



# Sacred music points youth toward God, director says

By Michelle Martin | Staff Writer

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More than 15 youth choirs from the Archdiocese of Chicago, Joliet, Rockford and Michigan participated in the Chicago Choral Festival and Mass presented by the American Federation Pueri Cantores on Feb. 24, 2024 at Holy Name Cathedral. The young singers practiced together all day with guest conductor Carling FitzSimmons, then joined Bishop Mark Bartosic for the 5:15 p.m. Mass where they led the singing. AFPC is the official music organization for students in the Catholic church. It organizes choral festivals and Masses for parish and school choirs in grades 4 through 12 in cathedrals and other churches around the United States. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)

Holy Name Cathedral rang with the voices of about 240 young people on Feb. 24, as members of 15 Catholic school and parish

youth choirs assembled for the 2024 Pueri Cantores Chicago Youth Choral Festival and Mass.

Pueri Cantores, an international movement to involve young people in singing sacred music, is hosting 16 such choral festivals around the United States this year, and will host even more next year, said Paul French, national president of the American Federation of Pueri Cantores and the music director at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish.

Their purpose goes deeper than teaching children to sing.

“The work of Pueri Cantores is, in a word, evangelization,” French said. “It’s in the guise of sacred music, but for us beauty is transformative. ... We help people to root themselves closer to their faith and the church. In a very practical way, these young people look around and say, ‘It’s not just my choir singing this music.’”

The repertoire for the festival included Gregorian chant, works by Mozart and Gabriel Fauré and works by contemporary composers, French said. All of the participating choirs, which included students in grades four through 12 from Illinois and Michigan, had been rehearsing the music since the fall.

Funding from the Helen Brach Foundation and the Altum Fund helped pay for the Chicago festival.

Choir members had three rehearsals during the day Feb. 24 before singing all the Mass parts at a liturgy celebrated by Auxiliary Bishop Mark Bartosic. They sang under the direction of master conductor Carling FitzSimmons.

Working with FitzSimmons also provided a learning opportunity for the choir directors, French said.

The number of festivals and student choirs is growing, French said, as schools come out of COVID-19 protocols, he said.

“The pandemic really cut the legs off of all choral singing,” he said. “Out of an abundance of caution, children’s choirs and youth choirs were tremendously affected. Youth choirs are really just emerging from their place of dormancy and are really sort of taking off in a huge way not only here in Chicago but around the country and around the world.”

Pueri Cantores is the official student choral organization of the Catholic Church, and has 32 federations around the world. In addition to local festivals, choirs can also participate in international congresses.

French, for example, traveled with 38 students — in a contingent of about 100 people — to Rome, where the students were among a choir of 5,000 young people from English-speaking countries at the Mass celebrated by Pope Francis at St. Peter’s Basilica on the Jan. 1 feast of Mary, the Mother of God.

Such events are transformative in the faith lives of young people, he said.

“It’s using this ‘treasure of inestimable value’ — sacred music — to help young people grow to love the faith and love their church and to nurture that faith,” French said, noting that many young people are leaving rather than coming to the church. “This is a really practical way to help young people find their way to the church. Sacred music is the vehicle for pointing toward God and pointing toward what’s possible in our faith and the church.”



Paul French, director of Pueri Cantores and director of music at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Chicago, answers a question from Anthony Rodriguez of St. Peter Damian School in Bartlett during rehearsals as Karina Makina looks on. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)



Students look towards the conductor for direction during rehearsals. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)





Adrian Sylvester from St. John Brebeuf School and Lilian Vu chat during a break. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)



Anthony Rodriguez of St. Peter Damian School in Bartlett and Antonio Lu warm up in rehearsals. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)



Loui Salonga from Our Lady of Mount Carmel on Belmont in Chicago studies music during rehearsals. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)



Sophie Dzdowski from St. Peter Damian School in Bartlett asks a question during rehearsals. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)





Students perform the prelude before Mass begins. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)



Hazel Musser from Freeport sings during Mass at the cathedral. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)



Guest conductor Carling FitzSimmons directs students during Mass at the cathedral. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)



Fiona McClaughlin and Lucy Johnson sing during Mass. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)





Mateo Cervantes from Epiphany Catholic School in Little Village follows his music during a song at Mass. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)



Mateo Cervantes from Epiphany Catholic School in Little Village follows his music during a song at Mass. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)



Parents and guests applaud the young singers at the end of Mass. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)



The youth pose for a group photo. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)

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