

Catholic musician Matt Maher recalls Rio, says God won't leave us



Singer and songwriter Matt Maher will perform Sept. 21 at Loyola Blakefield in Towson as part of the Archdiocese of Baltimore's 225th celebration. (Courtesy Matt Maher)

By Christopher Gunty

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As a singer, songwriter and worship leader, Matt Maher marvels that the heart of the Incarnation is Jesus engaging with people.

"The Word became flesh - Why?" he said, adding that our belief that God became a person is "the reality of what it means to have God with us."

The human need for God and the fact that God will never leave us are themes woven throughout the Catholic musician's work, especially on his latest album, "All the People Said Amen." And they are themes that will echo through The Hollows at Loyola Blakefield Sept. 21 when Maher performs a concert to celebrate the 225th anniversary of the Archdiocese of Baltimore and the 50th anniversary of Monsignor O'Dwyer Retreat House.

Canada-born Maher grew up Catholic, but fell away from the practice of the faith until a conversion experience as a college student in Arizona. Since his early 20s, he has performed across the country and around the world, including at World Youth Day events. At WYD 2013 in Rio de Janeiro, he sang "Lord, I Need You" on his knees, playing an acoustic guitar, while approximately 2 million people, including Pope Francis, prayed at eucharistic adoration.

"I didn't really have a grasp of it until after the fact," he said in an Aug. 22 phone interview from his home in Nashville, Tenn. "The coolest thing was that the two things you could hear were the ocean and a helicopter overhead. I'm on a beach with about 2 million people and I can hear the ocean, and I can hear the helicopter ... and that's it. It's really amazing."

Harkening back to St. Augustine and author C.S. Lewis, Maher noted that all have dignity because we are made in the image and likeness of God "but we're not God. And when man is most comfortable admitting that to himself and to the world, then

that's when God is closest to him. God's distance to us is entirely of our making."



The cover of Matt Maher's latest album, "All the People Said Amen."

He believed that song, during adoration, resonated with the World Youth Day attendees.

"The simplicity: God, I need you," he said, contains the answer to how to witness the faith and evangelize: "One person, on their knees, to just simply say, I don't have a chance at (anything) without you, Jesus."

With that need in mind, Maher takes hope from the Emmaus story of Jesus walking with two disciples in disappointment and their sense of failure, rather than when they felt successful. "He was walking alongside two people who felt lonely and defeated. My hope for any young person who's reading this or may come to any of the concerts I play is that they would continue to feel God say, 'Keep walking, I'm with you.'"

"I think the church can help in that, to tell young people that Christ is with you in your walk to full maturity. Christ is with you in your walk to adulthood and into purpose. And God will never leave your side," he said.

Maher, who turns 40 in November, has seen success in the contemporary Christian music industry, including Dove and Grammy award nominations and the last four of his seven albums in the top 25 charts. His face was on 3 million Dr Pepper cans as part of a promotion in six states. But he takes it all in stride, noting that his rendition of "Lord, I Need You" from Rio may have a million views on YouTube, but "Gangnam Style," the South Korean dance song, was a global cultural and marketing phenomenon with more than a billion views.

The virtue of Maher's faith compels him to keep that in mind. "It's not as much a sense (that I say), 'God, make me humble' as it is that all I have to do is look around. I'm really not that big a deal," he said, chuckling. "Plus I have a great wife who keeps me very, very grounded. And my two kids don't care a lick about what I do. All they care about is that they have a dad."

See Matt Maher in concert

Where: Loyola Blakefield, Outdoors on The Hollow, 500 Chestnut Ave., Towson

When: Sunday, Sept. 21. Grounds open 1:30 p.m. Pre-show 1:45 p.m. Concert 2:30 p.m.

Cost: \$15, \$10 for parish and school groups

All are welcome, especially youths and young adults; In the event of rain, concert will be held in Knott Hall. Visit archbalt.org for concert details and group and individual tickets.

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