their families. Filing cabinets and binders filled with illegal music leave a trail of evidence to this exploitive and all too common abuse in parishes throughout the United States and abroad. Authors—and, indeed, all artists—seem to be sacrificed on the altar, victims of the very people they write for, in the name of the church and the requirements of sung worship. Those without sin may cast the first stone.

As a response to such unjust and repressive acts, in 1990 my husband and I began an online service whose sole mission is distribution of liturgical music and other resources offered at full discount to the buyer. We sell the materials at almost half off their usual cost as an incentive to church musicians and liturgists to purchase rather than copy. Our “business” operates on a shoestring: There is no profit for us because there is

Ms Denise Morency Gannon is the director of music and liturgy at Stonehill College, North Easton, Massachusetts, and, with her husband, the founder and owner of Morgan Music and Liturgy, New Bedford, Massachusetts, www.mmlit.com.



no markup for the client. The full revenue earned, therefore, benefits both the writer and the buyer. By doing business this way, we hope to encourage parishes that think they may not have the financial resources to purchase all of the music they want to use for worship to purchase rather than copy. We serve freely and without salary, operating late at night and in the early morning hours out of a minuscule office space in our home. “Warehouse 15” stores both our liturgical supplies and the family *Monopoly* game.

Beautiful Stories

The work has caught on, and we’ve heard some beautiful stories as a result of

the service we offer. Some parishes tithe to the poor the money they save by purchasing from us. Others tell us that the service kept them from abusing the copyright law, and the discount we offer served to deflect their potential injustice. We’ve become the core for a miniature network of Christian communities working together in the hope that someday things will be different for all musicians and writers.

In the business sense, of course, we are a failure. It’s difficult to remain voluntarily poor when peers gain momentum in their businesses, and I become discouraged at times because I don’t see great strides in our attempt to create change. However, there is more here than meets the eye.

My husband and I feel that we’ve raised the justice bar on behalf of people who earn their living through a creative enterprise. We feel strongly that we will be unable to teach justice to our three teenage children unless we live justly first. Our children have come to understand what this tiny enterprise stands for not because of our words but because of our deeds. In our small way, I feel, we stand with prophets who act as truth tellers and protest the practice of greed, arrogance, and selfishness. Modern day prophets like Gustav Gutierrez, Jon Sobrino, Daniel Berrigan, Megan McKenna, and many others speak on God’s behalf to call all people to a conscious faithfulness, to call us into a relationship with the God of love through solidarity with the poor. Even though our meager attempt to practice justice may create just a ripple against the tide in an ocean of injustice, I feel as though people who depend on just payment for what they create and others who profess justice by what they sing will, with our help, witness justice by what they do.

The temptation to become a for-profit

business can be challenging. Justice prompted our initial effort, but the world judges success on earned revenue. Although our miniature operation won't rock the financial world, we feel as though our attempt at doing justice alleviates some of the wrong that people do—sometimes in ignorance but more often in arrogance—by abusing the laws that protect writers, musicians, and artists. By bringing attention to the copyright issue, we have helped more than a few church musicians and their parishes to make significant changes in their praxis. Some have joined us in the endeavor to change copyright abuse by changing themselves once they became aware of their own malpractice and its results. Because we recognize that copyright abuse affects living people and not just a company whose name appears on a piece of music, some of us have experienced new meaning in our celebrations of the Eucharist with our communities. As we stand in solidarity with victims of injustice, we can begin to look at ourselves with new eyes and ask some serious questions about the intentionality of our work practices. As we become better ministers, our work takes on a new richness. Our honest actions move us toward a new integrity in our planning for and preparation of musical liturgy. In short, we have become more authentic in our attempt to be more faithful to the Gospel. As one musician asked recently: "How can we sing songs of justice if we aren't *living* justice in our own parishes?" Amen.

A Sign of Contradiction

Although our efforts have not created any dramatic impact on just payment to writers, I feel as though what we are doing is such a sign of contradiction in this task- and profit-oriented world that it is worth doing, even if it fails. We speak on behalf of beauty and the arts and the right of any artist to make use of God's creative gifts and earn a just and decent wage. Through art, writing, and music, we believe that God's beauty is revealed; through these gifts, in the context of what artists create, many people are better able to discover who they are. To exploit any artists, writers, or musicians by depriving them of a just wage is to diminish what is given to us as gift from God and reduce it to a matter of mere profit for its own sake. Not only does the work lose value, it defaces the Source who gives it intrinsic life—God,



the giver of all gifts. To stand for the right of all artists to live justly is to stand for God who gives this great gift of inspired beauty.

The simple fact that our paltry business loses money more often than not gives it a prophetic voice as a counter-cultural industry that witnesses to the Gospel on behalf of all exploited peoples. We are building the kingdom of God here on earth in one small way. The prophet Amos tells us that we are not allowed to enhance our lifestyles at the cost of the poor, the underpaid, and the marginalized. No excuse exists in Scripture for such practices. If we want to change our hearts, we must change unjust praxis by what we do as well as by what we speak or sing. The singers of the songs of justice must *become* the songs of justice. The kingdom of God becomes present when hearts and practices align with the Gospel.

In Gustavo Gutierrez's vision, liberation community among the poor is a

place of conversion, of transformative action where communion is experienced in anticipation of the full communion of the eschaton. That's why the experience of Eucharist is so rich in communities that experience the Gospel in this way. When experienced at this level, the Gospel comes alive. The hearers of the word and the doers of the word become the actual recipients of the word. The Paschal Mystery is actualized by the very presence of those who receive it and act upon it. Liberation communities of the believing poor who are changed by liberation spirituality become living sacraments, pointing the way to the reign of God and to what we are all expected to bring to the table if we expect to share in the feast of life. The authentic preaching of the Gospel depends on our making the word *poverty* far less ambiguous by giving it bone and marrow, flesh and blood. The reign of God is within our reach as we live justly, love gently, walking humbly with our God in one another.