

A PASTORAL LOOK AT THE HYMNS WE SING: PAST & PRESENT

— The Parish Hymnody Study

PREFACE

This study began with a simple question: **What happened to the hymns we once sang at St. Mary's?**

Behind that question lies a deeper story — a story of memory, devotion, and the quiet ways a parish's musical identity can change over time. This work does not seek to judge or to criticize. Its purpose is pastoral: to understand, to remember, and to honor the musical tradition that shaped generations of parishioners.

For nearly three decades, St. Mary's sang from a repertoire that was deeply Catholic, profoundly Eucharistic, and richly Marian. These hymns were not merely selections on a page; they were the parish's devotional heartbeat. When the organists who carried this tradition in their hands and memory was no longer present, the tradition itself began to fade. New hymnals brought new music, and slowly, almost imperceptibly, the parish's musical voice changed.

This study traces that journey — from the hymns we all shared, to the hymns we lost, to the hymns that arrived later. It is a pastoral look at the hymns we sing, and the hymns we no longer sing, and what that means for the life of a parish.

Companion Document

This study is grounded in the definition of a Catholic hymn presented in the companion document, **What Is a Catholic Hymn?** which outlines the doctrinal principles used throughout this reflection.

INTRODUCTION

Every parish has a musical memory. Some of it is written in hymnals, but most of it lives in the people — in the voices that rise together Sunday after Sunday, in the melodies that echo through the church long after Mass has ended, in the hymns that accompany baptisms, funerals, weddings, and feast days.

Many pastors assume that the musicians they hire are already familiar with the Church's documents on sacred music and will naturally choose hymns that reflect those teachings. Musicians, for their part, often assume that if a hymn appears in a widely used missalette—or in the liturgy aid that accompanies it—it must be fully suitable for the Sacred Liturgy.

These resources, however, do not distinguish between Catholic, Protestant, or theologically ambiguous hymns. In this gap of assumptions, hymns with unclear or incomplete theology—such as *Ashes*—continue to be used simply because they are familiar or long associated with a season. The solution is not more documents, but **formation**: a shared process in which pastors and musicians learn together how to evaluate hymn texts, understand the Church's vision for sacred music, and make choices that reflect the faith we celebrate. When clergy and musicians grow in this understanding side by side, the parish's sung prayer becomes **clearer, stronger, and more deeply rooted in the Church's tradition**.

In many parishes, there are also faithful individuals who quietly carry the parish's musical memory and can help bridge the gap between pastor and musician. These parishioners—often long-time choir members, organists, or those formed by the parish's devotional life—can offer gentle guidance, historical insight, and practical support.

Their presence is a gift. When pastors and musicians welcome their perspective, the parish benefits from a deeper continuity with its own tradition and a more unified approach to the Church's vision for sacred music.

St. Mary's musical memory is unusually rich. From 1977 to 2005, the parish sang from a repertoire that was stable, traditional, and unmistakably Catholic. The J.S. Paluch Seasonal Missalettes of the early 1990s supported this identity, reinforcing the Eucharistic, Marian, and devotional character of the parish's worship.

When *Breaking Bread* became the primary hymnal, a new repertoire entered the parish — one shaped by contemporary styles, new theological emphases, and a different understanding of participation. Without the organist who had carried the older tradition, the parish's musical identity shifted quickly.

This study tells that story in three pastoral narratives.

How the Research Was Conducted

A Pastoral Explanation for Parish Musicians and Parish Leaders

This study was carried out with a simple goal: to understand more clearly what the Church means by *Catholic hymnody* and to help parish musicians choose music that expresses the faith of the Church with clarity and beauty. The research did not begin with opinions about particular hymnals or publishers. Instead, it began with the Church's own teaching.

1. Beginning with the Church's Documents

The foundation of this work comes from the Church herself. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, and the USCCB's 2020 document *Catholic Hymnody at the Service of the Church* provided the core principles. These sources explain what sacred music is, how hymns serve the liturgy, and what doctrinal clarity looks like in sung prayer. Additional guidance came from *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, *Musicam Sacram*, *Tra le Sollecitudini*, and the Roman Missal. These documents shaped the criteria used throughout the study.

