

# "A great emancipator, a heart-regulator"

## A God who loves singing and dancing

Anyone who has ever experienced the fervor of African-American worship is likely to be swept back to those moments by the vivid writing in the selection on the following pages, an excerpt from Sister Mary McGann's award-winning book *A Precious Fountain*. Think twice, therefore, before reading it in a public place, for you may soon find yourself swaying to the rhythm of the gospel hymns.

The parish Sister McGann writes about, the lens for her portrait of black worship, is Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Hunter's Point, San Francisco. It is a parish that has drawn RSCJ to ministry for nearly forty years.

In the late 1960s, when Redemptorist Father Don MacKinnon, a cousin of Sally Rude, RSCJ, was named pastor, he asked RSCJ in San Francisco to help build parish programs. Over the years, they have responded so generously that the Society's seal is embedded in one of the stained glass windows. Those who came included Sisters Patricia Desmond, Ellen Hoffman, Judy Roach, Marilyn McMorro, Rosemary Thompson, Mary Lou Warner, Mary Elizabeth Nothomb, and especially Helen Carroll, who worked at the parish for nearly twenty years after retiring as principal of Stuart Hall for Boys, San Francisco.

The RSCJ taught catechism and tutored adults. Sisters Joan McKenna, Helen Donohoe and Connie Welch came from Lone Mountain College in San Francisco to teach classes in Hunter's Point. A community college evolved.

Sister Irma Dillard joined the parish in 1990 and has served as coordinator for the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, facilitated retreats, led Bible study and mentored the present pastor, Father Kirk Ullery. She has helped develop the parish's annual Kwanzaa celebration.

The latest chapter in this long relationship brought Sister McGann to the parish as a doctoral student in liturgy in 1991. Today she regularly sings in the choir, commuting from her home in Berkeley. She describes her initial experience of Lourdes in the introduction to the book.

"Despite the hospitality I felt from members of the community, I knew that I stood at an intersection, a complex border-crossing," she writes. "I was attracted by the art of their communal modes of song and worship, and realized how much I could learn from them. Yet it was clear that I would be changed in the process." Changed she was! *A Precious Fountain* testifies to gifts of insight, wisdom, experience and lasting friendship that she has received from the Lourdes community.



Rose Isles, alto, is one of the lead singers in the Lourdes choir.

“Music is a gift of God,” remarked Tina Edwards breaking into a youthful smile. Tina, Tiffany Isles and I were conversing about how music at Lourdes affects one’s experience of prayer. “Music is natural,” she continued. “Hear the birds! Hum a tune! [Feel it as you’re] walking down the street! It’s the rhythm, it’s the pace, it’s always there! Music is a gift of God, a gift he gave us so that we can worship better, so that we can worship in his house.”

It seemed she’d touched the core, the heart of all that we’d been exploring that April afternoon. The song doesn’t begin with us. It’s a gift of God, to be received and returned in praise to the One from whom it comes. It’s a godly presence that makes our worship fuller, richer, more precious to the One who offers the gift. To receive this gift, explained Tina and Tiffany that afternoon, is to allow the sound, the energy, the truth, the vibrations, the message of the music to fill your body, to stir your soul, and to shake the dust off your praises; to tap into your fears, to flood you with consolation, to break down your inner barriers and enable you to surrender to God. In the rhythms of the body, [they seemed to say,] you discover the rhythms of the Spirit. “Here I am, Lord ... before I was holding back.” Tina concluded. “You release and completely surrender yourself to God.”

As Pat Goodall and I turned off Haight Street onto Clayton Avenue, Pat’s voice was full of animation. Returning from a Day of Prayer for the San Francisco School of Pastoral Leadership, at which the Lourdes choir had sung, we were discussing the importance of people worshipping God according to their own distinctive styles and sensitivities. I pulled the car near the curb across from Pat’s home so as to finish the conversation. “We at Lourdes need to make a joyful noise,” claimed Pat. “We need to worship God *as we know and feel God to be!* Our God is *happy, joyful*, not depressing, sad, or uptight. *God’s shoes don’t pinch!*”

The image lodged in my mind as I continued my drive home. A God whose “shoes don’t pinch,” I mused, is no doubt a God who is at home amidst our singing and dancing; a God who delights in a

creation that is rich with rhythm, movement, color and diversity – all of which is the work of God’s own hand; a God whose Wisdom is at play in the universe, delighting to be at large in “God’s playhouse.” The very *way* we worship and make music, Pat seemed to say, reveals how we know God, how God reveals Godself to us.

