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Musician and Pilgrim: An

Interview with Matt Maher

🕒 November 21, 2013 📁 Interviews, Saints, The Catholic Post, Worth a Listen

Last week, I was privileged to interview Matt Maher, the best-selling and award-winning Catholic singer/songwriter. Maher performed at a standing-room only concert, “An Evening of Worship” of more than 1,400 at [Harvest Bible Chapel](#) in East Peoria November 14, along with worship singer Meredith Andrews and Vertical Church Band. Following is a longer version of our Q&A that will appear in [The Catholic Post](#). Tomorrow I will be sharing the “back story” behind the interview and more about Matt Maher, including what books he’s reading these days.





Q. The video of you singing “Lord, I Need You” during the Eucharistic Adoration Vigil at World Youth Day in Rio went viral among Catholics online. What was it like to sing at World Youth Day?

I’ve been to World Youth Day many times. The first was 2000 in Rome, and then 2002 in Toronto and then 2008 in Sydney. I missed Madrid because my wife was having our first baby.

I was actually on the fence about attending World Youth Day in Brazil, but the artistic director e-mailed me several times. The producer of the main stage events had heard “Lord, I Need You” and wanted to have the song sung there.

At first I thought I would be singing in the time before Adoration. I didn’t realize until about an hour and a half before that I was going to sing while the Blessed Sacrament was exposed.

Q. Did you plan to kneel?

Well, that’s interesting, because some people were kneeling and some people were standing in Brazil.

And I did parish ministry for 13 years, and in the work I did with LifeTeen, and leading music during Eucharistic Adoration, was big part of the ministry. I had almost always knelt. At first, there's a challenge to it—how do I kneel and sing at the same time?

At World Youth Day, I was waiting to walk up the stairs to go on. I said a prayer and then I said a Hail Mary, and all of sudden I felt the Holy Spirit say, “You should kneel,” and I said, “Okay.” And I knelt.

There were two million people at the Vigil. The two thoughts I had during adoration were the Lord saying, “I am the same. There's really nothing different.” There's no way for eye to the comprehend two million people, and they were behind me, so I couldn't see them. And so it was the Lord saying to me, “You've done this before.” And the miracle of it was rooted back in the fact that the Lord chooses to come to His people in this way.

The other human thought was, “Man, I really hope I'm not bothering the Holy Father, because that would be a real drag.”

Q. Did you get a chance to meet Pope Francis?

No, I didn't, but someone sent me the freeze frame photo of us very close together, and I've thought of maybe sending it to him along with a note saying, “Hey, we were really close, but we didn't get to meet. Let me know if you'd ever like to have lunch.” Some of my friends have joked that he might call me, since he likes to do that.

Q. Do you have thoughts on or a favorite quote from Pope Francis?

He's so prolific. I'm like everyone else in that I'm constantly digesting it. Every morning I read the Vatican News Service and he is saying something really profound.

My favorite theme from Pope Francis, what I'm hearing, is how he wants a church that is poor.

God is using him; He is casting a different vision for how Catholics are how to engage in the world.

There are some areas of tension in the United States. While we're part of such a wealthy country, we forget that we're really a very small part of the global Catholic Church. When you are the vicar of Christ, you are thinking about the entire world—Europe, Africa, Asia. Sometimes in the West, we can fall into the temptation to be self-obsessed, and we need to change that.

Pope Francis talks about how we're hospital workers on a battlefield, and if you're treating the wounded, some of it gets on you. It's always a challenge for us in Western culture (which itself is narcissistic) to wonder, "Is the Church being narcissistic?"

I think that's what he is talking about when he is talking about getting away from being self-referential. It's considering what do you think about first, are you thinking about

yourself, or are you thinking about the people you are called to serve? It's going to take time (to fully understand all that Pope Francis is teaching). [John Paul II] preached the Theology of the Body, and we're still unpacking it, and we will be for a couple of hundred years.

Q. You're open about your Catholic faith, but in a way that is accessible to all Christians—your music & ministry strike me as realistic and healthy ecumenism. What makes you successful at that, and what can the average person learn from you?

