

THE LDS HYMNAL: VIEWS ON FOREIGN EDITIONS

The Spanish Hymnal

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The Church in the Latin-American countries faces acute problems in relation to music and worship. While this is not readily apparent to the general Church membership and leadership, it is of great concern to aesthetically-minded members in Latin America who wish to upgrade church life in its various facets and to help their brothers and sisters in their upward reach. Of these people, the most sensitive towards music and poetry realize that there is a problem that should be faced squarely in the very near future, and it has to do with finding ways to provide the Church with an inspiring corpus of music which can aid the worshipper in fulfilling his desire to commune with his Creator. Such music would also be capable of teaching the doctrines, commandments, and ethical laws in the mind of the worshipper; remind him of his relationship with Deity; and help him celebrate the joy of being part of the Restored Church.

In speaking of a corpus of music I refer not only to hymns, but also of choral and organ music, the shortage of which is indeed a more acute problem. Nevertheless, the scope of this article is limited to the musical portions of the worship services which directly involve congregational participation, namely, hymns.

It is evident that those who produced the first and only hymnal for the Spanish-speaking countries had lofty goals. These goals need not now be changed, but only more effectively achieved. As it now stands, the Spanish hymnal is a conglomeration of mediocre and bad translations of English texts, set to music of the same calibre. The bad, unfortunately, is prevalent.

There is a need for a revision and expansion of the Spanish hymnal which would yield a new collection of hymns accessible to the majority, musically, poetically and theologically. The texts should be easily comprehensible when read or sung and should be written in currently-used Spanish. The latter is imperative, and would exclude many archaic translations. This obviously places the responsibility of creative work on the native talent to produce its own literature.

The Spanish hymnal came to life in the 1940s. Before then congregations used a book which contained only texts, with accompaniment played from either the English *Deseret Sunday School Songs* (1909) or *Latter-day Saint Hymns* (1927), according to the occasion. Congregations learned the tunes by rote, and there was no singing part.

I remember as a young boy the excitement with which the new hymnal was received in Buenos Aires. A collection of beautifully-bound musical settings of our own hymns was beyond everyone's expectations. This, of course, satisfied a tremendous need, and the effort put into its production deserved the praise it received.

Members of the Church in those years came essentially from the middle and

lower-middle classes; many had limited educations and lived relatively simple lives. Although sensitive to the gospel, they were generally indiscriminating in other aspects of their religious and secular lives. They took the new hymnal to their hearts and were thrilled to have it, and for many years it satisfied its intended purpose. However, as time went by, the Church attracted converts with higher education, experience, culture and expectations. As these new members began to take a closer look at the hymnal they realized that it left many things to be desired.

The Spanish hymnal is derived from the American *Latter-day Saint Hymns* of 1927 (over 200 selections) and the *Deseret Sunday School Songs* of 1909. Many of the original English texts are poetically weak to begin with. They seem only to get worse in translation, and have a certain awkwardness when coupled with poor tunes. The translations are extremely poor, so much so that many hymns are unintelligible at first sight, yielding exact meaning only after careful reading. In order to fit text to music, the translators often wrenched the syntax terribly. For example, the meaning of a phrase or stanza is often dependent upon the phrase or stanza which follows it. Frequently one must wait until the end of a stanza to catch the verb needed to complete the action. Language difficulties are compounded by inferior musical settings.

Another weakness of the Spanish hymnal is its use of archaic and obsolete words and phrases, making understanding difficult without the assistance of a dictionary. Owing to these and related problems, many hymns are shallow in content and extremely naive. The gospel and ballad type tune comprises over one third of the entire hymnal. Both text and music in the majority lack dignity, substance and character.

As one peruses the pages of the Spanish hymnal, it is evident that its compilers aimed at functionality—a hymnal for all seasons to be used by all organizations of the Church. The first thirty-five selections are geared to primary-aged children. Many of these are didactic in nature and not all are faith-promoting or spiritual. One song is entitled “Let’s Brush Our Teeth.”

