

# **Musical Symbol and Reified Sound: The Body-Semiosis of a Life-Teen Catholic Mass**

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LifeTeen is a movement in North American Catholicism that seeks to contextualize the Catholic faith for youth through weekly events including the LifeTeen Mass. This Mass uses contemporary music to set all of the Ordinary and Proper musical texts of the ritual. Just a for the sake of context and as a quick overview into the order of the Mass, this diagram shows some these ritual texts in the order in which they occur. The five Mass Ordinary texts are fixed and remain the same from week to week no matter the liturgical season. These are the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei which all lead up to the climactic point of the Eucharist. The texts below the timeline are the Propers which change weekly every Sunday no matter the liturgical season. At the LifeTeen Mass of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Denton, TX both of these types of ritual texts are set to a contemporary worship musical aesthetic. So that you know what I mean when I say contemporary worship, here is an example of a contemporary worship song largely influenced by genera of CCM (Contemporary Christian Music). So that you can hear this aesthetic in a LifeTeen context I will play you some field recordings from Immaculate Conception. The first is the “Alleluia” which is sung right before a passage from the Gospels is read. Next is the “Agnus Dei” which is sung directly after the exchange of the Peace. In this presentation I will show how this aesthetic of the LifeTeen Mass ritual music at Immaculate Conception can be understood as a symbol that when encountered achieves integration through a central arch-symbol of “Body” (which I will explain further momentarily). Distinct issues are raised regarding the community’s understanding of itself and the Divine through this Body arch-symbol when the aesthetic symbol of ritual music is expressed through the aesthetic symbol of contemporary culture at the LifeTeen Mass.

In their book *Meaning*, Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch offer a framework for understanding the cognitive processes of perception and recognition of symbols. According to their definition, a symbol has the power to actually participate in the reality to which it points and therefore mediates that reality to a perceiver. (As a side note and for the sake of clarity, this definition differs greatly from the concept of symbol in Peircian semiotics). The subsidiary clues of a symbol (original qualities of a symbol’s aesthetic uniqueness) create a form greater than the sum of its parts which points to the meaning of a focal object. These clues are of such interest that when a person understands the connection between the subsidiary clues and the focal object his or her perception of the object is carried “back toward...those...memories of [his or her life]...which bore upon the focal object to begin with” (Polanyi, 73). In this way the self is drawn into the life of the symbol and thereby can be said to actually participate in the reality of which it mediates. In this way through recognizing a symbol one encounters meaning and does not simply gain symbolic information. In her study of Taize chant, Judith Kubicki describes this function as being “carried away” and surrendering the self to a symbol’s meaning (Kubicki, 99) (Chauvet, 84). This surrender in and through the “whirl-pooling” of one’s perception bearing

back upon itself allows subjects to integrate disparate, or alienated parts within themselves by participating in the symbol's mediated reality. A similar integration occurs between separate members of a community in order to form a collective identity, sense of place, and solidarity in the world through each member's respective recognition of the same symbol (Kubicki, 101).

Such recognition, participation, and integration of Immaculate Conception's symbolic life and identity occurs primarily through the preeminence of an arch-symbol. By the term arch-symbol I mean a symbol\* which symbolizes the process of symbolization or the process of symbolic mediation. In other words it is a symbol for the entire process of recognition, participation and integration that was just discussed. Kubicki sums up the thought of Louis-Marie Chauvet when she writes "the body is the primordial and arch-symbolic form of mediation...it is the body that places human beings in the world and it is the body that is the entry place where the entire symbolic order takes root in us as human beings" (Kubicki, 101). Each one's person is mediated or symbolized through the body and in turn the world (or one could even say existence) is mediated or symbolized by bodily participating in its reality.

Spatially a body hangs on a cross suspended in the focal center of Immaculate Conception's sanctuary, signaling the centrality of the Body arch-symbol to draw each individual into the singularity of its symbolic collective self. If the body is an arch-symbol for symbolization's mediation and if it is the way in which the otherness of a person is made fully present (either to itself or to others), then considering the Catholic Church's Christological doctrine of Christ's nature being both fully human and fully divine, the symbol of the crucifix is fundamentally a symbol of the integration of the transcendent and the immanent; of heaven and earth; of God and Man; of otherness humanly and familiarly present (Libreria, 117-121). In Catholic thought God has become symbolization or mediation itself. The corporate integration of community members is the other aspect of the Body-symbol. The symbolic language for a unified corporate reality of the Church in Catholic thought is the "Body of Christ." (Libreria, 220) (also see Lubac, 327-227). A distinctly Catholic idea is that participation in Christ is participation in the Church, which is symbolized as His Body. So integration of otherness and immanence operate on two planes within the arch-symbol of Body at Immaculate Conception: the religious plane (between God and Humanity) and the social plane (within Humanity).