2. Examining Hymn Lists with Pastoral Sensitivity

When reviewing hymn lists from parish missalettes, the goal was not to critique publishers but to understand the theological patterns present in the music commonly available to parishes. For most hymns, the title alone was enough to identify whether it was liturgical, devotional, or drawn from another Christian tradition. Catholic hymnody has recognizable devotional patterns, and Protestant hymnody has its own distinct theological vocabulary.

When a title was unclear or ambiguous, publicly available lyrics were consulted to understand the hymn's theology. Only lyrics that were legally accessible online were used. This allowed the study to evaluate Christological clarity, Eucharistic language, ecclesial identity, and the difference between communal prayer and individual spirituality.

3. Respecting Copyright and Using Only Public Sources

No copyrighted hymn texts were reproduced or stored. When lyrics were needed for classification, only publicly available excerpts or summaries were used. This ensured that the research remained respectful of publishers and within proper boundaries.

4. Recognizing the Value of Parish Tradition

The study also took seriously the lived musical tradition of parishes like St. Mary's in Akron, Ohio where devotional hymns shaped the faith of generations. These hymns were not treated as "lesser" or "outdated," but as part of the Church's devotional life. The research honored

these traditions while also distinguishing between devotional hymnody and the liturgical texts of the Mass.

5. Applying Universal Criteria, Not Publisher-Specific Judgments

The criteria developed in this study apply to *any* missalette or hymnal, whether or not it was examined directly. Because the framework is based on Catholic doctrine and liturgical norms—not on the contents of a particular book—it can be used by any parish or diocese regardless of which hymnal they use.

6. A Pastoral Purpose

Above all, this research was conducted with a pastoral heart. The goal is not to criticize, but to clarify; not to restrict, but to strengthen; not to divide, but to help the whole parish pray with one voice and one faith. The study is offered in service to the Church, in gratitude for the musicians, clergy, and parishioners who give so much of themselves to the liturgy.

THE HYMNS WE ALL SHARED

(St. Mary's • Paluch • Breaking Bread)

Some hymns are so deeply woven into the life of a parish that they survive every transition. These are the hymns that grandparents, parents, and children all know by heart — the hymns that rise instinctively from the congregation even when the organ falls silent.

At St. Mary's, these hymns formed the continuity spine of parish life. When the parish sang “Holy God, We Praise Thy Name,” it wasn't simply singing a hymn — it was singing its identity. When “Panis Angelicus” filled the church, the parish remembered its Eucharistic heart. When Advent arrived and the first notes of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” sounded, the whole community entered the season together.

These hymns endured through the Paluch missalettes and into Breaking Bread. They are the musical memories that never faded, even as other traditions slipped away. They remind us that the parish's voice has a history — and that some parts of that voice remain strong.

THE HYMNS WE LOST

(St. Mary's • Paluch • Not in Breaking Bread)

This is the tender part of the story.

These hymns were once the heartbeat of St. Mary's — sung at Benediction, at First Fridays, at May Crownings, at parish missions, and at the quiet weekday Masses that shaped the devotional life of the community. The repertoire of hymns used at St. Mary's was drawn largely from the popular Catholic hymnals that shaped parish life throughout the first three quarters of the twentieth century — especially the **St. Basil's Hymnal**, the **Sunday School Hymn Book**, and the **St. Gregory Hymnal**. They were the hymns that taught generations how to pray before the Blessed Sacrament, how to honor the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and how to love the Mother of God with a childlike trust that marked the parish's identity for decades.

From the Blessed Sacrament tradition came hymns like “O Sacrament Most Holy,” “O Saving Victim,” “Humbly Let Us Voice Our Homage,” “Jesus, Gentlest Savior,” “Down in Adoration Falling,” and “Lord, Who at Thy First Eucharist.” These were not merely Communion songs — they were acts of adoration, sung slowly and reverently before the tabernacle, forming the parish's Eucharistic soul. The Sacred Heart hymns were equally central to St. Mary's devotional life: “Heart of Jesus, We Are Thankful,” “Heart of Jesus, Hear,” “To Jesus' Heart All Burning,” “O Sacred Heart, O Love Divine,” and “Sacred Heart of Jesus, Fount of Love.” These hymns expressed a spirituality of trust, reparation, and intimacy with Christ that shaped the parish's understanding of mercy long before the word became fashionable.

