

Why Catholic bishops rocked out to megachurch worship hits

by [Bob Smietana](#)

August 21, 2024



Catholic bishops sing "How Great Is Our God" during the National Eucharistic Congress, July 20, at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. (RNS photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

In mid-July, Lucas Oil Stadium, home of the Indianapolis Colts, was transformed into a place of worship as more than 50,000 Catholics gathered for the National Eucharistic Congress.

The stadium full of young people, nuns in an array of habits, and priests in black and brown faced an altar adorned with four candlesticks and a golden monstrance displaying a consecrated host for eucharistic adoration.

Then there were the Catholic bishops and other worshippers in the stands, hands raised in worship, singing "How Great Is Our God," a megachurch-style worship anthem, as a church rock band played on stage. That song was one of several

Protestant-style worship songs sung at the Eucharistic Congress. Others included “[Way Maker](#),” “Build My Life,” “Come to the Altar,” and “[Praise](#),” the latest hit from [Elevation](#), one of the so-called Big Four megachurches that [dominate](#) the worship music charts.

The presence of these songs is one more sign of the triumph of the Big Four churches, whose charismatic-tinged anthems can be found in Christian gatherings of all kinds. But the songs also reveal a new kind of ecumenical liturgical movement—built on friendship, songs, and shared experience rather than formal denominational cooperation.

One of the clearest examples of this ecumenical liturgical movement came during the COVID-19 pandemic, when [hundreds](#) of virtual choirs from different Christian traditions around the world all recorded versions of “The Blessing,” a [hit worship song from](#) [Elevation](#), said worship scholars Sarah Kathleen Johnson and Anneli Loepp Thiessen.

In a 2023 article for the [academic journal Worship](#), Johnson and Thiessen pointed out that the song had been recorded more than 100 times—by [Catholics in Singapore](#), [Lutherans](#) in Washington state, an [ecumenical virtual choir](#) in Pittsburgh—who all found common meaning in the song.

Johnson, an assistant professor of liturgy and pastoral theology at St. Paul University in Ottawa, Ontario, said she’s been encountering songs like “The Blessing” in unexpected places for a decade—which changed the way she thought about these songs.

These songs, she thought, might be a sign that Christians who are often divided have more in common than they realize. They are singing with more people than they know, she said.

“That led me to wonder, how can this shared music help Christians who struggle to recognize each other, enter into a new kind of relationship through these shared worship practices,” she said.

Thiessen, a doctoral candidate at the University of Ottawa who worked with Johnson on a new Mennonite [hymnal committee](#), said Christians have always borrowed songs from one another.

And they may not be aware of where those songs come from, she said.

Both Johnson and Thiessen said that in a time when people are divided, even in churches, the ecumenical power of worship songs gives them hope.

“We’re sharing the same songs, even though we’re attending different churches,” Johnson said. “We have a common language, a common expression of worship that we can enter into together. And I find that very, very hopeful.”

Thiessen also said that in recent decades, there’s been more collaboration among musicians from different traditions in writing music for worship. For example, the Catholic songwriter Matt Maher, whose song “Your Grace Is Enough” is a staple in megachurches, co-wrote “Lord, I Need You”—another megachurch hit—with a group of evangelical co-writers and has [collaborated](#) with Chris Brown, a songwriter from Elevation.

Maher, who led worship one night at the Eucharistic Congress, said that friendships among songwriters from different traditions can help Christians see what they have in common. Maher got his big break when Chris Tomlin, one of the best-known worship artists, [recorded Maher’s](#) song “Your Grace Is Enough.”

Maher recalled some evangelicals being surprised the song came from a Catholic musician.

“Catholics believe in grace—it’s just that we live in a sacramental reality in terms of how we experience grace,” he said. “But the idea of saying that God’s grace is sufficient is scriptural.”

Maher said that modern songs that cross denominational boundaries tend to be based on Bible verses. They also focus on common longings among Christians, such as the desire to draw close to God. Those songs may draw on familiar themes. He pointed to the song “Lord, I Need You,” which Maher said was inspired by an old Protestant hymn, “I Need Thee Every Hour,” and echoes some of that hymn’s emotional core.

“I always say a big part of faith is memory,” he said.

Songs that cross denominational boundaries can come with challenges. Justin Sytsma, pastor of worship and outreach at Kortright Presbyterian Church in Guelph, Ontario, said that he “reluctantly” leads a handful of songs from churches like the

Big Four in worship.

That's in part because of concerns about the prosperity-gospel leaning of Steven Furtick, the senior pastor of Elevation, who is also a songwriter, as well as the [scandals](#) that rocked Hillsong, the Australian megachurch and music industry powerhouse.

Sytsma said his church sings both what he called "tried and tested" songs as well as some newer songs. When people suggest songs from the Big Four, he feels torn, not wanting to impose theological purity tests while also not wanting to support ministries he does not trust.

"Sometimes I feel like there's no better choice than for me just to sing some of those old hymns," he said.

Some denominational groups have begun to curate their own lists of popular worship songs. Those lists often draw from the [worship charts](#) published by Christian Copyright Licensing International, more commonly known as CCLI.

Such lists try to highlight popular CCLI songs that fit a denomination's theology, said Nelson Cowan, a United Methodist worship leader who directs the Center for Worship and the Arts at Samford University, a Baptist school in Birmingham, Alabama. The idea, said Cowan, is to supplement the most popular songs with more denominationally distinctive options.

The CCLI website also includes a [liturgy planner](#) to help musicians at local Catholic parishes use modern worship music during masses.

He was not surprised to hear that megachurch-style worship songs were featured at the National Eucharistic Congress. The songs played there, he said, were focused on direct praise of God, rather than teaching theological concepts—so they fit at the event.

David Moore, who led worship during the Eucharistic Congress, said songs such as "Praise" or "How Great Is Our God" were a good fit in part because they were meant for large groups to sing in worship. There aren't many songs in the Catholic tradition that work for singing in a stadium-sized event.

But even more important was that all the songs during the congress, from chant and a gospel choir to modern worship and hymns, focused on direct praise and adoration

of God. The desire to sing praises and be close to God is something all Christians share.

Moore, who often leads worship nights at local parishes, said he learned that lesson while growing up in a family where his relatives went to different churches. His grandfather was Catholic, his grandmother was Southern Baptist, and a few of their relatives were Church of Christ. But when they all got together for the holidays, they'd pull out an old Baptist hymnal.

Singing about the goodness of God, he said, bound them all together. That's more important than where a song came from, who wrote it or what theological camps it falls in.

"I don't really care about that," he said. "I care about the Lord being honored, adored, and worshipped. That's where we find unity."—Religion News Service