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Participants in the New England Pueri Cantores Youth Choir Festival pose with Bishop Robert Reed at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross. Pilot photo/courtesy Richard Clark

Cathedral hosts youth choir festival

Jacqueline Tetrault Pilot Staff - FRIDAY 10TH OF MARCH 2023

BOSTON -- Children's choirs from different Catholic communities in Massachusetts and beyond combined their voices for the New England Pueri Cantores Youth Choir Festival and Mass, held March 4 at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross.

Pueri Cantores -- Latin for "children singers" -- is an international choral organization for Catholic students, whose mission is to evangelize and catechize choristers through sacred music. In the U.S., the American Federation organizes choral festivals at the local and national levels held in cathedrals, basilicas, and other significant regional churches.

The approximately 100 children spent the day rehearsing together, preparing music for the Mass celebrated by Bishop Robert Reed. The guest conductor for the festival this year was James Kennerley, music director of St. Paul's Choir School in Cambridge.

Kennerley tried to arrange the seating in the cathedral so the various choirs were mixed. Those from Massachusetts were The Boy Choristers of St. Paul's Choir School in Cambridge; St. Columbkille Partnership School in Brighton; St. Margaret of Scotland Children's Choir from Beverly; Immaculate Heart of Mary School Chorus from Still River; and members of the Cathedral of the Holy Cross Youth and Adult choirs. Coming from outside the state were St. Cecilia Youth Schola of Ste. Marie Parish from Manchester, New Hampshire; Blessed Sacrament Children's Choir from Tolland, Connecticut; and Mount Royal Academy Choir from Sunapee, New Hampshire.

Christopher Hebard is the director of St. Margaret of Scotland Children's Choir in Beverly. He said that the festival was "good for giving us a different director's slant on music," as well as "pushing us a bit" and "showing my choir that, yes, there are other children who do this every week."

The occasion also made him reflect on why music is important in the Mass, and why having a children's choir is important. He said that music "slows down the prayer and gives us time to join our hearts and minds together, as we beg for God's forgiveness and give Him glory."

"The children learn the richness of the Church's tradition, hear the beauty of goodness, and take the texts that they sing into their hearts and minds," Hebard said.

He said he hopes his choir will be "eager to go again next year" and "understand that they have peers with whom they share the Faith and the love of beauty."

Michael Olbash attended as the choral director of Immaculate Heart of Mary School, Still River, where his children attend school and where he teaches the upper school chorus. He also works full time as the director of sacred music at both St. John's Seminary and Pope St. John XXIII Seminary.

He has been involved with Pueri Cantores for about a decade, having served on the board of directors and organized similar festivals across the country. He said that

although he brings students to many choral festivals, he looks forward to Pueri Cantores the most, and builds his curriculum around the repertoire planned for each year.a

"Unlike most other choir festivals, Pueri Cantores is entirely non-auditioned and non-competitive, so every one of my students can have the experience of singing with a hundred other youngsters who share their joy of music making," Olbash said.

He expressed appreciation that even parishes and schools with only a few choir members can come to the festival and "experience belonging to something so much larger than they usually experience, the physical reality of being living and active members of the Body of Christ, singing his praises and worshiping Still River with their peers."

Kiara Zani, the choir director at St. Columbkille Partnership School, brought her choir of students from grades five through eight. It was her second time at the festival, but it was the first time each of her students participated.

"It was wonderful for them to meet singers from Catholic choirs across New England and sing in the magnificent Cathedral of the Holy Cross," Zani said.

She said her students particularly enjoyed the variety of songs in the festival repertoire, including several pieces in Latin.

"Seeing my students in those pews on Saturday and hearing their voices so beautifully raised during this Lenten season was a very special experience for me as a music educator," Zani said.

She said she was grateful that her school supported their participation in the festival and Mass.

"I am definitely looking forward to next year!" Zani said.