Next there are ten Christmas hymns, all set to traditional American tunes. One New Year’s song is included, which, considering its quality, would have been more appropriately placed in the children’s section. The text continues with a dozen songs for youth. The remaining selections touch many different subjects of the Restored Gospel and embrace many styles, including Psalter, Eighteenth-century Methodist tune and Victorian. There is an abundance of American gospel songs such as “In Our Lovely Deseret” and “When Upon Life’s Billows,” characterized by their rather tongue-in-cheek dotted rhythms. Another species is what Verena Hatch terms “Latter-day Saint choir anthems,” a combination of Methodist and Victorian hymn styles. In the Spanish hymnal these are assigned to the congregation in spite of their length and high tessitura. Most are rarely sung due to their difficulty.

The Spanish hymnal served a particular need at a particular time; the Church was brought to the Spanish-speaking countries by North Americans who were challenged with providing the converts with hymns that would reflect the Restored Gospel and Latter-day Saint philosophy. At that time there was no other way to do what they did. The result, obviously, could not have been better than the original source, and as we all well know, our musical heritage embraces the banal along with the sublime. For countries of Catholic background, rooted in the Latin European tradition, the implantation of a foreign mode of expression represented in the musical forms found in the hymnal, and the total neglect of any indigenous material, has been both an imposition and a disservice.

Most of the tunes in the current Spanish hymnal have been deleted in subsequent editions of the English hymnal. Over the past seventy years the inadequacy of a large quantity of our hymns has become apparent, and conscientious editors have retired them from the official repertory of the American hymnal. This, I think, is now imperative for the Church in Latin America. The time has come for a new body of congregational hymns with original Spanish texts set to fresh melodies. If some of the old favorite tunes must remain, they should be provided with texts written by Latin-American poets—persons residing in their own countries, capable of conveying their own experiences in the light of the Gospel. They are the only ones capable of doing this in the best way. I do not apologize for expressing my opinion that university-trained linguists and even Latin-Americans with long residence in the United States should be excluded from the task.

We need a concerted effort to locate the poets and musicians within the Church in *all* countries of Central and South America who could spearhead the revision of the Spanish hymnal. In a world-wide church such as ours, exchange of ideas can be of great benefit. The task would be tremendous and the problem of communication and coordination even greater, but the challenge would be exciting.

The French Hymnal

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Early in the history of the French missions, Church leaders encouraged the publication of hymnals. In 1899, the Swiss Mission published a collection of Mormon hymns which became the basis of the French hymnody. When the publication of this collection was exhausted in 1907, Sylvester Q. Cannon, president of the Netherlands-Belgium mission, printed *Hymnes de Saints des Derniers Jours*. Paul Roelofs, D. B. Richards and M. C. Giaque, as well as an unnamed investigator from Lausanne, translated many LDS Hymns into French. Thus appeared in the Francophile countries such hymns as "Now Let us Rejoice," "Guide Us O Thou Great Jehovah," "How Firm a Foundation," "How Great the Wisdom and the Love," "Come, Come Ye Saints" and "O My Father."

In 1954 the French hymnal was revised once again. *Eglise de Jésus Christ Des Saints Des Derniers Jours* repeats many of the old translations, with occasional improvement, completes the process of translation (for example, adding the fourth verse of "Come, Come Ye Saints"), and adds newer hymns, mostly from the English Hymnal. Particularly after World War II, when America was held in high esteem by the French speaking people, the translation of the "American" hymnal was favorably received. It is important to note that the hymnbook appeared prior to the publication of the French *Doctrine and Covenants*, *Pearl of Great Price*, and the corrected version of the *Book of Mormon*. It also appeared prior to the building effort resulting in many chapels and two temples in Western Europe.

Now, some twenty years later, significant social and political changes have occurred. The ravaged cities of France, Belgium and Luxembourg are now rebuilt and the memory of the American liberation is dimmed. Through the common market, French speaking countries have developed a stronger sense of political, economic and cultural affiliations. Church leaders have recommended that the Saints not emigrate to the United States but instead build Zion where they live. With the erection of chapels in which they can worship and temples in which they can receive