“Sacred Music Library’s A Catholic Book of Hymns is an excellent collection of orthodox, inspiring, and beautiful hymns.”

A Review by Jennifer Donelson-Nowicka

The collection contains many well-known and beloved English-language hymns, as well as a plethora of hymn tunes and texts which might be unknown to Catholics, but which deserve to be known and loved.

The solid hymns that Catholics love can be found in their best-known tunes, and a number of these texts have been included in additional tune options, allowing parishes to broaden the musical horizons of congregations.

Hymns for many devotions are available: Our Lady, Star of the Sea, the Sacred Heart, Our Lady of the Rosary, general hymns for patronal saints, prayers for the pope, etc.

Several excellent adaptations of sequence texts, music for Benediction, and the most beloved Christmas carols make the volume extremely useful for parish use.

As the Introduction to the volume makes clear, the book’s value is in complementing the integral music of the Roman rite (the propers and ordinary of the Mass, and the Latin hymnody of the Office), and this volume would be the perfect complement to something like the Parish Book of Chant, where one could find the Ordinary texts of the Mass (EF and OF), chants of the Kyriale, and other Gregorian chants for a congregation.

For this reason, A Catholic Book of Hymns sets forth a truly Catholic understanding of the role of hymnody in parish devotions, in the home, and as a possible addition to the integral music of the Mass in the Roman rite.

Beautifully typeset with lovely fonts, the layout is eminently readable and pleasing to the eye. Typically, three verses of a hymn are set within the musical staves, and extra verses are listed in text-only below. (An exception to this comes in hymns of four verses where all the verses are set in the musical system.)

The hymns appear in alphabetical order, and traditional, time-tested poetic renderings of texts appear in their original wording. Hymns which have appeared in multiple keys in common hymnals are usually included in the higher of the typical keys.

The volume is lightweight, but still possessing a large number of hymns on sturdy, mostly-opaque paper. The binding is strong, laying open nicely in the hand of the parishioner.

Parishes looking for an excellent collection of English-language hymnody will find in this volume a book which raises Catholic congregations’ expectations for the beauty of hymn tune and text.

Too, pastors of souls will find in this book hymns which lead the hearts and minds of their flock, through the beauty of poetry and melody, into the heart of the Catholic understanding of the mysteries of the Trinity, the Eucharist, the life of grace, Our Lady’s loving care for her children, the Church as the mystical body of Christ, and great cloud of witnesses in the communion of the saints.

Jennifer Donelson-Nowicka is an associate professor and the director of sacred music at St. Joseph’s Seminary (Dunwoodie) in New York, where she also teaches sacred music courses in the St. Cecilia Academy for Pastoral Musicians.

Donelson-Nowicka has been named as a Consultant to the USCCB’s Committee on Divine Worship and serves on the Archdiocese of New York’s Liturgical Music Commission. She also co-hosts a podcast entitled “Square Notes: The Sacred Music Podcast.”