Composing the Hymn for the Holy Year of Mercy

By Paul Inwood | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

On March 13, 2015 Pope Francis made the following announcement:

“Dear brothers and sisters, I have often thought of how the Church may render more clear her mission to be a witness to mercy; and we have to make this journey. It is a journey which begins with spiritual conversion. Therefore, I have decided to announce an Extraordinary Jubilee which has at its centre the mercy of God. It will be a Holy Year of Mercy. We want to live in the light of the word of the Lord: ‘Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful’ (cf. Lk 6:36).”

A number of events would take place in Rome in the course of the Holy Year, bookended by the solemn opening of the Holy Door in St. Peter’s on December 8, 2015 and its closing on November 20, 2016, which would be mirrored by the opening and closing of other holy doors in major churches all around the world.

The prospect of perhaps being able to contribute in some way to an extraordinary outpouring of mercy in the spirit of Vatican II was very much in my mind as I sat down on April 9, the Thursday of Easter Week, to start to think about the text.

On March 31, 2015, Monsignor Massimo Palombella, the Maestro di Cappella of the Sistine Chapel Choir, sent an email with attachments to ninety composers around the world, of whom I was one. One of the attachments was a letter of invitation to recipients, dated March 30, to “submit a score for candidacy for the Hymn for the Holy Year of Mercy.” The second attachment was the text of the Hymn itself, as “defined” by a “restricted commission of the Holy See.” “In ‘ecclesial’ logic,” continued the invitation, “it has been thought necessary to have a competition to identify composers with the greatest experience of composing music for the Liturgy. The hymns composed will be judged by a commission which will choose one, proposing any necessary modifications.”

The Holy See had published a jubilee hymn previously, for the Millennium Year 2000. On that occasion the composer had been Jean-Paul Lécot, director of music of the domaine in Lourdes, who was not among those invited to participate on this occasion.

The invitation laid down some rather strict “indications” concerning settings to be submitted:

1. The Hymn has a litany structure (on the model of the Laudes Regiae) and so what is in italics and in
boldface type (a sort of “interpolation”) needs to be easily singable by the Assembly.

2. Obviously the assembly interventions need to be singable and repeatable immediately after a single hearing. The “litanic” responses of the Assembly (those in italics) should always have the same melody.

3. The parts that are not in italics and not in bold are to be entrusted to the Schola and should also, in a basic version, be singable (if necessary) also by the assembly or by a soloist.

Furthermore, “The Hymn shall be translated into the main European languages.”

Additional stipulations followed:

1. One version should be written for Schola in 4 voices (SCTB); and in 2 disparate voices (women and men) and in 2 equal voices (SC; TB)
2. The text in bold should also be elaborated in 4 voices (SCTB) and for Assembly.

Then came the cruncher. The closing date for submissions was May 11, just six weeks from the date of the invitation, which itself had arrived on the Tuesday of Holy Week, the busiest time of the year for pastoral musicians! (One result of this was that, out of ninety composers invited, only twenty-one eventually submitted completed settings.)

In reading Pope Francis’s bull Misericordiae Vultus setting up the Holy Year of Mercy, I had been struck by his exhortation that “we need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace,” and even more so by the fact that he had chosen the date for the opening of the Year because it would be the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council, and “the Church feels a great need to keep this event alive”! The prospect of perhaps being able to contribute in some way to an extraordinary outpouring of mercy in the spirit of Vatican II was very much in my mind as I sat down on April 9, the Thursday of Easter Week, to start to think about the text. For reference I quote here the first few lines as provided by Msgr Palombella:

**Misericòrdes sicut Pater!** [cfr Lc 6, 36] [motto anno d. Miser.]

1. Rendiàmo grazie al Padre, perché è buono
   *in aetèrnum misericòrdia eius* [cfr Sal 135/6]
   ha creato il mòndo con sapiènza
   *in aeternum misericordia eius*
   conduce il suo pòpolo nella stòria
   *in aeternum misericordia eius*
   perdòna e accòglie i suoi figli [cfr Lc 15, ss]
   *in aeternum misericordia eius*

The remainder continued in the same way, with the two-line **Misericordes** refrain appearing only after verses 2 and 4.

The first thing that was very clear was that the Latin refrain and litany responses would be best remaining in Latin, as a unifying component for use all around the world. Next, it seemed obvious that the verses could not be set in any kind of meter, as they would need to be singable in many different languages with different rhythmic characteristics. Third, the five-syllable word **Misericordes** looked as if it would be a compositional difficulty. Fourth, although nothing had been said in the brief concerning accompaniment, I wanted whatever accompaniment there would be to work with guitars as well as with
keyboard instruments. That would dictate a certain harmonic simplicity.

