



Choir members reminded to consider ‘spiritual purpose’ of singing

- [William Cone, Florida Catholic Media Staff](#)
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PALM SPRINGS | Being a church minister in the era of COVID-19 is complicated, but especially so for music ministers and choir directors. Fears related to spreading the disease and tools used to block its transmission can make their work more challenging. Add to that the increased absences of choir members because of the pandemic and the trials can become extreme.

Richard Robbins, director of choral activities at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, understands what they’ve been going through. He has worked as an educator and church musician for many years and

knows well the problems of music directors, and even more the people who direct youth choral programs.

He was featured Nov. 4, 2021, on a webinar in cooperation with his university and the American Federation Pueri Cantores, a Catholic international student choral organization that presents youth choir festivals across the United States. The title of the webinar was “Reassessing, Renewing and Rebuilding Youth Choral Programs.”

“It really is an unprecedented time for music directors, for teachers, for choral directors in modern history,” Robbins said. “So, I want you to know that I’m coming at this from

a place of real empathy, and that many of the situations that you might be dealing with are very similar the world over.

“I hope we can draw great strength from one another, just knowing that other people care a lot about music and folks are really trying to create something beautiful in their school teaching situations, in their parish liturgical situations. We really want things to continue to thrive for choral music, and I think that things can,” he added.

Robbins offered practical advice on such topics as what facemasks allow the most freedom of movement for singers while protecting others and how to deal with other pandemic issues.

“Spiritually, obviously if we’re working in a Catholic school or Catholic church, we have a way of approaching spirituality very directly,” he said. “But beyond that, we might ask ourselves to consider what the spiritual purpose of singing happens to be. Why are we singing in a moment where it seems so difficult?”

Robbins, who serves as a guest conductor at Pueri Cantores youth choir festivals, encouraged all those watching the webinar to participate in their local choral events and learn from music directors who have more experience leading young people.

The 2022 South Florida Youth Choral Festival and Mass for mixed voice and treble choirs in grades four through 12 is planned for Saturday, Feb. 12, 2022, at 4:30 p.m. at St. Luke Parish, 2892 S. Congress Ave. in Palm Springs.

Celebrant at the liturgy is scheduled to be Father Andrew Brierley, pastor of St. Luke, and the guest conductor will be Guiliano Grisi, an orchestra and choir conductor who began to collaborate as an organist and music director in Italy at age 12.

“I think that it’s important for people to come together and think about ways we can unify our approaches, and still find things to work toward so that our own teaching has purpose,” Robbins said.

“These festival experiences allow you to work on repertoire and then to combine with other groups so that you can experience strength in song together,” he said. “It gives you something to aim toward. And, in a year when everything has been really up and down, aiming toward a goal is something that can give your program purpose and can give you purpose as a teacher. And then your students can experience something beautiful.”

Pueri Cantores festivals and conferences across the U.S. for 2022 are set to take place in person, though events in the past 18 months have been virtual. Robbins said he is excited for what the festivals can do for music teachers and students.

To find out more about the American Federation Pueri Cantores and how music educators and young singers can participate in the South Florida Youth Choral Festival and Mass, visit www.pcchoirs.org. The website also offers helpful resources for youth choir directors dealing with various challenges.