

Fr. JC's Pastoral Letter

My dear Little Flower,

Grace and peace to you from Washington, D.C. As I write this letter, I find myself sitting on the campus of the Catholic University of America, where hundreds of pastoral musicians from across our country have gathered for the **50th Anniversary Convention of the National Association of Pastoral Musicians (NPM)**. It is a joyful celebration of prayer, friendship, learning, and above all, of music offered for the glory of God.

Yet for me, this gathering is much more than an anniversary. It also feels like coming home.

Thirteen years ago, during the summer of 2013, I came to this very city to attend *my very first* NPM convention. I had just been accepted to the Immaculate Conception Seminary in South Orange. My future in the Archdiocese of Newark was still unfolding before me. I remember walking through the convention halls with the excitement of a young seminarian who had spent his teenage years behind a piano in church.

For the first time, I met the composers whose music had accompanied my own faith: Christopher Walker, Marty Haugen, Dan Schutte, and so many others. These were names I had only seen printed beneath hymn titles in our missals. Suddenly they were standing only a few feet away. I remember being completely star-struck!

But as unforgettable as those encounters were, they were not the greatest gift. The greatest gift came each morning and evening. It was the experience of praying the Church's prayer with hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of voices united as one. Morning Prayer. Evening Prayer. The celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Priests, deacons, religious, choir directors, cantors, organists, instrumentalists, composers, parish volunteers, people from every corner of the country singing together, not as performers, but as faithful believers. It was one of the most profound liturgical experiences of my life. In those moments I realized something that has stayed with me ever since: the Church sings because she believes; the Church sings because she loves. Music is never simply decoration. It is both faith and love finding its voice.

Looking back now, I recognize how providential that first convention truly was. I remain deeply grateful to **Fr. Jack Cryan**, then Pastor of Our Lady of Mercy in Jersey City, whose encouragement and generosity made that experience possible. Long before I could imagine serving as a priest in the Archdiocese of Newark, he helped open a door that allowed me to witness the beauty of the Church at prayer. God often writes our stories through the kindness of people who may never realize how much they have changed our lives.



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Served by our Pastoral Associates:

Teresa Johnson
Office/Business Manager
officemgr.lf@gmail.com

Genevieve Emanuel
Religious Formation
& Family Ministry
religiousformation.lf@gmail.com

Dan Grossano
Outreach & Ministries
pastoral110.lf@gmail.com

Giovanni Longo
Music Ministry
lfmusicministry.lf@gmail.com

Carolee Aresco
Technology & Media
lfttech.lf@gmail.com

Eileen Baker
Baptism Coordinator
secylittleflower.lf@gmail.com

Peggy Squazzo and
Isabel Cabrera
Reception
littleflower.frontdesk@gmail.com



Today, thirteen years later, I have returned to the very place where that journey began. Only now, I return not as a seminarian, but as your pastor. The faces around me have changed, and many dear friends have joined the pilgrimage along the way. Some of the composers who once inspired me are no longer here. Today, like before, I stand among countless musicians, priests, and faithful once again, praying, celebrating, and making music to the Lord.

How faithful God has been. As I prayed over today's Gospel (Matthew 13:44-52), I could not help but hear these memories echoing within it.

Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field and like a pearl of great price. When someone discovers it, everything else becomes secondary. They joyfully give everything to possess that treasure. Looking back over these thirteen years, I realize that God has been quietly revealing that treasure all along. It was never simply about beautiful music. It was never about meeting well-known composers. It was never about attending conventions. The treasure has always been, and always will be, Jesus Christ. He is our greatest treasure. Every hymn worth singing ultimately points beyond itself. Every choir rehearsal, every organ prelude, every psalm, every "Amen," every Alleluia finds its purpose only when it leads hearts toward Him.

Sacred music has taught me that beauty evangelizes. Sometimes a sermon reaches the mind. A hymn touches the heart. There are moments when a melody allows the Word of God to linger long after the final blessing has been given. Music has a mysterious way of carrying faith into places where ordinary words cannot go.

As your pastor, I find myself increasingly grateful for all who dedicate themselves to this ministry in the church, especially in our parish. Our cantors, choir members, instrumentalists, music ministers (Giovanni Longo), and every person who quietly prepares each liturgy (Gina Ferraioli) remind us week after week that the Mass is never a performance. It is prayer. They help us lift our hearts toward heaven.

Please keep them in your prayers. My hope is that we continue to sing and make music for the Lord. Never be afraid to let your voice become part of the Church's prayer. God is not looking for perfect voices. He delights in faithful hearts.

As I conclude this letter, one refrain continues to echo quietly within me. It has accompanied me through many seasons of my life, from my youth, through seminary, into the priesthood, and now back to Washington once again: **"Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord."**

Those words come from **Psalms 89:1**:

"I will sing of the Lord's steadfast love forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations."

How fitting those words seem today.

Looking back, I see that every note, every friendship, every unexpected turn, every assignment, every blessing has become another verse in the song God has been writing throughout my life.

And I pray that, whatever melodies still remain unwritten, they may always be sung for His glory.

Please know that I carry all of you with me in my prayers here in Washington. As we celebrate this joyful anniversary with the Church from across our nation, I ask the Lord to bless our parish family, to deepen our love for the sacred liturgy, and to help each one of us discover anew the treasure hidden in the field: Jesus Christ Himself.

Until we gather again around the altar at Church of the Little Flower, may our lives continue to become songs of gratitude. **Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.**

Your parish priest,
Fr JC Merino