There's a couple of things to remember. Our understanding of Christians from other denominations has changed so much since Vatican II, and needs to change further. Jeffrey Gros was one of the leading Catholic experts on ecumenism—he died recently. Last April I met him at Mundelein Seminary, and he said something there that was very profound. He said that when it comes to ecumenism, we have to realize that we are a pilgrim church and we are on a journey to the New Jerusalem. So when we meet other Christians on the way, it's not about coming back home, as much as it is the destination.

Before ecumenism used to be an academic endeavor, done mostly by debating and writing papers.

What God is doing now— and maybe I get to be a small part of it— is missional ecumenism. It's ecumenism ordered around developing understanding in the middle of a common work together.

Ecumenism is Emmaus. To me, Emmaus is the model for evangelization, but it's also a model for ecumenism. Emmaus was when two people were walking together on "The Way" and Jesus encounters them. And as early Christians, we were known as "the people of the Way". So as Christians together, we're really about The Way.

I've been reflecting on the charism of World Youth Day as pilgrimage. Prior to the Reformation, pilgrimage was a way that people developed deeper in their faith and their relationships with each other, and learn about and connected to the history of the Church, literally through the ground by going to holy sites, and to the Holy Land.

And so missional ecumenism carries this whole pilgrimage spirituality of the "now" and the "not yet." We're building the kingdom of God, but it's not finished. Because (all Christians) have a common goal of reaching culture, of helping bring restoration, you can start to dialogue about the differences.

Q. Some of the interviews with Pope Francis share how he felt a deep sense of peace, and absence of fear, when he was elected Holy Father. You seem to me similar in that you have no fear about sharing your faith or being open about it.

Sometimes I've gotten flack that I haven't been "Catholic" enough, but I'm approaching from the part of the prayer of St. Francis, "not be understood, but to understand." I'm not concerned primarily with trying to be right, as much as trying to understand the people I serve.

*Q. I loved what you said on a radio interview before the concert (on a morning [WCIC interview with Jill and Jeremy Tracey](#)) in which you quoted St. Faustina and her vision of “the ocean of mercy.” Can you share that with readers of *The Catholic Post*?*

Well, it comes from St. Faustina’s diary. Jesus talks about sinners, and he says, “bring them to my ocean of mercy.” I sort of elaborated on it by saying that God gives us an ocean of mercy and we tend to act like it’s a cup.

When we first encounter Jesus, we experience the ocean, and then we walk away from it. When we walk away from it, and then think, I can’t carry the ocean with me, so I guess I’ll carry a cup. But that size mercy would be exhausted rather quickly, on yourself and on others. Mercy is so needed.

I think there is a huge emphasis now in ministries in proclaiming the truth, standing for the truth. Some people amend this to say that you need to share the truth in love.

But before it all, in Scripture it says, “God’s kindness leads us to repentance.” The kindness that is talked about is God’s mercy, the mercy that he has shown us. And when you are walking in humility—which is a big aspect of this papacy—the reason you are humble is because you are aware of the mercy of God. There’s less time to cast judgment.

Q. You’re a new dad. How does parenthood affect your music, your faith, and your life?

My wife and I have a two-year-old son and a month-old daughter.

Marriage exposes all the things in you that are selfish, but you're dealing with another adult so you don't necessarily have to change.

Being a parent makes you realize that if you don't, it will drastically affect the life of another human being, and they are counting on you.

So, first of all, marriage has changed my DNA, and then parenthood as well. Marriage is a sacrament and it changes you. It's like the first time you go to confession or the first time you receive the Eucharist. Marriage is the same way. We need to help people understand that. And also, that the priesthood and marriage are mystically linked. You can't have good marriages without the priesthood and vice versa.

For me, I think the parenthood thing is only settling in now, because my kids are so young.

Q. What's next for you?

I'm working on something ambitious; it should come out in 2015. I'm just writing and reading and praying right now. The two things that I'm thinking about and praying about is World Youth Day in Krakow in 2016 and the fact that several years from now is 500 years from the Reformation.

I am so grateful to Matt Maher for being willing to do this interview. He was very articulate and had much more to say than this Q&A. I'll share a few behind-the-scenes facts and more from our interview tomorrow, so be sure to check back. Or you can just sign up to receive e-mail updates from Reading Catholic by using the box on the upper right of this page, and you'll get updates when they appear here.

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