

National organization leads children's choir at Columbus Cathedral



by **Hannah Heil**
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65 young choristers, or choir singers from five diocesan youth choirs were represented at the Pueri Cantores festival & Mass: Columbus St. Cecilia, Gahanna St. Matthew the Apostle, Lancaster Basilica of St. Mary of the Assumption and Marion St. Mary.

Pueri Cantores, a national student choral organization of the Catholic Church, visited Columbus St. Joseph Cathedral on Saturday, March 7 for a festival and Mass.

All diocesan parishes and school treble voice choirs in grades four through 12 were invited to participate. The diocese's youngest singers gathered, singing various pieces of sacred music from the Church's historical repertoire.

A total of 65 young choristers, or choir singers, took part in the event. Five diocesan youth choirs were represented: Columbus St. Cecilia, Gahanna St. Matthew the Apostle, Lancaster Basilica of St. Mary of the Assumption and Marion St. Mary.



Choristers patiently waiting for their cue from conductor Paul French. Photos courtesy Sarah Lightle

Vox Iuvenum, a youth choir based at St. Joseph Cathedral, also participated. The choir is composed of students from various schools and parishes. It is directed by Dr. Nicole Simental, director of music at the Columbus St. Thomas More Newman Center near Ohio State University.

Paul French, president of the American Federation of Pueri Cantores, served as conductor. The Chicago-area resident has composed more than 200 choral and orchestral works.



Paul French, president American Federation of Pueri Cantores, conducting during Mass with Bishop Earl K. Fernandes.

Dr. Richard Fitzgerald, director of sacred music for the Columbus diocese, accompanied the choir and served as organist for the Mass. Bishop Earl K. Fernandes celebrated.

Choral festivals are typically held in cathedrals and presided over by the local bishop.

Pueri Cantores, which means “boy choir” in Latin – puellae translates to “girl,” is commonly understood as “young choir.”

The national organization holds several annual choral festivals, which are Masses with extended pre-service or prelude music. Individual choirs sing, and collectively, the gathered choir performs an array of choral pieces prior to Mass.

“It’s all about, through the medium of sacred music, exciting young people for their faith, giving them a renewed focus on their faith, and frankly, how can we expect to have adult choir members if we don’t draw them in as young people?” French reflected.

About 80,000 children sing in Pueri Cantores festivals worldwide. National federations of Pueri Cantores are present in 37 countries, including South Korea, India and Sri Lanka in Asia; Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo in Africa; Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela in South America; Mexico, Canada and the United States in North America; and several European countries.

“But here in the United States, our work, it’s only one thing,” French said, “and the one thing is evangelization.”

Singing sacred music, he explained, roots young people more deeply in the Catholic faith. They are moved by the beauty and art of the Church’s holiest music.

“It’s an opportunity for the Church to gather outside of sacramental moments of Confirmation for young people, ... to gather together to praise God with the beauty of music,” he noted.

“It’s an opportunity for the local bishop or cardinal to gather with his young flock without any other agenda than to be together and praise God.”

This year, 18 Pueri Cantores festivals comprising several hundred parish and parochial school youth choirs – consisting of nearly 4,000 young people – will be held in the United States.

Several festivals are taking place in new cities this year, including Columbus.

Sister John Paul Maher, O.P. (Order of Preachers), assistant superintendent for Catholic Culture, and Fitzgerald, who serves as organist at St. Joseph Cathedral, helped to bring the festival to the diocese’s mother church.

The festival allowed children to witness to their faith, Sister John Paul explained.

“The opportunity for the young people of our diocese to come to their diocesan cathedral to participate in Holy Mass celebrated by their bishop is a gift,” she said, adding that it “can help them visualize how they belong to the universal Church.”

Sacred music, she noted, also instills virtues of reverence and piety in young people when approached as a form of worship.

The music shares the purpose of Catholic education: to provide an encounter with God. The purpose of sacred music sets it apart.

“Young people understand when something is special,” Sister John Paul affirmed. “It can bring a certain expectation or excitement when ... something special is used or experienced: special clothes, beautiful place settings or cultural songs.



Choristers singing prelude songs before Mass with Bishop Earl K. Fernandes at the St. Joseph Cathedral.

“When we speak of sacred music, we hope to convey that this music is sacred because it is set apart for the worship of the Lord.”

A choral festival, Fitzgerald added, “gets young people interested in singing and interested in the Church and liturgy. It gives them opportunities to come together, and as a community, worship together.”

The cathedral organist, along with Sister John Paul, Simental and the bishop, were eager to promote children singing sacred music taught by the Church.

Fitzgerald said hosting a choral festival at the Columbus cathedral, such as Pueri Cantores, was “long overdue.”

“This is something that we are going to do in years to come,” he affirmed, “so I’m hoping that this will continue to grow.”