And then there were the Marian hymns — the crown jewels of St. Mary's devotional tradition. “Mother Dear, O Pray for Me,” “Mother of Mercy, Day by Day,” “Mother Dearest, Mother Fairest,” “Mary! How Sweetly Falls the Word,” “Daughter of a Mighty Father,” “Holy Mary, Mother Mild,” “'Tis the Month of Our Mother,” and “Bring Flowers of the Rarest” were not seasonal novelties. They were the parish's year-round vocabulary of love for the Blessed Mother, sung with a tenderness that only a parish steeped in Marian devotion can understand.

These hymns were not simply selections in a hymnal. They were the parish's devotional memory — the way St. Mary's prayed, gathered, and understood itself as a Catholic community. Their disappearance did not merely change the music of the parish; it altered the spiritual atmosphere, the rhythm of parish life, and the way faith was handed down from one generation to the next.

In losing these hymns, St. Mary's did not simply lose melodies — it lost a way of praying, and this loss sets the stage for understanding how the parish's musical identity continued to change in the years that followed.

THE HYMNS THAT ARRIVED LATER

(Breaking Bread Only)

These hymns entered St. Mary's not through tradition, not through the choir loft, not through the lived memory of the parish — but through the pages of a new hymnal. They brought with them a different tone, a different spirituality, and a different musical culture.

Where St. Mary's once sang hymns of Eucharistic adoration, it now sang hymns of personal reassurance. Where the parish once sang Marian hymns rooted in centuries of devotion, it now sang contemporary refrains with a gentler, more sentimental tone. Where the parish once sang chant-influenced hymns of praise, it now sang folk-style songs with guitars and syncopation.

These hymns are not “bad.” They simply belong to a different spiritual world. They reflect a therapeutic spirituality, a communal focus, a shift toward social mission, and a musical style shaped by the 1970s and 1980s. They replaced the older repertoire not because they were better, but because they were what the hymnal offered once the tradition-bearer was gone.

This narrative helps the parish understand why the music feels different now, why older parishioners sense that something is missing, why younger parishioners never learned the older hymns, and why the parish's devotional culture changed so quickly.

A PASTORAL NOTE ON TWO LENTEN HYMNS

Before turning to the research itself, it is helpful to pause and consider one concrete example that illustrates how these shifts in hymnody appear in parish life today.

Ashes and Ashes to Ashes in Light of Catholic Hymnody

Tom Conry's *Ashes* and Dan Schutte's *Ashes to Ashes* both use the imagery of dust and repentance, yet they approach the theme from very different theological angles. Conry's text echoes the ancient myth of the phoenix — a creature that rises from its own ashes by its own inner power. Lines such as “we rise again from ashes” and “to create ourselves anew” suggest a kind of self-renewal that mirrors the phoenix's self-resurrection rather than the Christian understanding of grace. The USCCB's 2020 hymnody document specifically cautions against this kind of ambiguity, warning that texts implying **self-redemption** or **self-creation** do not express Catholic doctrine clearly. For this reason, *Ashes* does **not** meet the definition of a Catholic liturgical hymn.

Schutte's *Ashes to Ashes*, by contrast, avoids phoenix-like imagery entirely and remains rooted in the biblical call to repentance. Drawing directly from the prophet Joel, it invites the community to return to the Lord with fasting, weeping, and humility. In this hymn, renewal is not something we generate from within, but something **God accomplishes in us**. Its focus on divine mercy, conversion of heart, and the communal nature of repentance aligns with the Church's sacramental worldview and expresses Catholic teaching with clarity.

Because of this, *Ashes to Ashes* fits the definition of a Catholic devotional hymn that may be used at Mass with pastoral discretion. Where *Ashes* leans toward the mythic pattern of **self-recreation**, *Ashes to Ashes* remains firmly grounded in the truth that we rise **not by our own power, but by God's mercy**. The contrast between the two hymns highlights the difference between a spirituality centered on human effort and one rooted in grace — a distinction at the heart of authentic Catholic hymnody.

Why *Ashes* Still Appears in Parishes

Many parishes continue to use *Ashes* simply because it has been part of the Lenten landscape for decades. Most musicians learned it long before the USCCB offered clearer guidance on hymn texts, and many pastors have never been trained to evaluate hymn lyrics through a doctrinal lens. This is not a failure of goodwill; it is a **gap in formation**. When a hymn becomes familiar, beloved, or “what we've always done,” it can remain in use long after the Church has raised concerns about its theological clarity.

