

Young singers take the stage at Pueri Cantores choral festival and Mass at St. Matthew's Cathedral

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Students sing during the Pueri Cantores 2023 Mid-Atlantic Youth Choral Festival and Mass at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle on March 4, 2023. Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory celebrated the Mass. About 315 young singers from 18 Catholic schools and parishes in Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia and Pennsylvania participated in the choral festival and Mass. (CS photos/Mihoko Owada)

Soft harmonies filled the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in downtown Washington, D.C., on March 4 during the Pueri Cantores 2023 Mid-Atlantic Youth Choral Festival. The event was followed by a Mass celebrated by Cardinal Wilton Gregory. Pueri Cantores in Latin means “young singers.”

Cardinal Gregory greeted the hundreds of young singers from Washington, Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania, and said he could not believe the “heavenly chorus” was on Earth after hearing their singing.

“I cannot help but believe that the heavenly chorus is somehow present here tonight. Somehow the angels are singing with us, and we do that with great joy as we welcome these young people who lift their

voices in praise of God and allow us to lift our hearts in thanksgiving,” Cardinal Gregory said.



Students sing during the Pueri Cantores 2023 Mid-Atlantic Youth Choral Festival and Mass at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle on March 4, 2023. (CS photos/Mihoko Owada)

Eighteen different parishes and Catholic schools with about 315 young singers participated in the youth choral festival and the Mass that followed.

The cardinal’s homily, which was based on the reading from the *Gospel of Matthew*, was about Peter, James and John making the ascent on Mount Tabor with Jesus – the site of Jesus’s Transfiguration.

“The Transfiguration is actually a ‘teaser’... for all of us of the greater things still to come... The Transfiguration is a glimpse of the resurrected Christ that urges us not to be disturbed or disheartened by the events of the Passion that will eventually portray Jesus as simply a broken, powerless and humiliated convicted criminal,” Cardinal Gregory said.

He went on to say how Lent can be an overwhelming time as it requires sacrifice and “personal endurance.”

“Early in the season of Lent, before we manage to grow weary of our prayer, fasting and almsgiving, the gospel narrative of the Transfiguration provides us a glimpse of what Lent is leading all of us

to Easter and beyond – when Christ will bring us all into a new way of living with and in his glory, which will last forever,” Cardinal Gregory said.



Cardinal Gregory gives Communion to a student during the March 4 Mass at St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington that was part of the Pueri Cantores 2023 Mid-Atlantic Youth Choral Festival. (CS photo/Mihoko Owada)

Paul French, the American Federation Pueri Cantores president, served as the festival's conductor. French has worked with the organization for 15 years.

“The event was spectacular,” French said afterward. “It was such a wonderful day for a variety of things. It was a wonderful day, first and foremost, for the Church. There were families gathered, schools and parish choirs gathered. It was a time to rejoice in our being Catholic. It was a time to rejoice in the beauty of sacred music and to delight in the beauty of the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle and its magnificent architecture.”

According to French, the choir directors at each school do much of the “heavy lifting” when it comes to preparing the students. He said that music is intrinsic to the Catholic faith.

“Every year we choose a different repertoire, and we delight and we honor the traditions of our history of Gregorian chants and Latin motets. We also find great beauty in contemporary compositions of the 20th and 21st centuries. So our job is to find a balance,” French said.

The beauty of sacred music, French said, is what evangelizes many of these Pueri Cantores participants. The federation will host 14 festivals around the United States this spring. So far this year, the festivals have been held in Washington, D.C., Boston, San Francisco, and Houston.

“Sacred music is transformational and normative in liturgy. And what that means is that beautiful music that points to God has the ability to help young people transform their lives and want to become deeper entwined in their faith in God and their faith in the Catholic Church, and that’s what the day is all about, the transformational power of beauty,” French said.



