

Christmas carols

I still can wake up at 2:30 a.m. in mid-July with “Joy to the World” whispering to me, and not the “Three Dog Night” song.

Back in the day, the nuns drilled us on Christmas carols like they drilled us on the Baltimore Catechism. The carols stayed with us over the decades and we re-visit them like old friends every year.

Knowing our limitations, the nuns rarely taught us more than the first couple of verses and maybe the last of the carols. We all know that “Heaven and nature sing” in “Joy to the World.” But most of us – or at least me – wouldn’t recognize the line, “He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found,” from the third verse.

I was under orders not to sing in eighth grade. The nuns had noted that I was such a loud and lousy singer that I could drag an entire class out of tune. But that didn’t stop me at Christmas Mass, and I belted out the songs.

As the years have gone by, my singing never got any better. Until it stopped when I had my larynx popped out. So it goes.

But I’ve tried to explore the carols a bit more, especially those verses you might not recognize unless you are graced to sing in a choir. So many carols have such a richness.

Take the fourth verse of “The First Noel”: “This star drew nigh to the northwest, o’er Bethlehem it took its rest. And there it did both pause and stay, right o’er the place where Jesus lay.” Annie Lennox skipped that one in her rendition.

Then there is the third verse of “Angels We Have Heard on High”: “Come to Bethlehem and see Him whose birth the angels sing; Come, adore on bended knee, Christ the Lord, the newborn

King.”

I understand what St. Thomas Aquinas meant when he wrote, “To sing is to pray twice.” Scholars say that he actually wrote “He who sings well prays twice.” That left me out. But the carols – though beautiful to sing – capture the heart and joy of Christmas. They are Catholic belief in song. No matter the vocal skills brought to them, they present the Faith in beauty, peace and joy.

“Be near me Lord Jesus I ask you to stay, close by me forever, and love me, I pray. Bless all the dear children in your tender care, and fit us for heaven, to live with you there.” That’s the third verse from “Away in a Manger.”

And on the litany goes. The third verse from “O Holy Night”: “Truly he taught us to love one another; his law is love and his gospel is peace. Chains shall he break for the slave is our brother and in his name all oppression shall cease.” Or the 10th verse from “It Came Upon A Midnight Clear”: “When peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling and the whole world give back the song which now the angels sing.”

When you are at Christmas Mass and you hear that one voice that sounds like an old dog barking, be merciful. Christmas carols are for everybody, even those who can’t carry a tune with a suitcase. The nuns might have rolled their eyes back in the day and Thomas Aquinas might have winced. But sorry, Thomas – it’s the faith, not the voice.

The fifth verse from “O Come Let Us Adore Him”: “Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning; Jesus, to thee be glory given; Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing: O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.”

Now that’s a true Christmas carol.

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