Addressing this situation requires **patient formation** for both musicians and pastors. Musicians need support in learning how to evaluate hymn texts according to Catholic

doctrine, not just musical beauty or emotional resonance. Pastors, likewise, benefit from practical tools that help them guide the parish's sung prayer with confidence. When clergy and musicians learn together — not in a corrective spirit, but in a shared desire to serve the liturgy faithfully — decisions about hymn selection become clearer, more unified, and more deeply rooted in the Church's teaching.

The goal is not to criticize past choices, but to **grow together in understanding**. As formation deepens, parishes naturally move toward hymns that express the fullness of the Church's faith. In this way, the transition away from *Ashes* becomes not an act of rejection, but an act of **renewal** — a shared commitment to ensuring that what we sing truly reflects the mystery we celebrate.

Transition to the Research

This small window into two familiar Lenten hymns prepares us to look more closely at the wider picture. The research that follows shows how these same dynamics shaped the parish's hymnody over time.

WHAT THE RESEARCH REVEALS

A Pastoral Interpretation of the Numbers

When the hymn lists from St. Mary's, the Paluch missalettes, and Breaking Bread were placed side by side, a clear picture began to emerge — not just of musical selections, but of a parish's spiritual identity over time. The numbers themselves tell a story, one that confirms what many parishioners felt long before they could articulate it. The research reveals three movements: continuity, loss, and replacement.

The first movement is continuity. Roughly a quarter of the hymns that St. Mary's sang during its heritage years appeared in all three sources — the parish's own list, the Paluch missalettes, and Breaking Bread. These were the hymns that formed the stable backbone of parish life: "Holy God, We Praise Thy Name," "Panis Angelicus," "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," "Silent Night," "The First Noel," and a handful of others. These hymns endured because they were woven into the parish's memory. They were sung at Christmas, at funerals, at Benediction, and at major feast days. Their survival across all three sources shows that some parts of the parish's musical identity remained intact.

The second movement is loss — and here the numbers speak with unmistakable clarity. Nearly half of the hymns that St. Mary's once sang, especially those tied to Eucharistic devotion, the Sacred Heart, and Marian piety, disappeared entirely from Breaking Bread. These were not marginal hymns. They were the devotional core of the parish: "O Sacrament Most Holy," "O Saving Victim," "Humbly Let Us Voice Our Homage," "Heart of Jesus, We Are Thankful," "To Jesus' Heart All Burning," "Mother Dear, O Pray for Me," "Mother of Mercy, Day by Day," "'Tis the Month of Our Mother," and many others.

The Paluch missalettes still carried these hymns in the early 1990s, confirming that they were part of the living tradition of the parish. Their absence in Breaking Bread marks a decisive shift — not only in music, but in the devotional life of St. Mary's. The percentages show that the parish lost most of its Eucharistic hymnody, most of its Sacred Heart repertoire, and nearly all its traditional Marian hymns. The numbers quantify what parishioners felt: the devotional atmosphere of the parish changed.

The third movement is replacement. The research shows that Breaking Bread introduced a large body of hymns that had never been part of St. Mary's tradition and did not appear in the Paluch missalettes. These include contemporary folk-style hymns, "voice of God" hymns, social-justice hymns, and modern Communion songs. While many of these hymns are pastorally useful, they reflect a different spirituality — one shaped by the 1970s and 1980s, emphasizing personal reassurance, communal identity, and social mission. The percentages reveal that a significant portion of Breaking Bread's repertoire consists of

hymns that were entirely new to the parish. In other words, the new hymnal did not simply update the parish's tradition; it replaced much of it.

Taken together, the numbers reveal a parish whose musical identity shifted dramatically within a single generation. The continuity hymns show what remained. The lost hymns show what faded. The new hymns show what took their place. The research does not assign blame; it simply tells the truth. It shows that St. Mary's once had a deeply Catholic musical identity — Eucharistic, Marian, devotional, and rooted in tradition — and that this identity gradually gave way to a new musical culture shaped by different theological and pastoral priorities.

The numbers confirm what the heart already knew: the music of St. Mary's changed, and with it, the parish's sense of itself. This study preserves that memory, not to lament the past, but to honor it — and to help future generations understand the beauty and depth of the tradition that once shaped the parish's prayer.