Conversation flowed easily among the women of the Lourdes Sodality huddled around a long table in the church hall that May morning. Margaret Fisher was seated across from me, her head nodding as various women spoke about their experience of music in the Lourdes liturgy. Margaret, a slender great-grandmother with wisdom in her eyes and dignity in her bearing, was dressed that morning in a tailored navy suit set off by the ruffled collar of a crimson blouse. A gentle woman, she waited patiently to join the flow of words and images. Then, as if too full to hold back any longer, she remarked, “Well in the *Bible* it says that we should praise God with *cymbals and drums!* Let *everything* praise God...” Her comments were swept along in the flow of conversation, but her reference to Psalm 150 was clear. She might well have continued to claim a biblical warrant for praising God with clanging cymbals, with loud crashing cymbals, with drumming and dancing! “Clap your hands all you peoples, shout to God with cries of joy!” Liz Bell returned to Margaret’s theme moments later. “The instruments – the drums, the piano [we use here at Lourdes] – help bring out the *continued*

*Irma Dillard, RSCJ, (right) and other members of the congregation clap to the rhythm of the opening song of liturgy at Our Lady of Lourdes.*



Photo by Jack Smith, Catholic San Francisco

*feeling of the music, the power. ... Like we're praising the Lord in a lot of ways and with a lot of voices!"*

Instruments, these women seemed to say, stretch our ability to praise God. Drums, piano, crashing and clanging cymbals amplify the sound, the energy, the feeling, and the power of the music so as to awaken our bodies and enable our spirits to resonate with God's gift of song. They expand the "voices" of our praise, enabling us to express the "unsayable" – those dimensions of our praise that go beyond our words.

*"M*any of the songs we sing at Lourdes come from the greater Black church," remarked Father Kirk from across a small kitchen table in the parish rectory as we talked about how this community claims a musical tradition that is both Black and Catholic. "We make them our own. They enrich our Catholicity. But that's not the point for people at Lourdes. ...

"The *main* priority is to praise God. ... It's all about praising God. And there are many ways of praising God. Clapping, for example – we clap to praise the Lord, that's the basic reason, not to keep the choir in rhythm. To make sound before the Lord. ... The priority here is to praise God."

Father Kirk's words are borne out in conversations with others at Lourdes. No matter what the message of a song – be it thanksgiving, supplication, or testimony – the act of singing is understood to be one of praise. Indeed, singers often

use "singing" and "praising" interchangeably. "I love singing to God and praising his name," commented Judy Brown. "I love praising God. That's why I sing – for the grace of God, all the blessings he's given me – singing is just giving back. ... It's giving back to him what he's given me in my life."

At Lourdes, singing and praising are never timid or hesitant. A God who "is worthy to be praised," as song after song reiterates, deserves colorful praise, embodied praise, dancing praise, and at times, ecstatic praise.

These conversations weave a perception that at Lourdes, music-making is revelatory – revelatory of the community's experience of who God is, of what it is like to be in God's presence, of what it means to be created in God's image, and of what it is like to experience God as living Presence at the heart of the community's prayer. In the rhythms of the body one discovers the rhythms of God's Spirit – a God who loves singing and dancing.

Music as gift "of God" carries the imprint of the Giver – a Giver whose life is refracted in sound and movement, in dress and dance, in timbre and gesture. At Lourdes, to sing and praise God is to become a vessel of that life, to be moved by that life, allowing it to fill one's mind, to touch one's emotions and liberate one's body. It is to realize that "the world and time are the dance of the Lord." It is to join the "cosmic dance" which, as the great contemplative Thomas Merton once wrote, "beats in our very blood."

*Below left, Father Kirk Ullery, pastor of Lourdes, preaches at Sunday liturgy. Below right, members of the congregation stand one by one, as they are inspired to join the choir in making music.*



*I*t was the only time I saw Brother Banks dance. The "holy dance" that is, a dance recognized by the community as the impulse of the Holy Spirit. A dance that reaches back into the tradition of Black worship. A dance he no doubt first experienced in his youth on a Louisiana plantation, in the gatherings for praise and worship which he so beautifully described in our conversations.

It was June of '94 – a challenging time for the parish, a time of uncertainty. Just a week before the archdiocese had announced the closure of All Hallows, Lourdes' neighboring parish, and Lourdes was faced with an influx of new members into its tiny church house. What would become of this parish? Father Kirk would ask as he preached that morning. How would he and members of the



community welcome another community in grief, mourning over the loss of their beloved parish – including a large Samoan community with its own distinctive style of worship and life together?

Before the liturgy began that morning, Father Kirk sensed a heaviness in people’s hearts and requested that someone in the choir sing “Unwavering Faith” – a song that could capture the sentiments and prayer of the community, their plea for “faith to climb those mountains” which inevitably lay before them. Yet after a day of rehearsing for a gospel concert in Santa Clara, neither Ernestine Harris nor Pat Goodall felt ready for the vocal challenge.

Just then, like a miracle, Charlene Edwards arrived unexpectedly all the way from Stockton, and was pressed into service. Many times before, during her years as choir director, Charlene’s resonant contralto voice had gathered the Lourdes community into a fervent plea for “unwavering faith,” for “faith to climb that old, old rugged hill”; for “faith to ensure God will answer if we only do his will.” This morning would be no different.

