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## Cerneka's Marian hymn published, to be sung at CathedralGLOW



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**Shannon Cerneka**

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### By Jay Nies

Erin Cerneka and her husband were familiar with a simple Gaelic melody known as the "Mingulay Boat Song."

She once noted that it could be refashioned into a church tune.

She later suggested that her husband compose a hymn that his students at St. Peter School in Fulton could sing on Marian feastsdays.

"I decided to wed those two suggestions," said Shannon Cerneka, youth minister, music teacher and campus minister at St. Peter Parish in Fulton, and half of the popular Catholic evangelization duo known as Oddwalk ([oddwalkministries.com](https://oddwalkministries.com/)) (<https://oddwalkministries.com/>).

The result is "Holy Mary, Pray For Us," an uplifting Litany of Mary recently published by GIA Publications Inc. ([giamusic.com](https://www.giamusic.com/store/sacred-music/)) (<https://www.giamusic.com/store/sacred-music/>)

Mr. Cerneka will sing the song as part of the May 4 CathedralGLOW event the night before the rededication of the Cathedral of St. Joseph.

"This is a song that honors Mary for who she is and the 'yes' that she gave to God for all of us," said Mr. Cerneka.

He started by refashioning the melody to "Mingulay Boat Song into the tune for the refrain:

*"Holy Mary, Loving Mother, walk with us and show us Jesus. Holy Mary, Queen of Heaven, hear our prayers and pray for us."*

Each classroom in St. Peter School is dedicated to the honor of Mary under one of her many titles.

Mr. Cerneka wrote a corresponding tune and wove many of the titles from the school into a litany, including: Our Lady of Guadalupe; Our Lady, Queen of Peace; Our Lady of the Rosary; Our Lady of Victory; Our Lady of Fatima; Our Lady of Mount Carmel; Our Lady of the Pillar; Our Lady of Lourdes; Mary, Mystical Rose; Mary, Star of the Sea; Mary, Queen of the Angels; Mary, Cause of our Joy.

Each title is followed by the request, "Pray for us."

"One thing I set out to do with this was to underscore the role that Mary plays," said Mr. Cerneka. "She walks with us, hears our prayers, prays for us and leads us to Jesus."

He said the "Mingulay Boat Song" wasn't written for church, but the tune's haunting simplicity lends itself to prayer and contemplation.

"There's a reason these old melodies stick around for generations," he said. "People like them and they're easy to learn. When I teach this song at church, it takes no time for people to pick it up."

### **Learning and praying**

Mr. Cerneka had never composed a Marian hymn or a litany before.

Nonetheless, he said, "of all the songs that I've written, this one is probably in the top three that I like and am proud of."

"It has a contemporary feel, but it's something that you could pick up with an organ and a choir and have it work," he stated.

It can be prayed with any group.

"For a congregation to sing something for Mass, the melody should be relatively simple and accessible," he said. "And this particular melody does that, I think."

He wrote the song with the St. Peter School community in mind, and wound up dedicating it to the people there.

He wanted it to help them pray and grow in their faith, and for them to be able to learn it quickly and sing it well.

"They don't have to know the whole thing," he noted. "They just have to sing the 'pray for us.'"

And if they learn something about Jesus's Mother in the process, all the better.

"It's a way to hear those titles and to be reminded of the fact that Mary is praying for them and watching over them and journeying with them as students," he said.

### **In good order**

Mr. Cerneka first introduced his students to "Holy Mary, Pray For Us" in 2017.

The late Father Frank Bussmann was serving as pastor of St. Peter Parish in Fulton and St. Jude Thaddeus Parish in Mokane when he died suddenly in November of that year.

Remembering Fr. Bussmann's deep devotion to the Blessed Mother, the students at St. Peter School sang Mr. Cerneka's song during their Christmas concert.

"We did an opening song and then launched into 'Holy Mary, Pray For Us' as a way to pray for Fr. Frank and say thank you to God for him," Mr. Cerneka recalled.

"I thought it would be a good way to honor him," he said.

Mr. Cerneka has been collaborating musically with Orin Johnson of St. Louis, the other member of the Oddwalk duo, since 1998.

They have composed several hymns and praise songs together, many that are performed at gatherings of young people.

Mr. Johnson agreed to arrange "Holy Mary, Pray For Us" so Mr. Cerneka could submit it to a music publisher.

"When I write a song, I work with lyrics and guitar chords," Mr. Cerneka noted, "but I'm not sitting there with a blank sheet of music paper and writing the notes."

"I sort of tinker with my guitar and play with the words until it comes together and sounds right," he said.

As arranger, Mr. Johnson added the piano accompaniment and vocal harmony.

"What he did was invaluable," said Mr. Cerneka. "I could submit the words and a list of guitar chords and a recording of me singing it, but there's no way it could get published if I did that."

He particularly likes how the refrain can now be sung as an echo.

### **Up to the Holy Spirit**

Music publisher World Library Publications accepted the song for publication in 2018.

The COVID-19 pandemic and other factors figured into a lengthy delay.

The company is now a division of GIA Publications Inc., which notified Mr. Cerneka in March that the song was being published.

“What I’ve come to appreciate about being published is that somebody outside my immediate sphere seems to appreciate this thing that I have written,” he stated.

“A little bit of validation comes with that,” he said. “I think that’s something we all need to some extent, and it’s really nice when it happens.”

He said his goal as a teacher, composer, accompanist and evangelizer is to draw people closer to Christ and into a deeper connection with the Church.

He commented on how he sometimes hears students humming the tune to the recessional hymn in the school hallway after an all-school Mass.

“There’s something about music that connects with people and brings it all to life in a way that other things cannot,” he said.

He acknowledged that once a piece of music is published, it’s up to the Holy Spirit how it works for people.

“Anything you create that is artistic, once you put it out there, it has the capacity to go anywhere in the world,” he noted.

“If it’s strong enough and easy enough to pray with, it will honor God and help people grow in their faith in a healthy way – and you’ll have nothing to do with it!”

*A video of Mr. and Mrs. Cerneka singing “Holy Mary, Pray For Us” can be found by searching “Cerneka” and “Holy Mary, Pray For Us” at [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lgqCPOH13s) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lgqCPOH13s>).*

*A basic recording of the song can be found at:*

*<https://on.soundcloud.com/8ggKDf3RTGJfRg3j8> (<https://soundcloud.com/shannon-matthew-cerneka/holy-mary-pray-for-us>)*

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