



Mary Frances Reza Honored as Fellow of The Hymn Society

Mary Frances Reza, of Albuquerque, NM, is a pivotal figure in liturgical music of the US Catholic Church and beyond, particularly as it concerns Spanish-language and bilingual (English-Spanish) worship.

If there is a singular contributing force behind the landmark Spanish-language hymnal *Flor y Canto* (1989, Oregon Catholic Press), it is Mary Frances Reza. In 1982, Mary Frances served as the chairperson of the Southwest Liturgical Conference's annual Study Week, the theme of which was focused on Hispanic music and expression in the Roman Catholic liturgy. Already well-connected to the region's faith communities, Mary Frances dutifully culled well-known pieces by local composers in Northern New Mexico, featuring these songs prominently throughout the conference. In attendance was Owen Alstott, then-publisher of Oregon Catholic Press (OCP), who was so impressed by these undiscovered gems that he committed to creating a new Catholic hymnal in which such repertoire could find a home (this, in spite of the fact that OCP had just released its 1982 *Cánticos* hymnal, primarily featuring repertoire imported from Spain). This decision, sparked by Alstott's experience at the conference and subsequent visits with Mary Frances, essentially plotted a new course for Spanish-language liturgical music in the US, one no longer plagued by obscurity, but emboldened with mainstream legitimacy and visibility. Alstott enlisted Mary Frances to serve as the chief editorial consultant and committee chair for what would become the first edition of *Flor y Canto*. She went on to serve on the committee for the second edition in 2001, and has continued to consult for OCP in subsequent years.

Her editorial impact notwithstanding, Mary Frances is herself a gifted composer. Because her compositions are unabashedly conceived for communities with limited resources, there is a deceiving simplicity in her craft that belies rich melodic and harmonic treatment steeped in longstanding sacred music traditions. Her compositional craft was influenced by studies with chant specialist Theodore Marier (1912–2001) and a deep appreciation for the

works of pioneering post-Vatican II composers such as Fr. Joseph Gelineau (1920–2008) and Fr. Lucien Deiss (1921–2007). Perhaps it is the unpretentious, nonchalant spirit typical of New Mexico, where Mexican (new *and* old), Anglo, and Native American cultures regularly intersect in both daily life and worship practice, that makes Mary Frances’ compositional style at once familiar and exquisite, immediate and timeless. Whatever the ingredients, it has resonated over the years with generations of Latino church-goers.

Her first published Mass setting, *Misa San José*, was written for the parish community of San José in Albuquerque and has been a staple there since the early 1980s. (In fact, it was at San José where a visiting Owen Alstott witnessed the vibrancy of Hispanic worship and came to his epiphany about *Flor y Canto*). Mary Frances’ other published mass setting, *Misa Santa Fe* (2011), is dedicated to the community of the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Santa Fe, where she served in her role as Director of Music for the Archdiocese of Santa Fe. Its lively rhythms and poignant sonorities capture the essence of the region. I am honored to have contributed the published choral and instrumental arrangements to this popular work. In addition to these Mass settings, Mary Frances is especially known for her Spanish and bilingual psalm settings. Many of these are compiled on the album, *Gusten y Vean/Taste and See* (1998, OCP).

Indeed, Mary Frances’ sacred compositions helped open the floodgates of bilingual possibilities in liturgical music, bringing awareness and acceptance of Hispanic language and styles to mainstream English-speaking communities. Generations of bilingual composers have since followed her innovative lead. The likes of Pedro Rubalcava, Bob Hurd, Jaime Cortez, Donna Peña, Santiago Fernández, Lourdes Montgomery, and Eleazar Cortés, among others, can all attribute inspiration to Mary Frances Reza. It is no wonder she is lovingly referred to by her admiring colleagues as the “godmother” of bilingual music.

As a child growing up in northern New Mexico, Mary Frances followed in the footsteps of her mother, a parish organist. By fifth grade she was a regular organist for Mass. She went on to study at the Jesuit University ITESO (*Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente*) in Guadalajara, Mexico, and earned degrees from the College of St. Joseph, University of Albuquerque (Bachelor of Arts in Music and a Bachelor of Science in Education), and the University of New Mexico (Master of Arts in Bilingual Education and English as a Second Language). She served as the chair of the liturgical commission in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe for many years, her

leadership being so notable that she was later entrusted by then-Archbishop Robert Sanchez to establish the Archdiocese's first Office of Worship. In this latter role, she would directly impact the liturgical formation and practices of the entire region. Mary Frances maintains a national profile through her emerita leadership roles with the Southwest Liturgical Conference and the Instituto Nacional Hispano de Liturgia. She was an integral part of the committee tasked by the US Catholic Bishops with creating the musicalized chants of the US *Misal Romano, Tercera Edición* (2018).

For Mary Frances, the work of education was always central to her mission. A teacher's heart coupled with a loving spirit compelled her to create opportunities for formation and enrichment for the oft-underserved Hispanic community, most notably the biennial Hispanic Pastoral Musicians Conference. In promoting liturgical literacy in her own corner of the world, she went on to impact an entire nation's familiarity and embrace of the Hispanic presence in the church.

Herself a recipient of numerous awards, including the Faithful Servant Award (2000, Southwest Liturgical Conference) and Frederick R. McManus Award (2011, Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions), in 2015, the Southwest Liturgical Conference saw fit to establish the Mary Frances Reza Award in preservation of her own legacy.

At 93 years of age, she continues to serve by leading her choir and playing dutifully for weekly Mass at her home parish of Our Lady of the Assumption in Albuquerque. For this remarkable embodiment of selfless service and for a lifetime of considerable achievement, The Hymn Society joyfully welcomes Mary Frances Reza to its distinguished circle of Fellows.

Submitted by Peter M. Kolar, composer and Senior Editor for
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