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Shannon Cerneka's 'Better Together' song is an urgent call to unity

Inspired by a guiding principle of the diocese's pastoral plan, along with events of this year



Shannon Cerneka and Orin Johnson (seated at piano) rehearse a song in St. Peter Church in Fulton. PHOTO BY ERIN CERNEKA

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“We are better as a Church when we are physically together, worshiping and serving God. hat’s one of the things that’s been so hard about this pandemic – having to get used to not being together.”

SHANNON CERNEKA

By Jay Nies

CLICK HERE to see the lyrics and musical score and hear a recording of “Better Together.” (<http://Oddwalkministries.com/bettertogether>)

- “Open wide the doors ...”
- “Let us be the Church ...”
- “Where friendship is nurtured and burdens are shared.”
- “One people. One Body in Christ.”

“We are better together.”

Catholic composer Shannon Cerneka's newest composition builds momentum through repeated phrases and challenging summons to unity.

"The hopeless, the poor, the weak, the frightened, the meek, the helpless, the scared, the abused: they all belong," stated Mr. Cerneka, director of music and youth ministry for St. Peter Parish and School in Fulton, and member of the popular musical duo, Oddwalk Ministries.

Likewise, strangers, the sinful and repentant, the hurting, those who are searching, exiled and fallen-away, and all who are rigid and self-righteous must be ushered through the open doorways.

"When you open wide the doors, you're letting in not only people who are seeking Christ but people who are going to question what you believe, who are not going to see or experience things or look at the Church the way you do," said Mr. Cerneka.

It can be hard, frustrating, even risky work.

But as the song alludes, it's for the best.

"Better Together" points to Jesus's burning prayer for unity as the cross loomed before Him — "that they may all be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I in You" (John 17:21).

"The Church is holy but messy if we're doing it right," Mr. Cerneka insisted. "So once you open the doors, you don't close them again. And you don't just leave them open but wide-open."

Whether or not a person accepts Christ's invitation to step through the doorway and become part of the community is up to that person.

"But it's not our place to get in the way of anyone being with Christ and His Church," said Mr. Cerneka. "The question is, do we close our doors to people and situations that we are uncomfortable with?"

Deeper longing

Mr. Cerneka composed "Better Together" this summer with help from friend and fellow Oddwalk performer Orin Johnson.

It's a simple tune in an easy key with uncomplicated chords.

"I wanted it to be very accessible," said Mr. Cerneka. "I think it is. The kids at St. Peter picked up on it right away."

The initial inspiration came from Bishop W. Shawn McKnight's catchy and oft-repeated appeal to unity and cooperation within the Church and beyond.

"Receiving the Eucharist is the most intimate thing we can do," Mr. Cerneka pointed out. "But then what? There's a life to be lived, a world to be lived in, and we're not trying to escape from that. We're called to be in the world and help transform it in Christ.

"That happens through the use of our gifts, our talents, our opportunities," he said.

The composer found even deeper meaning in the idea of "better together" during this tumultuous year for the Church and U.S. society and in long periods of isolation due to the COVID pandemic.

"We are better as a Church when we are physically together, worshiping and serving God," Mr. Cerneka said. "That's one of the things that's been so hard about this pandemic — having to get used to not being together."

Even after Masses were reopened to the public and school resumed with in-person instruction, safe distances still needed to be maintained.

"The closeness we long for still seems such a long way off," he observed.

Called together by Christ

Mr. Cerneka looked further into the human condition, toward the deeper, perennial sources of division and alienation that only God, working through His people, can remedy.

"The 'better together' for the song came from this notion that despite the things that divide us, we are still better when we have a common bond," he said.

Not everyone has experienced that bond. Some long for connection but don't feel connected at all.

"There are so many people that I think want to be good Christians, want to practice the faith well," he said, "but they feel judged or pushed away, or like they just don't belong."

The "Open Wide the Doors" theme — popularized by Pope St. John Paul II during the Church's Jubilee 2000 celebration and echoed by Pope Francis nearly two decades later — speaks to actively addressing barriers to unity.

"We're not a Church of the perfect," said Mr. Cerneka. "I think we sometimes forget that Christ came to us in this broken world to bring healing and reconciliation. As holy as He is, Jesus had dirt on His feet through most of His earthly life."

And in getting His feet and hands dirty, Jesus restored relationships, healed divisions and brought people one by one back into the fold.

He then said to do likewise.

"It's Christ Who calls us together," Mr. Cerneka noted, "and it's for a purpose: so we can worship Him and also so we can be sent out on mission."

The more, the better

Mr. Cerneka and Mr. Johnson are working to have the words to "Better Together" linguistically and culturally translated into Spanish.

They hope the song also eventually finds its way into other languages.

"That's the spirit of it," said Mr. Cerneka. "If we're going to sing about being one community, then we have to make the song accessible to as many people as possible."

In the meantime, the score and English lyrics are available online.

"All who are interested have our permission to use the music and lyrics within the context of school and worship settings," Mr. Cerneka stated.

That may change if a publisher decides to license the song, "but for now, you can have it free of charge," he said.