Simultaneous participation in both of these planes in the life of the Body arch-symbol is primarily achieved through the ritual act of the Eucharist. The crucifix is not the only central object in Immaculate Conception's space: it hangs directly over the altar table, which is where the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ; the God-Man or the Body arch-symbol of the unity of Heaven and Earth. The congregation participates in the Body arch-symbol of the unity of Heaven and Earth through the ritual act of eating, thereby bodily surrendering their own essence and way of being in the world to the Transcendent integrated with the Immanent. As the assembly is symbolized as the Body of Christ, each member of the congregation also bodily participates in and physically integrates within their person this symbol of congregational unity.

Since symbol's distinguishing feature lies in its ability to "carry subjects away" into meaning through their participation, music can be seen as an important symbol in the context of ritual because of its participatory character (Kubicki, 121). Participation in song by the entire assembly can be a powerful encounter with the Body arch-symbol both in its unification of the congregation as social Body and in the unification of Heaven and Earth through the bodily-felt presence of the Divine. Ben, the worship leader of the LifeTeen Mass, described two instances where he experienced the Divine in powerful ways. One was at World Youth Day in Spain when

an enormous multi-ethnic crowd sang a well-known Catholic hymn together. The other instance was at LifeTeen training in Arizona where everyone in the room was singing passionately and loudly. In both instances, an experience of congregational unity was complemented with an experience of the Holy Spirit within and upon his chest; a bodily experience of union with the transcendent. Ben also has a memory from when he was about ten years old in which he heard the voices of “either angels, or the communion of the saints” singing along with the music at Mass (Briones). Both the angelic body and the communion of the saints are expressions of the social dimension of the Body of Christ, which are at the same time experienced as transcendent. Seen through Michael Polanyi’s understanding that participation in symbol occurs when perception of the symbol is carried back toward memories that have bore upon the symbol in past experience, Ben’s experience as a ten year old could have highly influenced how he encounters the Body arch-symbol of participatory singing as union within the congregation that perpetuates union between Heaven and Earth. Ben’s bodily experience of the Holy Spirit can be seen as the ontological expression of transcendence/immanence integration experienced through the simultaneity of both the social and religious dimensions of the Body arch-symbol. Just as participating in the Eucharist is a physical reality, so Ben’s experiencing of the Divine in congregational singing is a bodily reality. Recognition of the Body arch-symbol expresses and perpetuates itself bodily.

Persons in Immaculate Conception’s congregation have differing opinions about LifeTeen. Linda, a middle aged woman, grew up Catholic but it wasn’t until Immaculate Conception began to offer LifeTeen services that she began to connect in a personal way to the Mass ritual. Besides contemporary worship at LifeTeen Mass, Linda has listened to rock music for much of her life (Drews). Marco on the other hand, who is a graduate student, finds LifeTeen “showy” and not reverent enough. He often listens to modernized versions of Jewish liturgical song (Rodriquez). The difference between Linda and Marco’s reaction to contemporary worship music in Mass can be understood as a difference in the recognition, participation and integration of aesthetic symbols. Edward Foley describes how “sound structure is a symbolic reality which [perpetuates] the social structure through its signifying power” (Foley, 319-320). Thus contemporary worship music’s signifying power must be analyzed further to understand the issues raised resulting from how it transforms the social. And if its signifying power transforms the social, the experience of the Divine is transformed as well since both are integrated in the Body arch-symbol. In her article “Music Sacred and Profane: The Use of Popular Music in Evangelical Worship Service,” April Vega quotes scholars who “assert that American society is not secularizing but merely expressing its religiosity in new ways” and the “religion-like qualities” of popular culture such as the focus on community, “emotional depth, and the intensity of experience” fill “voids left by institutional religions” (Vega, 376). Shawn David Young in his article “Evangelical Youth Culture: Christian Music and the Political” describes the history of CCM as originating in the Jesus Movement when “countercultural Christianity” was allowed to “reify religion as...’a system of symbols’” consisting of “‘empowered’ cultural artifacts” (Young, 325). It was through these artifacts that Linda could understand the Mass ritual more fully because it was placed in the context of a sound structure in which she was fluent thereby helping her to recognize, connect, and participate - “live into,” be “carried away” – in the meanings of the symbolic ritual acts. In the framework of Michael Polanyi, the subsidiary clues of the contemporary worship music aesthetic could be recognized and therefore her perception of the focal point of the ritual reflected back to her own lived experience with the sound symbol of popular music and she was able to live within the meanings

