

Sacred song enthusiasts vote in hymn tournament

July 5, 2019

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Four months after March Madness, hymn lovers are awaiting the outcome of a different kind of tournament that will answer this question: “What’s the greatest hymn of all time?”

Will it be “Holy, Holy, Holy!”? Or how about “How Great Thou Art”?

Or one of six others in the Elite Eight that were announced July 2?

The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada decided to use the tournament as a way to draw attention to the music that fills church sanctuaries every weekend. Its contest, where enthusiasts have voted since May on its [website](#) and on Facebook, was inspired by a Catholic podcast, “Open Your Hymnal,” which had a spring tournament focused specifically on hymn tunes.

This contest focuses on both the texts and the tunes of beloved hymns.

Consider it a ‘teaching moment’

Brian Hehn, director of the hymn society’s Center for Congregational Song, said the tournament has been a kind of “teaching moment” that allowed the society’s members to have some fun and helped the uninitiated to learn that there are a variety of hymn styles.

Hymns were divided into different divisions, each with eight entries.

“Holy, Holy, Holy!” was the No. 1 seed and “O for a Thousand Tongues” was No. 8 in the strophic division, which features hymns with a different

text in each stanza and no refrain.

The top-seeded song in the refrain division was “When Peace, Like a River,” known best for the repeated phrase, “It is well with my soul.”

Another division includes chants (such as “O Come, O Come, Emanuel”) and cyclical songs (like South African hymn “Siyahamba”).

The last of the divisions, in which “In Christ Alone” was the No. 2 seed, features a grab bag of choices from hymn society staffers along with employees of Christian Copyright Licensing International, which focuses mainly on contemporary worship songs.

What? Amazing Grace didn't make the cut?

Like March Madness, the hymn tournament has included some early upsets. For Hehn, it was amazing that “Amazing Grace” was in that number.

“Because it’s such a staple in pretty much every tradition’s song repertoire, it’s surprising that ‘Amazing Grace’ didn’t make it into at least the semifinals,” he said.

“It made it to only the second round,” said Hehn, where it was defeated by “Holy, Holy, Holy!”

The hymns were ranked, or seeded, in four divisions based on their popularity in resources such as [Hymnary.org](https://www.hymnary.org), the top 100 list of CCLI and the National Association of Pastoral Musicians’ list of “Songs That Every American Catholic Should Know.”

“When Peace, Like a River” trounced “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms”

with a 77 percent to 23 percent vote in the first round but was then defeated in a 58 percent to 42 percent vote by “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” That Christmas hymn is now up against “My Hope Is Built/On Christ the Solid Rock,” which soundly defeated “Here I Am, Lord” in a 62 percent to 38 percent tally.

Advancing to the Elite Eight

The Elite Eight are: “Holy, Holy, Holy!”; “Be Thou My Vision”; “O Come, All Ye Faithful”; “My Hope Is Built/On Christ the Solid Rock”; “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”; “Of the Father’s Love Begotten”; “Holy God, We Praise Your Name”; and “How Great Thou Art.”

The tournament is fueled by votes from more than 800 people, most of whom Hehn said are affiliated with the 1,200-member society, including church music professors, hymn writers, other musicians and pastors.

The final rounds will play out when about 250 hymn enthusiasts gather in Dallas for their annual conference in mid-July. Voting in person and via Facebook will continue during three more rounds there and Hehn plans to announce the winner on July 18.

Anyone who submitted a bracket to the society with the correct winner before the voting started will win bragging rights — and a free membership for the next year.