

Thanksgiving for a Pilgrim of Music

By Fr. Dean McFalls, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Lathrop, CA. Nov. 16th, 2007

Last Wednesday, I started my Thanksgiving early. John Michael Talbot, probably the single most influential English Catholic musician during the past twenty-five years, came to Stockton. Having seen him last in Toronto at World Youth Day 2002, and in Modesto (1997), I was eager to soak in his melodies and join in the prayer at Presentation Church.

Talbot has played a special role in my Catholic life. Born one year and two days before me, he lived through the same era, had some of the same fallen heroes of youth pop culture, experienced some of the same disillusionment with the decline in American values, and made a similar spiritual journey. In my case, the pilgrimage led to the priesthood. In his case, his early success as a country rock performer (Mason Proffit) gave way to four years of searching, embracing the Catholic Church, and ministering through music, spiritual guidance, founding of a community and extensive works of charity. He has made over forty recordings and has sold over four million copies. His music has been used worldwide.

No sooner had I been confirmed on Easter Saturday, 1981, than I found my first vinyl disk of JMT. Called "Come to the Quiet", it incorporated the Morning Prayer of priests, religious brothers and sisters, and devout Catholics throughout the world. At that time, I was training in hospital chaplaincy in Albuquerque, NM. Every morning, I'd play the record as I prepared for the long hours ahead at the hospital. And that being the year when the *Walkman* was introduced, morning praise became mobile.

Later, Talbot's music would become part of the fabric of my daily life. So it was great to see him in concert in Seattle (1987) as I prepared to enter a religious order. He, by then, had established the "Little Portion", a Franciscan community in Arkansas. The contemplative life turned out to be the source of tremendous inspiration in composing his music.

So, having been influenced so much during my life as a Catholic by this great man, I was excited to know he'd be in Stockton. As Wednesday's Mass wrapped up, though, things changed. First, we celebrated the ninth day of prayers for a young man whose life, at thirty-three, was cut short by a drunken driver. Alex, in his own way, was tremendously talented and had a very big heart. But he didn't get to realize his fullest potential.

We also prayed for a fifteen-year-old girl who underwent a six-hour surgery for severe scoliosis. Her family has been through living hell for two years now, for many reasons; they see this surgery as a sign of hope.

Finally, I was about to race off for the concert (just a little bit late) when a dozen youth walked in with their parents. They wanted to confess. I'd told them they could rehearse the girl's "Quinceañera" ceremony that day, but had expected them at another time for reconciliation. Now it was too late. They wouldn't have another opportunity. So I sat down to hear their stories, and to offer God's forgiveness, as John Michael Talbot began his concert twenty-five miles away. Without revealing the content of the confessions, I can say that I'm sure glad I chose to stay behind.

Reconciliation and practice over, I closed up the church and checked the upper bathrooms before leaving. Unfortunately, one toilet was plugged.

Doors had to be checked, and I stopped by to greet several kids whose parents were in meetings. Someone needed to talk. O.K. Was it worth it to drive up to Stockton? "Yes," an inner voice replied. "Go. Fast."

Thank God I had just enough gas. And a parking spot was open, in the midst of so many vehicles. As I walked into the darkened church, a full ninety minutes late, I could see my hero-musician sitting in a pool of light beneath the huge figure of the risen Christ. Taking up my place in front of the baptismal font, dead center, I could bask in the last twenty minutes of music, flanked by hundreds of people from near and far away.

The first song I heard was one of my favorites. I had first heard it near Jemez Springs, New Mexico, not far from the Navaho reservation, on a field trip with friends from the hospital. Other songs invoked other parts of my spiritual journey as a Catholic. The last one was brand new. It was a beautiful invitation to prayer. I wished it could have lasted forever.

And then the concert was suddenly over. People jumped up to greet each other and flooded back to continue their own personal journeys. A tiny black woman of perhaps fifty-five to sixty was walking out alone. I approached her and asked how she'd enjoyed the concert. She broke a big smile and said, "Just great, praise the Lord!" Suddenly she was surrounded by her Methodist friends from Davis. I told them how I'd made my journey from a similar church. Then, with a hug, we parted company. I wanted to linger, having just retraced twenty-six years of life in twenty minutes. But the pilgrimage goes on. I'll just keep singing.