It is late in the service and people are settling into their pews after receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, when Charlene moves to the microphone.

**LORD // GIVE ME // THAT  
UN-WAY-ER-ING FAITH!** (Yes, Lord!)

she begins freely, in unmetred rhythm, the fullness of her voice drawing us into a communion of spirits. As each unhurried line flows out into the community, the ardor in Charlene’s voice swells ever so gently, the responses of *Yes, Lord!* and *Amen!* from around the church became more insistent. By the time she reaches the end of the song, a final soaring invocation for “unwavering faith,” many are in tears.

But then, a sudden sea change washed the church house. As the final cadence of Charlene’s song sound, with arpeggiated piano flourish and a swell of Isaiah’s cymbals, Charlene glances at Pat Goodall. Their eyes meet. A brief word is exchanged. Then a hushed word to Reed and Isaiah, who know all the songs by heart, and Reed segues into a jubilant “old, old gospel song,” recognized immediately as “I’ve Got Jesus and That’s Enough!” Isaiah is right behind, tapping into its rollicking



*Above left, lead singer Rita Turner, soprano, sings at the microphone as swaying choir members provide backup.*



*Above right, Louise Wood, a member of the congregation, claps and joins in the singing.*

duple meter with cymbals swinging and drums pulsing. Even before Charlene begins to sing, people around the church house are on their feet. Rhythmic clapping echoes off the walls. Charlene launches into a first verse, her voice spirited against Reed and Isaiah’s infectious syncopations:

**THERE’S ALWAYS SOMEBODY TALKING  
ABOUT ME // REALLY I DON’T MIND!  
THEY TRY THEIR BEST TO BLOCK MY  
PROGRESS // MOST ALL THE TIME.  
THE MEAN THINGS THEY SAY DON’T  
MAKE ME FEEL SAD; I CAN’T LOSE A  
FRIEND THAT I NEVER HAD.**

*I’ve got Je-sus and that’s enough!*

The entire church house seems to have joined Charlene on this last affirmation: “*I’ve got Jesus and that’s enough!*” *Yes!* calls someone from the first pew. *Amen!* shouts another from further back.

The song has hardly begun when Brother Banks rises to his full stature behind the choir. Cautiously, now, he begins to descend the three steps from where he was seated beside Father Kirk. Parting the choir line with a gentle nudge, he slowly walks out in front of the singers, and there, in the midst of the sanctuary, like the center of a ring shout, Brother Banks begins to sway with the gently percussive movements of an elderly dancer. Whatever has seized his soul is likewise stirring his body!

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To my amazement, he sways as if lost in the music. His movements are halting but never constrained. His white alb and red print stole shift from side to side with the gentle oscillation of his body, his arms, elbows bent, set in motion as if to an inner dance. “I’ve got Jesus and that’s enough!” rings another pulsing chorus. Joy, it seems, has taken hold, not only of Brother Banks but of the whole church house.

The lyrics are tripping off Charlene’s tongue as she sets up a rapid call-response:

**HE’S A GREAT EMANCIPATOR!**

**A HEART-REGULATOR!**

**ALL: Jesus is! Jesus is!**

**HE MAKES MY BURDENS LIGHTER, MY  
PATHWAY BRIGHTER!**

**ALL: Yes he will! Yes he will!**

**YOU BREAK ME DOWN AND GOD PICKS  
ME UP. STAYS RIGHT BY ME WHEN THE  
GOING GETS TOUGH!**

I’ve got Je-sus, and that’s enough!

Brother Banks, leaning ever so slightly forward, rocks rhythmically with each rapid phrase. Shifting weight from one foot to another, as if walking in place, his shoulders undulate in rapid waves of motion that echo through his arms and torso. Then, his feet shuffling, he turns in place. It seems Brother Banks is doing what we all wish to do. He dances at the center of the gathering, dances in our name! We’ve come into a clearing with him, a place of trust and celebration. It’s not that we’ve escaped the challenge of “climbing those rugged mountains” about which Charlene just sang, nor the “unwavering faith” necessary to make that ascent – but that we’ve broken through into a place of assurance, of security that God will be there with us. Behind Brother Banks, the choir is swaying with a jubilant sense of “victory” as Charlene invites us to declare over and again, “I’ve got Je-sus, and that’s enough!” It’s a moment of grace, a moment of reassurance. The Incarnate One, who knows our struggles and offers us hope, seems to be dancing in the very rhythms of Brother Bank’s elderly body. ❖



*Above, Isaiah Brown, instrumentalist at Lourdes since he was five years old, gives power to the music with his drums. Below, Sister Mary McGann, wearing a choir robe with African-American motifs for “Lourdes Day,” speaks with a member of the congregation.*

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