It is my normal practice when faced with a new text to say it, either aloud or in my head, many times over, to live with it and try to distill the essential rhythm of it. In particular, I was concerned about finding a rhythm for that word Misericordes that would be both accessible and memorable. In trying to pitch the mood at the right level, I was very conscious that this was music which would be used in a variety of different ritual contexts, and that it would need to be sufficiently simple to be of real service to people of the most basic accomplishments while not being so simplistic that the more skilled would turn up their noses at it.

What I ended up with was a metrical refrain consisting of a phrase sung once in E-flat major and then repeated down a third in C minor. My friends tell me that I sometimes over-use sequence, but I find it a most useful congregational “hook.” Despite my dislike for beginning a phrase on the half-beat, because I think it can sometimes make it awkward for people to know when to come in, the word Misericordes itself seemed to dictate using such a beginning. The use of sequence would mean that people would not only have room to breathe, they would hear (and feel) the same half-beat beginning a second time and so get used to it more quickly. The idiom of the refrain was unashamedly in the style of Jacques Berthier’s Taizé music with simple root-position chords and a 4-3 suspension. I decided to have it sung after verse 1 and 3 as well as 2 and 4.

For the verses, I opted for an extremely simple Gelineau-style tone, just two notes in one phrase, descending, three notes in the other, ascending, with the same metrical mini-refrain at the end of each line to avoid confusion. Here, too, I had in mind the stipulation that the verses could, at a pinch, even be done by the assembly if a cantor or schola was not available. The rhythmical similarity of my treatment of the word misericordia to Misericordes was an added bonus and helped to give the whole piece some cohesion. I deliberately lengthened the ter of in aeternum [for ever] to emphasize the idea of God’s mercy being everlasting. The Cm7-Fm6/C chord progression in the first line of the verse and the 4-3 suspension at the end of the litany response were intended to convey a sense of mercifulness. Because each verse consisted of four lines and not two, I simply repeated the same music for lines 3 and 4, thus making it easier for singers to learn.

Many people have told me that I “had mercy” on those who sang and prayed the Hymn because it was not too complicated, even though a handful of others have condemned the music as being too simple. I myself did not consider it to be the greatest or most original music I had ever written (!), but I hoped that the combination of Taizé-style refrain and Gelineau-style verses might fill the bill. On April 10, I completed the music and provided an English and a French translation (I am fluent in French and experienced with French liturgical texts) and put the piece on one side to “brew.” By May 11, no further inspiration had come to me, so I sent the score off to the Vatican and forgot about it.
On June 11, I was surprised to receive another email from Msgr. Palombella, informing me that my piece had been chosen as the winner of the competition. They required a single note to be modified: the final two notes of the litany response originally dropped a fourth from G to D; the last note would now be a G. I was happy to agree to that, and had already been thinking that a G might be better.

The email continued:

“We would also like a sextet brass prelude (two trumpets, two horns, one trombone and one tuba) and two interludes (or three) for the brass sextet (these interludes should be after the refrain 'misericordes sicut pater' and finish in C minor).

We would also like a polyphonic coda for chorus a cappella (SATB) finishing in C major.

The Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization will contact you officially for legal issues.”

I responded, asking if July 3 would be soon enough to do all this additional work. By return, I received a reply saying that the “coda polifonica” was extremely urgent because the Sistina would be recording the piece with Vatican Radio during the coming week! Though the brass parts could wait until the beginning of July, it would be good to have the prelude now so that they could record that as well (in the event, they didn’t). So I then spent the entire next twenty-four hours writing and engraving all the additional material, converting it all to XML as Msgr. Palombella uses the Sibelius music-engraving program rather than the Finale system, and sent it off on June 14.

At the same time I contacted an old friend of mine, Fr. Eugenio Costa, who works in the Jesuit Curia beside St. Peter’s Basilica and is very well connected, asking him if he knew anything about the competition. To my astonishment and delight, I discovered that he was the author of the text (the commission having made him modify it several times). I had first met Eugenio at a meeting of Universa Laus in England as far back as 1973.

People used the Hymn as a stand-alone sung item at the beginning of a service, during the presentation of the gifts, during the distribution of Communion, during the anointing of the sick, and accompanying the hearing of individual confessions during a service of reconciliation, but also more creatively as a sung response (refrain only) to an intercessions litany and in other ways.

