

### *C* is for *Cantus firmus* *On a reed!!*

I think you'll enjoy my analogy, if you understand the terms first. So, a little explanation for the sake of those who might otherwise wrinkle the brow.

A *cantus firmus*, literally "firm song," is a pre-existing melody which forms the basis of a polyphonic composition. For example, Johann Sebastian Bach wrote an organ prelude on the tune of the chorale we know in English as "Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying." In Bach's chorale prelude *Wachet auf*, one hears the slow, steady melody, the *cantus firmus*, played in whole notes in the midst of a lot of other musical action. I'd love to show you, or better yet have an organist play it for us, so you could hear, but maybe you have a recording. Or, search YouTube for *Wachet auf* Bach BWV 645.

"On a reed"? No one who listens to that chorale prelude should have any trouble discerning the melody. Because when the actual chorale is introduced into the musical mixture it is played on a rank of pipes which sound very distinctive. You could say nasal, like an oboe or bassoon. That is what is called a "reed" on an organ. Of course, the "reed" of an organ pipe is not actually made from a reed, but is metal.

May we proceed?

If you're ready now, let me introduce the text from which I am taking a little clip ("*cantus firmus* on a reed") to introduce my report on the Fourth Interna-



*Singing the cantus firmus at the Eucharist service in January at the 4th International Crossings Conference.*

tional Conference of the Crossings Community in Belleville, Illinois, in January 2012. It is a bit of parody written to the music of said chorale prelude, and you will appreciate it best if you know the music, but I think you can appreciate it even if you don't. My source is primarily my memory from a performance at a music camp in Vermont back in the 1960's, but someone I knew back then has helped me fill in a couple lines I had forgotten. According to him, it has roots farther back, at a school in England. My apologies to anyone whose rights are being infringed, including Mr. Bach.

*We all can play the organ, organ,  
Ever so clear and brightly.  
We play the six sonatas, -natas,  
Ever so clean and lightly.  
We do not employ the swell expression shades,  
To manipulate them is, of course, forbidden!  
We use the foundations,  
With flutes and mutations,  
And this we heed, we heed,  
**To play the cantus firmus on a reed, a reed,**  
And then the other voices smoothly flo-ow a-  
alo-ong thei-eir way,  
And that's the way we play!*

Now. After that lilting introduction comes the *cantus firmus*. On a reed, of course. Firmly.

*J. S. Bach, we do adore thee.*

*We hope our playing doth not bore thee.*

*We magnify thy glorious name.*

*We play all the trills and mordants,*

*Accordingly and in accordance,*

*Beginning on the upper note.*

*We practice every day*

*In the approved way:*

*Very slowly.*

*Don't use the vox*

*Like Virgil Fox!*

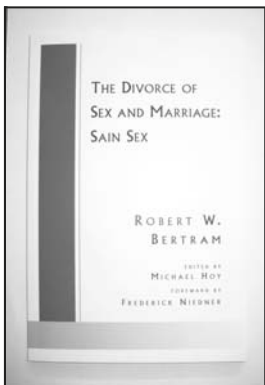
*We take these things so seriously.*

What made our International Crossings Conference so great? We heard the *cantus firmus* being played on a reed.

I've been to church conferences and assemblies and conventions where it was nearly impossible to discern the *cantus firmus*, the Gospel. To know what the church is all about. Because the Gospel was not being played on a reed.

Sometimes, you're lucky if it's being played at all. There are so many voices, so many hobby horses being trotted out. But not always the "strong song," the "fixed song," the "firm song," the melody the church is all about: the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Even when people write theology these days, even when sermons are preached, the *cantus firmus* is too often just another line, just one voice among many, none of them all that clear.

## The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex



**Robert W. Bertram**

**Edited by Michael Hoy**

*This book, which Bob Bertram was working on before his death, and now made ready for printing by Michael Hoy, is available by writing or emailing Crossings (see address below) and including \$13. (check or paypal).*

At Belleville we heard the firm song over and over again, to our mutual joy and encouragement. To quote from the above ditty, "That's the way we play." The argument of the Crossings Community is that when we properly distinguish the Gospel, when we highlight its singular importance relative to everything else we do and say, the whole point of God's Word to us in Christ becomes clear and bright.

The "special operations" of the Gospel (healing, peace-making, consolation, making us holy) are strengthened, and Christ gets his props.

At Belleville 2012, our speakers and friends worked from many angles, talked of many things, but everyone kept coming back to the necessity, even when speaking about discipleship, to let the Gospel rule.

It was a regular *chi-rho* kazoo. *Cantus firmus* on a reed.

## *R is for Read.*

Why should you miss that, just because you weren't there?

You say you were?

Even then, go and read again, the papers which were given at the conference, even if you heard them live. They are available at [www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org), click on conference, click on papers, click on 2012, and take your pick.

Click and **read**. (I suppose that is the new *tolle lege*.) (If you don't know, Google it.)

I was enlightened and heartened by re-reading Steve Kuhl's excellent keynote addresses, in which he revisits the conference topic of discipleship by walking us through the Gospel of Matthew. There is a facile reductionism at work in many parts of the church, by which "discipleship" is reduced to copying Jesus. Imitation. Or, if not imitating Jesus, doing lots of reps of certain prescribed behaviors by which, through much doing, we will save ourselves and the world. Steve helps us see through that:

Discipleship is not first and foremost about what the disciple does for Christ or anyone

else for that matter. It is first and foremost about what Christ wants to do for the disciple. In a nutshell, he wants to lead the disciple as sinner through death (understood ultimately as God's judgment upon all that opposes God) into a new life in Christ (understood ultimately as a life reconciled to God). Therefore the call to discipleship, "to follow me," is not a call to imitate Christ's life but to trust Christ with our life, or more precisely, with our death, which is where our life is going in the first place because of our sin and God's law. When Jesus says "follow me," he is inviting us to trust him to manage our death under the promise that he can raise us to new life. . . . The call to discipleship is about placing our lives under this death-defeating, new-life-creating management of Christ.

