

Cerneka, Johnson fill Oddwalk CD for Year of Mercy with prophetic reminders

By Jay Nies

Songwriting-performing duo Shannon Cerneka and Orin Johnson of Oddwalk Ministries want their listeners to stay focused on God's mercy and put it into concrete, sacrificial action every day.

Their latest digital music collection, "Mercy at Work: Songs of Justice, Peace and Action," makes that point with sharpness and urgency.

"Yes, we call on God to be merciful to us, especially in this Year of Mercy, but we also have a role to play in being that mercy for other people," said Mr. Cerneka, youth minister and music teacher at St. Peter parish and school in Fulton and Catholic campus minister at the city's two college campuses.

"It's up to us to cooperate with that, to be consistent with that in how we act," he said.

"Mercy at Work" is a collection of songs, most performed live, about having a deeper relationship with God and letting that overflow into loving service to His people.

There are up-tempo praise anthems, contemplative reveries and musical exhortations to go work the mist of heaven into the earth's clay.

"There's a very distinct mercy and justice theme running through these songs," Mr. Cerneka noted.

He and Mr. Johnson, who is director of music ministries at a parish in the St. Louis archdiocese, met while working in youth ministry at the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, Illinois, and have been collaborating and performing together for years.

They have been featured at school, parish, diocesan and national retreats and youth gatherings throughout the United States, including several National Catholic Youth Conferences.

They are scheduled to give a concert at 4 p.m. on Sunday, March 6, in the St. George Parish Activity Center in Linn and to headline the diocesan Jubilee Celebration for Junior



Orin Johnson and Shannon Cerneka of Oddwalk perform selections from their newest CD, "Mercy at Work: Songs of Justice, Peace and Action," during a concert in Ss. Joachim and Ann Church in St. Peters.



High Youth on Sunday, April 23, at the National Shrine of Mary, Mother of the Church, in Laurie.

Their individual and combined efforts have been published in nationally distributed Catholic hymnals and worship aids.

Trust and help

Known to some for their on-stage antics at big events, the Oddwalk performers have a profoundly spiritual side that finds expression in moments of deep communion with their audiences.

Inspiration for much of their music comes from their own experience of ministering to young people and growing in their own relationship with God.

Two of the tracts — "Have Faith" composed by Mr. Cerneka and "Mercy at Work" composed by Mr. Johnson — were chosen as theme songs for CHRISTpower retreats in the Jefferson City diocese.

Mr. Cerneka wrote "Have

Faith" during a time of jarring transition in his own life.

The CHRISTpower organizers that year chose Jesus' words, "Fear Not," for their theme.

"I knew I wouldn't be able to get that across in a song without being absolutely sure myself that God was taking care of me," said Mr. Cerneka. "I needed not to be fearful, I needed not to be anxious. I needed to put my trust completely in God."

The song's refrain proclaims: "Have faith! Know God is in control. Have faith! Let it settle in your soul. Jesus Christ will make a way where there is no way. Have faith and do not be afraid."

The verses flow from the "Prayer of St. Francis": "Where there is hatred, we can sow love. Where there's injury, Your pardon we give ... And in darkness, we can be light. And to mourners, compassion and care."

"It's this idea that God doesn't typically wave a magic wand and make things happen when people pray," said Mr. Cerneka. "He sends us.

"I see it as God calling on those who say yes to Him to be the answers to prayers that other people are praying," Mr. Cerneka continued. "That's how we contribute to building the Kingdom."

Similarly, the CD's title track injects urgency into bolstering mercy with service, prayer with action: "O Lord, let us pray with our hands, let us pray with our feet, and show

mercy turned into action. ... Not just to pray but to do, not just to wish but become, to become Your presence now, right now!"

"You don't just pray for mercy," Mr. Cerneka noted. "You have to get out there and be that mercy and bring it to people in new and profound ways."

See MERCY AT WORK, page 23

MERCY AT WORK

From page 5

Light in the darkness

Mr. Cerneka also wrote a stirring worship song called "His Light" — built on the first chapter of St. John's Gospel — in honor of 5-year-old Sam Santhuff.

"Super Sam" lost a courageous battle to cancer as a kindergartner at St. Peter School last year.

Along the way, he also inspired the whole community with his belief in Jesus and his infectious joy and giving spirit.

"The song reinforces the idea that no matter what you're dealing with, God has promised that He's never going to leave you," said Mr. Cerneka. "No matter how difficult or dark things are, the light is always there and always will be, and we can take comfort in knowing that."

In days of old

Mr. Johnson wrote the evocative "It Would Have Been Enough" for Mr. Cerneka's son Noah's First Holy Communion and for use at Mass during Lent at Mr. Johnson's parish, Ss. Joachim and Ann in St. Peters.

Based on the words of a traditional Jewish Passover hymn, it gives the highest order of praise to God for everything He did for His Chosen People and for sending Jesus to seal His covenant permanently with His Own Blood.

It includes the stanza: "If



You had only freed us from slavery in Egypt, it would have been enough. ... But You freed us from the bondage of sin and death."

He also composed the hauntingly transcendent "God of the Covenants," based on Psalm 51 and the stories of Old Testament patriarchs and prophets.

"As soon as he wrote it, I knew it was one of his best," said Mr. Cerneka.

Mr. Johnson insisted that Mr. Cerneka learn to accompany the song on guitar — a singularly challenging proposition.

"It's the hardest song I've ever had to play," said Mr. Cerneka. "It doesn't use conventional chords or transitions. There was nothing I could do to make it easier."

He learned to play it anyway, and his son will never forget.

WLP, one of the three big national Catholic liturgical music publishers, recently picked up the song for publication.

"When you listen close enough to the live recording," Mr. Johnson noted,

"you can hear people from our parish singing along because they love it and have made it an important part of their prayer life."

Into the deep

Mr. Johnson noted that he and Mr. Cerneka are moved and challenged

by Pope Francis' emphasis on honoring God by treating other people with deeper love and compassion.

He said this collection of music may seem a bit more prayerful and a bit less "goofy" than a lot of what people are accustomed to hearing from Oddwalk.

"But we've always had this ability to be more serious about the faith, more prayerful with the music," he stated.

"We don't see this CD as so much a departure or an evolution," said Mr. Cerneka. "We hope that it's more of a reminder of how important our faith is to us, and the importance of mercy and justice and community, the importance of Christ in our lives, and that we can do things differently."

"Mercy at Work" CDs are available for purchase at all Oddwalk performances and can be ordered online at:

<http://oddwalkministries.com/oddblog/merchandise>

The entire album can be downloaded for \$9.99 or individual songs for 99 cents apiece at iTunes.com.