In the photos above and below, students sing during the Pueri Cantores 2023 Mid-Atlantic Youth Choral Festival and Mass at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle on March 4, 2023. The event was for choirs with students from the fourth through the 12th grades at Catholic schools and parishes in the Mid-Atlantic region. (CS photos/Mihoko Owada)



After the Mass, singers from St. Bernadette School's youth choir, based in Springfield, Virginia, spoke about the experience. Nicholas Doan is a junior at Lake Braddock Secondary School. Jeffrey Tran is a freshman at John R. Lewis High School in Springfield, Virginia, and

Victoria Soller is a freshman at St. John Paul the Great Catholic High School in Dumfries, Virginia.

The students shared their thoughts on how music plays a role in practicing their faith.

“Singing to me, personally, is a way to honor God and honor Jesus by doing what all of us like to enjoy and all of us put our hard work into it, so it means a lot to us in that way,” Tran said.

For Doan, music amplifies his prayers.

“There’s something so transformative about the power of music. It goes beyond any prayer because it usually is a prayer that we are singing. But through any singing, you feel closer to the divine. That’s at least how I feel,” Doan said.

“It’s really just one of the best ways to praise God, in my opinion,” Soller added.

David Mathers, the director of music ministries at St. Bernadette’s, said that his 22 students have been rehearsing for the concert since January. When asked about hurdles that come about when trying to prepare for such an event, he said working with his students is so enjoyable it lessens any concerns.

“There’s so much fun and joy. Just doing the music with the kids and they enjoy learning new things, that overcomes all the logistical stuff,” Mathers said.

Mathers believes it’s important to expose students to religious music at a young age so they understand its role in the Church.

“It’s to show young people what music can do in the liturgy. It's also to show young people that there are other people out there doing the same thing that they are and really loving what they do with the music for the liturgy. So it's just a great experience for the young people to see their comrades at the other parishes doing this and to see the beauty of music serving the liturgy,” Mathers said.



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Emily Strab, the director of enrollment and a music teacher at St. Jerome Institute Catholic High School in Washington, D.C., said she was happy with her students' performance.

"They did an amazing job, I am so proud. When the cardinal said that they sounded like angels, I was tearing up a bit," Strab said.

Strab said working in a Catholic environment while teaching music was important to her after her time working in public schools.

"I would have students who would ask me questions about sacred music or just about theology, and I couldn't answer them," Strab said. "So I was like, okay, we're going to make a shift."

She worked with preschool and middle school students before starting to work at St. Jerome.

"When this position became available at St. Jerome Institute, I was like, this is it. Right? This is me getting to complete my vision of what I think Catholic music education should look like," Strab said.

Judith Cronin and Matthew Riordon, seniors at St. Jerome Institute, also spoke about their experience at the choral festival.

“I really think [our performance] went amazingly well, I really loved it, I think just being able to sing in the church in general, and this is such a beautiful cathedral, being able to actually sing here is such an experience,” Cronin said

Cronin likened the relationship between music and Catholicism to architecture and Catholicism.

“We’re studying architecture, and we recently brought up the idea of [St. Thomas] Aquinas and how when he was talking about building churches, that they’re supposed to sort of draw you upwards. And so that’s sort of what you’re talking about, gothic style. I think sacred music has a similar effect of drawing you toward God,” Cronin said.

St. Thomas Aquinas was a prominent Italian Dominican friar and priest and a doctor of the Church whose philosophical and theological teachings influenced other works, including architectural designs.

Riordon hopes to continue pursuing music as a hobby when he’s older. He said participating in events that celebrate sacred music helps people understand that the role of religious music is not just for background.

“I think it’s really awesome to get to do this because I think a lot of people think of music in the Mass as sort of [something] to fill up all the empty spaces when the priest is walking up or setting up the altar,” Riordon said. “But I think it actually has a really deep part in the prayer of the Mass, as the aspect of adoring God’s greatness, so I think it’s really important.”



After the Pueri Cantores 2023 Mid-Atlantic Youth Choral Festival and Mass at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle on March 4, Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory posed for photos with the young sisters. About 315 singers from 18 Catholic schools and parishes in Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia and Pennsylvania participated in the choral festival. (CS photos/Mihoko Owada)