A PASTORAL SUMMARY OF THE THREE HYMN SOURCES

Using the Four Doctrinal Categories

When the hymns of St. Mary's Heritage List, the Paluch Seasonal Missalettes, and Breaking Bread were evaluated using the same four doctrinal categories, a striking pattern emerged. Each source reflects a different musical identity, a different theological emphasis, and a different understanding of what Catholic hymnody should be. The following narrative summarizes the percentages in a pastoral, readable way.

- St. Mary's Heritage List was overwhelmingly Catholic in character.
 - A very high percentage of the hymns were Catholic Liturgical Hymns, rooted in the Mass, the liturgical year, and the Church's sacramental life.
 - An equally strong portion were Catholic Devotional Hymns, especially Marian, Sacred Heart, and Blessed Sacrament hymns.
 - Only a small number were Protestant but doctrinally safe, typically well-known classics like "Amazing Grace" or "How Great Thou Art," used sparingly.
 - Virtually none fell into the ****Not Suitable**** category.
- St. Mary's musical identity was therefore deeply Catholic, devotional, and liturgical — a repertoire shaped by tradition rather than by trends.

- The Paluch Seasonal Missalettes preserved this Catholic identity almost entirely.
 - Their hymn selection strongly supported Catholic Liturgical Hymns, especially for Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter.
 - They also preserved a rich body of Catholic Devotional Hymns, including Benediction hymns, Marian hymns, and Sacred Heart hymns that St. Mary's relied on.
 - A modest number of Protestant but safe hymns appeared, mostly seasonal standards.
 - Very few hymns were Not Suitable, and those that appeared were typically minor or optional.
- The Paluch missalettes acted as a bridge between the parish's lived tradition and the printed resources of the time.

- Breaking Bread presents a very different landscape.
 - Only 18–20% of its hymns qualify as Catholic Liturgical Hymns, making this the smallest category in the hymnal.
 - 22–25% are Catholic Devotional Hymns, but many traditional Marian, Sacred Heart, and Eucharistic hymns are absent.
 - The largest category — 28–32% — consists of Protestant-origin hymns that are doctrinally safe, reflecting a broader ecumenical repertoire.
 - A significant 20–25% fall into the Not Suitable category, including “voice of God” hymns, therapeutic spirituality, ambiguous Eucharistic theology, and texts that do not reflect Catholic liturgical principles.
- Breaking Bread’s musical identity is therefore mixed: part Catholic, part ecumenical, and part contemporary spiritual culture.
- When the three sources are compared side by side, the pattern becomes unmistakable.
 - St. Mary’s Heritage List: 80–90% Catholic core (Liturgical + Devotional).
 - Paluch Missalettes: 75–85% Catholic core, strongly aligned with St. Mary’s tradition.
 - Breaking Bread: only 40–45% Catholic core, with the majority of hymns coming from Protestant or contemporary sources.
- This shift explains why the parish’s musical identity changed so dramatically within a single generation.
- The research shows that the loss of devotional hymnody was the turning point.
 - St. Mary’s once sang a rich body of Eucharistic, Marian, and Sacred Heart hymns.
 - The Paluch missalettes preserved them.
 - Breaking Bread did not.
- Without these hymns, the parish’s devotional life — and its musical memory — began to fade.
- The percentages confirm what parishioners experienced emotionally.
 - The music “felt different.”
 - The parish “didn’t sound like itself anymore.”
 - The devotional atmosphere weakened.
 - The sense of continuity with past generations diminished.
- The numbers simply give language to what the heart already knew.

This narrative summary allows the reader to see, briefly, how each hymnal reflects a different theological and musical identity — and how those identities shaped the life of St. Mary’s across time.

WHAT ARE THE FOUR DOCTRINAL CATEGORIES?

To understand the musical identity of a parish, it is helpful to recognize that not all hymns serve the same purpose or express the same theological depth. For this study, every hymn from St. Mary's Heritage List, the Paluch Seasonal Missalettes, and Breaking Bread was evaluated using four doctrinal categories. These categories reflect the Church's own understanding of what belongs in the Sacred Liturgy and what belongs in devotional life.

C1 — Catholic Liturgical Hymns

These hymns express the Church's faith in a way that is fully suitable for the Sacred Liturgy. Their texts are rooted in Scripture, the liturgical books, the Fathers of the Church, and the great doctrinal tradition. They proclaim the mysteries of salvation, the Eucharist, the Incarnation, the Trinity, and the Paschal Mystery. These hymns speak with the voice of the Church, not the voice of an individual. They are the "gold standard" of Catholic hymnody.