of the rituals. LifeTeen attempts to reintegrate the greater society and the Church, and in this way its sound structure is a signifier of the disparate parts of society made immanent.

Yet, some leaders in the community that I spoke with are worried that something central to Immaculate Conception's life could be lost in the sound structure of LifeTeen. Matt is a seminarian at Immaculate Conception who is concerned that a sense of transcendence is lost in CCM's familiarity, as well as a sense of the Church's authority to influence culture. He sees that the Church's liturgy should not be affected by culture but that it should affect culture. He roots this in an understanding that participation in the transcendence of "Truth, Beauty, and Goodness" has the ability to bring change in the lives of those who participate in it and in the culture that is influenced by it (Tetyrak).

The Vatican II Council held during the 1960's opened the way for revolutionary changes to be made in liturgical music when it developed "norms for adapting the Liturgy to the cultures and traditions of the peoples" (Sacrosanctum Concilium, section III, D). In doing so, a unified aesthetic definition of musical transcendence (such as the Truth, Beauty, and Goodness) has been blurred and a new definition has taken precedence: congregational participation. In the Council document Sacrosanctum Concilium we read that music for the Liturgy "is to be considered more holy the more closely connected it is with the liturgical action" (Sacrosanctum Concilium, section VI). In other words, the more ritual music causes congregants to actively participate, the more it can be said to be transcendent. In 2007 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a document entitled *Sing to the Lord*, which states that such participatory holiness of liturgical song described in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* "involves...dimensions...which must be considered within cultural context" (Sing to the Lord, art. 67). In this way both Vatican II and the United States Bishops have shifted their pastoral focus within the elements of the Body arch-symbol encountered through ritual song. They have in a sense "loosened their grip" on articulating transcendence/immanence integration and have concentrated more on recognition and participation, asserting that transcendence will be encountered through the emphasis on these two elements thereby supplying no need to impose an objective aesthetic definition of it. Yet, as Matt believes, an authoritative definition of transcendence could be seen as necessary in order to encounter integration within the Body-arch symbol. The more distinct transcendence and immanence are, the more unified they can become. The Catholic Church's authority to define the transcendent could be at stake when a musical symbol is used that has, in some way, defined the transcendent on its own terms.

In conclusion, I have shown how symbols mediate meaning and that by recognition of and participation in this meaning a subject or a community can "live in" the meaning and realize an integrated essence. Since symbolization is an act of mediation, Immaculate Conception's Body arch-symbol mediates the Transcendent and the Immanent simultaneously through both the religious and social dimensions.

The aesthetic of contemporary worship constitutes a symbol that signifies an aesthetic reification of the transcendent. Definitions of transcendence and immanence are blurred, therefore the arch-symbol of Body can be blurred as well. On the other hand, contemporary worship may strengthen the congregation's perception of the Body arch-symbol in its ability to use the semi-religious language of popular culture to realize an integrated essence within that larger society.

LifeTeen is navigating changes in society in interesting ways. Although all of the Ordinary pieces of the Mass are played in a contemporary aesthetic I noticed that many of them are rooted in ancient chant-like characteristics. For instance, the Kyrie keeps somewhat of a

mellismatic melodic form. Here is a field recording of the Kyrie at LifeTeen. Also, the responsorial psalm is sung in a semi-intoned style accompanied by the acoustic guitar. These sound structures could be subsidiary clues that trigger the listener's memory of more traditional Mass settings and that root the community (albeit in subtle ways) in the Church's historical memory. As mentioned before, the role of memory perpetuates the self into the meaning of the symbol.

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