The next day, June 15, I received a phone call from the Undersecretary of the Pontifical Council. He told me that normally in these circumstances people donate their work to the Holy Father and asked me if I was willing to do that. I answered Yes, and asked if I could tell people about the competition. No, came the answer, not until the Pontifical Council officially announces it. That did not happen until seven and a half weeks later, on August 6, after all my summer conferences were over. In the meantime, I had been flown out to Rome in the last week of July to sign an Act of Donation in the presence of the Vatican Notary (no graphic of my signature embedded in a Word or PDF document for him!), and I was told that I could not tell anyone about that either.

Despite rumors to the contrary, neither Eugenio nor I received a penny for our work. The Hymn was
made available free of charge to anyone who wanted to use it (only publishers were required to enter an agreement with the Pontifical Council). This is also the place to say that a few people criticised the piece because it was a Litany, rather than a Hymn. The descriptor “Hymn” was chosen not by me but by those responsible for organizing the Holy Year of Mercy, as can be seen in the letter of invitation quoted near the beginning of this essay and on the Jubilee of Mercy official website.

Initially that website carried the Hymn verses just in Italian, English and French. People were asking me about other languages, so I asked other Universa Laus and NPM friends to help me produce Spanish, Portuguese, German . . . Other languages followed: Russian, Lithuanian . . . In addition I was asked to produce assembly editions in various formats, three-part choir versions, bilingual versions, and so on. All of that material, and much else (audio clips, video clips, my own brass parts and scores) was done in my own time and during the period from August to November, gradually appeared on my own website.

The version originally posted on the Vatican website also omitted all the guitar chord symbols that I had provided. When I reminded them that this might well exclude a huge number of potential users of the Hymn, they quickly reinstated the chords!

Another Universa Laus friend, Jesuit Fr. Vlastimil Dufka, invited me to Bratislava in November 2015 to supervise a video recording to be made for the Slovak Bishops Conference, using his Slovak translation of the verses. For this purpose he asked me to compose instrumental parts for flute, oboe (he being an oboist), and cello. You will find the instrumental parts and an audio recording, at the web page referenced above. A fine video recording is reproduced here:

The Slovak Bishops’ Catholic Radio station then asked for a “logo” or signature tune for brass that they could use throughout the Holy Year of Mercy in their daily broadcasts. I adapted the brass music I had already written and added some new material. All of that is also available on the same web page.

I was privileged to be able to attend both the opening of the Holy Door at St. Peter’s in December 2015 and its closing in November 2016. In addition I attended several other diocesan door openings, and walked through many more local holy doors in the course of the year. The huge amount of (unpaid) time and effort I put into building up the web page during those four months in the Fall of 2015 was amply compensated by the great sense I had of the whole world praying through this Holy Year, basking in an awareness of the mercifulness of God. I received hundreds of letters, phone calls, emails, photos, PDFs, and audio and video files of celebrations all over the world. In some cases, these translated the Latin refrains into local languages too, as in the Chinese version and the Arabic version (possibly my favourite because of how well it demonstrates inculturation [see below]), both to be found on the same web page. People used the Hymn as a stand-alone sung item at the beginning of a service, during the presentation of the gifts, during the distribution of Communion, during the anointing of the sick, and accompanying the hearing of individual confessions during a service of reconciliation, but also more creatively as a sung response (refrain only) to an intercessions litany and in other ways.

The many compliments, written and spoken, that I received were truly humbling. One priest described how moving he had found it just to walk slowly in procession, singing the Hymn all the way up the Via della Conciliazione to the Holy Door. The most amazing and gratifying aspect of the whole experience for me, however, was the realization that literally millions of people all over the world were praying “in unison,” a symbol of God at work in the Universal Church.
Paul Inwood is an internationally-known liturgist, composer, organist, choral director, author and clinician. His work is found in hymnbooks across the English-speaking world, and he is a frequent contributor to liturgical journals, blogs and forums. He was responsible for the introduction of the music of Taizé into the UK in the 1970s and the music of the Iona Community into the USA in the 1980s. From 1986 to 1998 he was a president of the international liturgical music study group Universa Laus, and in 2009 he was honored as Pastoral Musician of the Year by the National Association of Pastoral Musicians. In 2015 he was named as composer of the official Vatican Hymn for the Holy Year of Mercy. www.magnificatmusic.com

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