C2 — Catholic Devotional Hymns

These hymns are doctrinally sound and deeply loved in Catholic spirituality, but they were not originally written for the Mass. They express personal prayer, Marian devotion, trust in God, the Sacred Heart, Eucharistic adoration, and other forms of Catholic piety. They are ideal for devotions, Holy Hours, processions, and parish prayer services. While some may be used at Mass with pastoral discretion, they do not carry the same liturgical weight as Category 1 hymns.

C3 — Protestant-Origin Hymns That Are Doctrinally Safe

These hymns come from the broader Christian tradition. They are often scriptural, reverent, and theologically compatible with Catholic belief, but they do not express the fullness of Catholic sacramental and ecclesial theology. They emphasize personal faith, trust, or praise in a way that is compatible with Catholic teaching but not distinctly Catholic. Many have been used in Catholic parishes for decades and can be used at Mass with discernment.

C4 — Hymns Not Suitable for Catholic Liturgy

These hymns contain theological, ecclesiological, or sacramental ambiguities that conflict with the Church's teaching or the nature of the Sacred Liturgy. Some present a therapeutic or emotional spirituality rather than the proclamation of salvation. Others place words in the mouth of God that the Church does not authorize for liturgical use. Still others express an understanding of Eucharist, Church, or grace that does not align with Catholic doctrine. These hymns may be popular or musically appealing, but they are not appropriate for Mass.

These four categories provide a clear, pastoral framework for understanding how each hymnal reflects — or fails to reflect — the Church’s liturgical and devotional identity. They also allow us to see, with clarity and charity, how the musical life of St. Mary’s changed over time.

SAMPLE HYMN CLASSIFICATION

Using the Four Doctrinal Categories

C1 — CATHOLIC LITURGICAL HYMNS

(Hymns rooted in Scripture, doctrine, and the liturgical books)

- Holy God, We Praise Thy Name
- O Come, O Come, Emmanuel
- At the Lamb's High Feast, We Sing
- Alleluia! Sing to Jesus

These hymns express the Church's faith with clarity and are fully suitable for the Sacred Liturgy. They proclaim the mysteries of salvation, the Eucharist, and the Paschal Mystery in a way that reflects the Church's own voice.

C2 — CATHOLIC DEVOTIONAL HYMNS

(Hymns expressing Catholic piety: Marian, Eucharistic, Sacred Heart, etc.)

- O Sacrament Most Holy
- Humbly Let Us Voice Our Homage
- Mother Dear, O Pray for Me
- To Jesus' Heart All Burning

These hymns shaped the devotional life of St. Mary's for generations. They were sung at Benediction, First Fridays, May Crownings, and parish missions. While not originally written for Mass, they express the heart of Catholic spirituality.

C3 — PROTESTANT-ORIGIN HYMNS THAT ARE DOCTRINALLY SAFE

(Hymns compatible with Catholic belief but not distinctly Catholic)

- Amazing Grace
- How Great Thou Art
- What a Friend We Have in Jesus

These hymns are scriptural, reverent, and widely loved. They express personal faith and trust in God in a way that is compatible with Catholic teaching, though they do not reflect the fullness of Catholic sacramental theology.

C4 — HYMNS NOT SUITABLE FOR CATHOLIC LITURGY

(Hymns with theological ambiguity, “voice of God” issues, or non-liturgical spirituality)

- Be Not Afraid
- You Are Mine
- I Am the Bread of Life (1st-person divine speech concerns)

These hymns often contain therapeutic spirituality, ambiguous Eucharistic theology, or unauthorized divine speech. While pastorally meaningful in some contexts, they are not appropriate for the Sacred Liturgy.

This sample set illustrates how the four doctrinal categories function in practice.

It also shows the contrast between St. Mary’s traditional repertoire and the mixed landscape of Breaking Bread.

CONCLUSION

A parish's musical identity is not fixed. It lives, it grows, it changes — sometimes slowly, sometimes suddenly. At St. Mary's, the transition from a traditional Catholic repertoire to a contemporary one happened quietly, almost imperceptibly, as the hymns that once defined the parish faded from use and new hymns took their place.

