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M. ALFRED BICHSEL (1909 – 1992)

... was remembered in many quarters of the church's musical and liturgical communities with sadness and honor when he died in 1992. The candle-lighting ceremony at the North American Academy of Liturgy in January, 1993, however, struck a particularly appropriate note; for "Bix" (as he was generally known) had fused a pastoral-liturgical vision with profound musical gifts in his highly influential life as a church musician and educator. His broad interests and worldly-wise humor provided a model for church musicians who bring to worship leadership something more than technical skills.

Bichsel's background was unusually rich. Born in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, he arrived in the United States eighteen years later. After studies at Concordia Collegiate Institute (now Concordia College, Bronxville) he went on to earn a Bachelor of Divinity at Concordia Seminary (Saint Louis) and was subsequently ordained into the ministry of the Lutheran Church. Further education led to a master of sacred music degree from Union Seminary School of Music (New York) and a doctorate from the University of Strasburg. He also studied at the Julliard School of Music, American Institute of Musicology (Rome), and Eastman School of Music (Rochester, New York). He counted among his teachers such outstanding musicians as Yvonne

Rokseth, Clarence Dickinson, Ferde Grofé, T. Tertius Noble, and Leo Schrade.

Bichsel's teaching career took him first to Concordia Collegiate Institute, his one-time *alma mater*; but in 1943 he was called to teach languages and music at Valparaiso University (Indiana). There he became associated with Theodore Hoelty-Nickel, who arrived at roughly the same time. Bichsel established the University's Chapel Choir and was active in the development of the annual Church Music Seminar (originally known as the Church Music Conference), which was instituted in 1944 under Hoelty-Nickel's leadership. The Church Music Seminar played a major role in restoring a sense of liturgical purpose and higher standards for church music among Lutherans. It still functions today, though its program has been folded into the annual Valparaiso Institute of Liturgical Studies, in which Bichsel also took a leading role. The Institute originated in 1949, responding to a proposal from University President O. P. Kretzmann for an annual offering which would continue and redirect the older liturgical interest group known as the St. James Society. The Church Music Seminar and the Institute of Liturgical Studies that took shape at Valparaiso University represented Bichsel's two commitments: to a high practice of church music and to liturgical renewal.

Bichsel's influence eventually extended far beyond Lutheran circles. During the Valparaiso years, for example, he also lectured at the former Chicago Musical College. A major move took him to a double appointment teaching church music at Colgate Rochester Divinity School while also organizing and chairing the new department of church music at Eastman School of Music. Especially the Eastman position made him mentor to a whole generation of outstanding church musicians. He retired in 1975. Throughout his career, however, Bichsel saw himself primarily as a pastor. That did not change in retirement when he served as assistant pastor at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church (Rochester, New York).

Bichsel may have been a musician and pastor, but he was also a sophisticated man of the world and a master teacher. He played violin and piano in addition to the organ. Life for his friends was richer for his storytelling and his ease in talking about everyone and everything. He remembered names and cherished people. Above all, he knew his musical craft, practicing and teaching it with high standards. For some, those standards were intimidating, at least until “Bix” had given them self-confidence and shared with them the richness of his own personality.

Bichsel had a vision of church music that was primarily liturgical, and that liturgical vision shaped his many church music editions, articles (especially in the Valparaiso University church music reports), contributions to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, an unusually long list of lectureships, and published booklets (e.g. the “Manual on the Pastor’s Chant”). He wrote in his memoirs that “where there is a high regard for liturgy and liturgical life . . . music of high caliber will be produced.” Church musicians in our time, struggling to rediscover guiding principles for their work, may well remember “Bix” and his unwavering commitment to church music that was always defined liturgically. His preference for historic styles was undeniable, and his scholarship led him to high regard for the best in music. His values, however, were based on a devotion to church, ministry, and liturgy. In that regard, “Bix” might still be considered our teacher.

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For Further Reference

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Valparaiso University Archives and Special Collections (Reference: M. Alfred Bichsel)

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