

John Venuti grew up at the Fernald State School, an institution for people with intellectual impairment in Massachusetts, but after he moved back to Revere he grew into several valued roles in his life and in his community. He was a member of the church choir in his parish, and he also had been invited by his friend and former support worker Katherine Fox to join the advisory board of the Community Membership Project of the Eunice Kennedy Shriver Center. John came faithfully to all of our board meetings, but then one day he told Katherine he would not be able to make the next meeting. Katherine, disappointed, asked him why. John said the choir would be rehearsing on the same evening, and he could not miss that; "They need my voice," said John. This morning I was reminded of John's matter-of-fact discernment of his responsibility.

I have begun regularly to attend morning Mass at St. James in Stoughton, and for daily Mass at seven a.m. there are typically only about twelve parishioners present. Almost entirely the same people every day, nearly all about my age, all of them certainly more experienced than I. Even so small a group is sufficient to sound like a crowd at the points in the Mass in which the congregation responds aloud, because all are veterans, competent and willing to speak out (and for the opening hymn, sing out). A handful of these regulars take turns in the roles of altar server, lector, and at assisting in the Communion by offering the wine.

But last night and this morning we have had a substantial rainstorm, with damaging winds and some street flooding, so this morning our congregation was sharply diminished. Only two of the regulars were there, and none of those were there who take the roles assisting in the Mass. However, there were five people I had never seen before, the wife and brothers and sisters of a man who had died last month, and for whose Monthly Mind was the dedication of today's Mass. Early in the sequence of the Mass is the reading from Scripture and then the responsorial Psalm; looking around nervously, I stepped up and did the reading and led the Psalm. Father Derek, our priest, did his own serving at the Altar. The other regular in attendance, Donna, stepped up soon afterward to bring the Host to the priest, and then to hold and offer the wine for those taking Communion. Donna and I were the only audible voices during the responses within the order of the Mass, so we raised the volume of our voices and moved closer together. We had not arrived anticipating the necessity of performing duets and solos, but so be it.

Ambivalent feelings, as one might imagine. Part of me thinking, why did I come today? And part of me thinking, it's a good thing I came! I don't have much of a voice, to be sure, but they need my voice. You were right, John. All of our voices.

I hope you will forgive my pretentiousness in these next thoughts, but I could not help but think of the Church in times of persecution. Times when you might not know who would be able to show up, who would be left to mourn together and celebrate together, who would be left to fill the roles as members of the congregation or servers in the works of mercy. Now that is pretentious and self-glorifying, of course, since we (unlike our sisters and brothers in Iraq and Syria and elsewhere even in our own day) are not suffering persecution. I do believe our Church is, however, more and more dismissed and disdained in the late modern Western society in which we live. Just a few days ago I found myself in a conversation with good friends, some of them Catholic, when most of the group got carried away with their own humor to pass far beyond disagreement or criticism into what I considered mockery, ridicule, and disdain for many of the doctrines and practices of the Church. The current and

growing climate in our society may not be persecution, but it is a climate which may call, more and more, for serious people to step up. They need our voices.

There will be times when we may hope to be strengthened by St. Paul's words to the Ephesians:

Put on the armor of God, so that you may be able to stand firm.... For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of the present darkness.... Put on the armor of God, that you may be able to resist of the evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground. With all prayer and supplication, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit. To that end, be watchful with all perseverance and supplication for all the holy ones and also for me, that speech may be given me to open my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the Gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, so that I may have the courage to speak as I must.

But I do not offer that passage only in reference to speaking up when one's beliefs are mocked, at which (by the way) I failed miserably with my friends last weekend. "To speak as I must" can also come in planned and considered ways, including at workshops, not at all feeling like a battle for which even metaphorical armor is necessary—but part of a battle nonetheless. And we may be called "to hold our ground" not only by speaking, but also more unobtrusively by serving, assisting, organizing, and by "praying at every opportunity in the Spirit." Those are not as dramatic as to offer battle, of course. But St. Paul also wrote to the Ephesians of a diversity of gifts:

I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received... one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call.... And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.... The whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love.

Some as battlers in conversation, some as writers, some as teachers of workshops, some as lecturers, some as choir members. How many will come to the workshop, how many will read your writing, how many will brave the storm and attend Mass, how many will brave the growing climate of disdain and attend the Mass? All of these worries are beside the point. John Venuti (may God have mercy on his soul) was right: they need our voice.