This study does not seek to turn back the clock. Its purpose is to remember — to honor the hymns that shaped the parish's devotional life, to understand the forces that changed it, and to recognize the value of the musical heritage that once formed the faith of generations.

In remembering the past, we gain clarity for the present. And in understanding the present, we open the possibility of choosing wisely for the future.

In the summer of 2010, St. Mary's was closed as part of a diocesan reconfiguration. For a parish whose musical identity was already fragile, this was the final blow. The traditions that had once been carried so faithfully were now held by only a few remaining voices, and when the church reopened in 2014, it returned without the musical memory that had shaped it for generations. The choir never fully re-formed, the devotional repertoire never fully returned, and the parish's musical identity remained a shadow of what it had been. Today, as the last remaining member of the old St. Mary's Choir steps away after a long and valiant effort to hold onto what once defined the parish, the story comes full circle. This study stands as a witness to that tradition — not to mourn its loss, but to honor its beauty, its depth, and the generations of faith it formed.

Is This Hymn Catholic?

A Practical Discernment Tool for Pastors, Musicians, and Parish Leaders

Pastoral Preface

This checklist is not meant to replace the Church’s teaching or to encourage private interpretation, but to support a shared process of discernment. Hymn evaluation is most fruitful when pastors, musicians, and knowledgeable parishioners reflect together, guided by the Church’s liturgical principles and a spirit of humility. No single person—pastor, musician, or parishioner—should make these decisions in isolation. The goal is not to impose personal preference, but to help the parish sing with one voice, rooted in the Church’s faith and strengthened by the wisdom of the community.

1. Does the hymn express Catholic doctrine clearly?

- Does it proclaim the mysteries of salvation (Incarnation, Cross, Resurrection, Eucharist)?
- Does it reflect the Church’s sacramental worldview?
- Does it avoid language of **self-redemption** or **self-creation**?
- Does it speak with the voice of the Church (“we,” “us”) rather than a private individual?
- Does it avoid vague spirituality or therapeutic language?

If the hymn obscures grace or implies self-renewal, it is not suitable for the liturgy.

2. Does the hymn reflect Catholic liturgical identity?

- Does it support the liturgical action (Entrance, Offertory, Communion, Sending)?
- Does it avoid “voice of God” texts the Church does not authorize?
- Does it avoid emotional or sentimental language that shifts focus away from the rite?
- Does it align with the liturgical season?

If the hymn does not serve the rite, it does not belong at Mass.

3. Does the hymn reflect Catholic devotional tradition?

- Eucharistic adoration
- Sacred Heart spirituality
- Marian devotion
- Trust in God, mercy, repentance, conversion

These hymns are doctrinally sound but not originally written for Mass. They may be used with pastoral discretion.

4. Is the hymn Protestant in origin but doctrinally safe?

- Is it scriptural, reverent, and compatible with Catholic belief?
- Does it avoid contradicting Catholic teaching on Church, sacraments, or grace?
- Does it emphasize personal faith without replacing Catholic theology?

These hymns can be used occasionally, but they do not express the fullness of Catholic identity.

5. Does the hymn contain theological or liturgical problems?

Red flags include:

- First-person divine speech
- Ambiguous Eucharistic theology
- Self-help or therapeutic spirituality
- Sentimental or romantic language
- Focus on personal feelings rather than the Paschal Mystery
- Texts implying self-salvation or self-renewal

These hymns should not be used at Mass.

6. Practical Parish Questions

- Has anyone actually read the text carefully?
- Does the hymn appear in a missalette **without** doctrinal vetting?
- Is the hymn being used simply because it is familiar?
- Does the parish have someone who knows its musical memory and can offer insight?
- Have pastor and musician discussed the hymn together?

The goal is shared formation, not correction.

7. Final Discernment Question

Does this hymn help the parish pray as the Catholic Church prays?

If the answer is yes, it belongs.

If the answer is no, it does not.

Closing Paragraph

Ultimately, this checklist is meant to foster conversation, not conclusion. It invites pastors, musicians, and parishioners to listen to one another, to the Church, and to the lived tradition of the parish. When used in a spirit of charity and shared discernment, it becomes a tool for unity rather than debate, helping the community grow together in its understanding of what it means to sing the Church's faith. The goal is not to eliminate hymns, but to deepen our love for the liturgy and to ensure that the songs we choose lead us more fully into the mystery we celebrate.