He goes on, in part two, to demonstrate from Matthew how that relationship with Christ is not a do-it-yourself project but involves us in being the church. In part three (I hope this will soon be on the Crossings website) he shows how the disciples who are in Christ and who live in the church are in the world.

The relationship with Christ is what constitutes the disciple as disciple and consists of faith alone. The disciple's relationship to the Church is the means by which Christ nurtures the disciple and consists in fellowship in Christ. The relationship of the disciple to the world is the way Christ makes new disciples, and it consists of witness and service to the world.

Read. On a reed.

## O is for "standing O"

We were thrilled (how else could you interpret the standing ovation Pastor Felix Meylahn received at the end of his presentation) to hear from a South African pastor about how the Gospel lifts people up in a situation fraught with immense difficulties for everyone, but special difficulties for Christians, whose freedom is not the freedom to think only of themselves. He told us about some of his members whose sense of vocation frees them to serve, in school or hospital, going for many months without their pay and suffering intolerable working conditions. All this he systematically related to our triune faith, and to the Small Catechism, using a drawing his daughter created showing the two hands of what he refers to as our "ambidextrous God." (Become his Facebook friend, and see for yourself.)



Felix Meylahn (above); the five bishops (from left) Martin Wells, Tom Skrenes, Marcus Lohrmann, S. John Roth, Gerald Mansholt

O is for the Others, too, all of them worthy of praise. Thanks be to Mark Mattes for clarifying two prevalent alternative models for thinking about discipleship, linking them to social gospel and Pietism. Like Kuhl's presentation, that of Mattes alerted us to ways the *cantus firmus* can actually get lost when churches trumpet other priorities. His work will be published in an

other place. Soon, we hope.

Rick Bliese and Matt Becker were there to help us see how Bonhoeffer thought. Kit Kleinhans wittily introduced us to some ramifications of social media for our gospeling, particularly in her college campus context. Five ELCA bishops let us hear how they see discipleship in their calling. Jerry Burce scintillated on Mark, from what I hear. (I didn't get to hear it.) Steve Albertin blessed us with a series of Sermon on the Mount reflections, and Lori Cornell played the *cantus firmus* for the Eucharist on Tuesday evening. Catch what you can, by reading the library of 2012 conference papers at the website [www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org).

## *S is for Silence*

A minute of, so we can transition from J. S. Bach to The Carpenters. Editor, please leave a respectful space or two at this point, please?

## *S-I-N-G is for SING*

If you are of a certain age, you know the song by The Carpenters, “Sing!” If you aren’t, maybe your browser is still open and you can check it out on YouTube. If you are older than me, don’t bother, just go with the written word, which is still around.

Sing, sing a song!  
Make it simple, to  
last your whole  
life long.  
Don’t worry that  
it’s not good  
enough for any-  
one else to hear,  
Just sing, sing a  
song!

Sing, sing a song,  
Let the whole world sing along.  
Sing of love there could be,  
Sing for you and for me,

I’m not claiming that the famous singing siblings were evangelists. You would have to swap “the” for “a” in the first line, at least. Doubtless they were encouraging people to sing whatever was in them (*facere quod in se est*). But we have a firm song, and a Great Imperative. The *cantus firmus* is to be sung. The living voice of the Gospel is not just to be talked about, not just to have papers written about, but actually to be announced. Lifted up above the fray, the bedlam of competing inspirations and ideas with which the world is filled as never before.

The last time there was complete radio silence in the world was for the minute back in July 1937 when all broadcasting was suspended in honor of Guglielmo Marconi, upon his death. It will never be again. But amid all the verbal jousting and jostling which fills the lower atmosphere of our planet, there is still a voice



which rises above all the others, as though on a reed, to tell us that it is in the face of Jesus Christ, the Crucified One, that we see the glory of our God, whose delight it is to give us his peace.

This needs to be sung, to be believed. I half believe Martin Luther’s assertion, “*So singen sie’s nicht, so glauben sie’s nicht!*” (If they won’t sing it, they don’t believe it!) Maybe he was exaggerating, but maybe not.

But whether you are singing, or just telling something so sweet it sounds like a song, proclaim the Word that gives life. Don’t let the bells and whistles cover it up.

Don’t let it get lost in a salad of in-junctions (“Let us do more! Let us try harder!”) Get out wax paper and a comb, and tell the Gospel.

## *S is for Stops*

*As in “Pull out all the Stops”*

This is the point at which the editor begins to sound like the preacher on the radio, and maybe ah do, but anyway. Crossings thanks you for the kind generosity of you who supply the dollars (and other currencies) which keep our lights on. When we put on a conference, maintain a website, send out a newsletter to encourage the singing of the *cantus firmus*, it is really you who are doing it. You are down in the cellar below the organ pumping the bellows. You are the wind beneath our wings. (Ouch. Strike that one!) You are the community we are talking about, when we say The Crossings Community. We count on you. Please use the enclosed envelope to help us continue. You know how much to put in.

P.S.: When the song says “Don’t use the *vox* like Virgil Fox,” it is referring to the *vox humana*, a tremulous stop meant to imitate human singing. Frankly, it sounds phony. But old Virgil Fox used it a lot. Don’t use that one. Who needs the *vox humana*, when you have the *viva vox evangelii*, the living voice of the Gospel, which is you telling someone the Good News about Jesus, for their peace?

P.P.S.: Wake! Awake! For night is flying!