

Article

[Download Now](#) [Add to Downloads Folder](#) [Print](#)

History of Hymns: “Alleluia,” by Fintan O’Carroll and Christopher Walker

by Jonathan Hehn



“Alleluia,”

by Fintan O’Carroll and Christopher Walker;
The Faith We Sing, No. 2043.

The “Celtic Alleluia” is nearly ubiquitous among today’s Roman Catholics, and indeed well known among many other Christian communities as well. First appearing in the early 1980s, this sung acclamation has found a place in a great many denominational hymnals in the the west, as well as around the world. United Methodists included it in *The Faith We Sing* at number 2043. It is an obvious choice for the Easter season, in which the church reclaims its great word of praise, “alleluia.” This is the third in a series of four articles in the month of April that will explore hymns especially appropriate for Eastertide.

Because the “Celtic Alleluia” has experienced a very quick and grassroots type of growth, it is somewhat difficult to trace the exact origins of the arrangement we know today by looking solely at the written record. As with folk music, it is much more useful in this case to consult the oral history of the piece. This author was fortunate recently to be able to conduct a

brief interview with composer and church musician Christopher Walker about the “Celtic Alleluia.” It is Walker’s arrangement of this acclamation with which most are familiar.

Walker explains that his discovery, and the subsequent success, of the “Celtic Alleluia” was a “complete accident in a way.”¹ During a stint teaching at a seminary in northern England around 1981, Walker was struck by the gospel acclamation² used during the seminary liturgy. Not knowing its source, he transcribed the “alleluia” onto a piece of paper and returned with it to Bristol, where he **was serving as director of music at the Catholic cathedral.**

Some time later, **Walker found himself giving a composition lesson to a Jesuit seminarian** who was working on his own gospel acclamation. During the lesson, Walker played the alleluia he had collected in 1981 and improvised a simple verse for it, in order to model a well-composed gospel acclamation for his student. The melody he improvised that day became the tune for the verses we associate with the Celtic Alleluia today, and thereafter Walker began using both refrain and verses locally at the cathedral in Grifton. However, Walker still had no idea who had composed the alleluia melody of which he had grown so fond.

It was sometime between 1981 and 1985 that Christopher Walker’s friend Fr. Paul Kenney, a Dublin priest and musician, told Walker that the refrain he had collected was in fact composed by the well known Irish musician, Fintan O’Carroll.

Fintan O’Carroll (Fiontán P Ó Cearbhaill) was born in Wexford, in the southeast corner of the Ireland, in 1922. From a young age, he was steeped in the traditions of Irish music, and after a brief stint in his early twenties as a clerk for Córas Iompair Éireann, the national railway of Ireland, he left to complete a degree in music at Trinity College Dublin. His subsequent career as a classroom and private music teacher, band and orchestra conductor, and church musician lasted until his death in 1981. Over the course of his lifetime, **O’Carroll composed a large corpus of sacred music, especially liturgical music for the Roman Rite, which continues to be influential.** His “Celtic Alleluia” comes from the *Mass of the Annunciation*, **a large, festive work composed in 1980.**³ The “Alleluia” itself appears in that work not as the gospel acclamation, but rather as the refrain for the entrance Psalm. Nonetheless, it is as a gospel acclamation that O’Carroll’s “Alleluia” has found global acceptance. 

In 1985, Christopher Walker was attending the national convention of the National Association of Pastoral Musicians in Cincinnati, when he had the chance to share O’Carroll’s “Alleluia,” along with Walker’s own newly composed verses, with some of his colleagues at Oregon Catholic Press. OCP agreed to publish the arrangement, and since then it has found wide acceptance, both locally in North America and indeed globally. In his interview, Walker shared a story of a recent trip to Singapore, where he encountered a group singing the “Celtic Alleluia” during a liturgy. Somewhat surprised, he exclaimed to one of the participants, “you’re singing my alleluia!” The participant replied, “Not, not your alleluia, the Singapore Alleluia!” Walker has shared that he never intended for the piece to find such broad use, but he is grateful for that fact nonetheless.

As with much folk-inspired music, the music of the “Celtic Alleluia” tends to lend itself well to a great variety of treatments. In a short article about this piece, Emily Brink gives the following advice:

This song works well on any and all instruments, but for [a] Celtic sound, invite a fiddle player to join you, or a recorder player, or maybe someone with a good ear who can make a penny whistle sing on the descant. A percussionist is nearly essential.⁴ 

In this author’s own experience, the “Celtic Alleluia” also sings well led by the organ, piano, guitars, or unaccompanied. The original arrangement even included parts for brass.

The original verses published by Christopher Walker are based on the text of the *Te Deum*, an ancient hymn of praise suitable for any festive occasion. There have been, however, a large number of other verses composed for the Celtic Alleluia since 1985. Many of these even correspond to the gospel readings from the lectionary.⁵ For instance, the second edition of the hymnal, *Gather Comprehensive*, provides Walker’s original verses plus sixty-one other verses for Sundays throughout the year!

In the context of a United Methodist liturgy, one could choose to use any of the verses that seem to fit the readings of the day or to simply sing the refrain by itself. In any case, singing an Alleluia is a wonderful way to embellish worship in the Easter season. For those who choose to sing it before and/or after the reading of the gospel, it can be a wonderful way to connect to the deep liturgical traditions of the church as well.

¹ Phone interview with Christopher Walker, March 14, 2016.

² A gospel acclamation is a short piece sung by the congregation before and/or after the reading of the gospel lesson during worship. Except during Lent, it is traditionally comprised of the word “Alleluia,” with or without verses. The *United Methodist Book of Worship* commends this traditional practice in its “An Order of Worship Using the Basic Pattern.”

³ The entire work can be found in the *The Collected Masses of Fintan O’Carroll*, Adapted by Kevin O’Carroll, Dublin: 2012, Veritas Press.

⁴ Brink, Emily, “[Songs for Lent and Easter](#)”, Songs for the Season, *Reformed Worship* (December 2002.) Available online  at <http://www.reformedworship.org/article/december-2002/songs-lent-and-easter>.

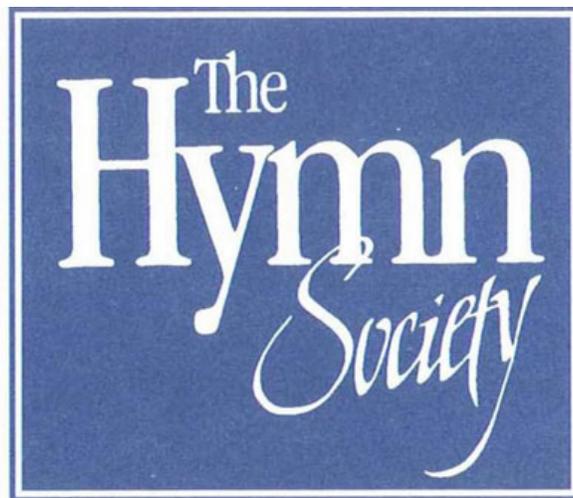
⁵ Mostly the *Lectionary for Mass*, though that lectionary in the great majority of cases prescribes the same gospel reading as the *Revised Common Lectionary*.

About this month’s guest writer:

Jonathan Hehn, OS�, is a Presby-Lutheran musician and liturgist currently serving Good Shepherd Lutheran Church and Saint Leo University in Tampa, Florida. He is a passionate practitioner, writer, and thinker.

This article is provided as a collaboration between Discipleship Ministries and The Hymn Society in the U.S. and Canada. For more information about The Hymn Society, visit thehymnsociety.org.

[Download](#)
[Now Add](#)
[to](#)



[Downloads Folder](#)