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O.C. choral students sing for the pope on Christmas Eve

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Students from Orange County participate in the annual International Congress of Pueri Cantores – the official student choral organization of the Catholic Church.

COURTESY OF CATHERINE C. MUZZY

By ERIKA I. RITCHIE / STAFF WRITER

Lily Muzzy extended a new zucchetto to Pope Francis. He took off his own skullcap, placed hers on his head and returned it to her, kissing her forehead, and giving her a rosary.

The experience Thursday in Sala Nervi was one that the 9-year-old girl, a student and choir member from St. Edward the Confessor Parish School in Dana Point, won't soon forget.

Lily was selected to meet the Holy Father as the representative from the American delegation made up of 29 choirs and 1,000 students nationwide who joined 6,000 others in Rome for the 40th annual International Congress of Pueri Cantores – the official student choral organization of the Catholic Church. On Thursday the choirs, made up of fourth- through 12th-graders, rehearsed before Pope Francis in Pope Paul VI Hall in Vatican City.

“This audience has very special significance for us as parents because Lily herself is a blessing and a survivor,” her mother, Catherine Muzzy explained. “Abandoned by her biological parents at birth, she survived harsh living conditions in a rural orphanage in Hunan, China, for nine months before being matched with her forever family. To have the opportunity to meet Pope Francis simply adds blessing to her life, her future, and her faith journey.”

Two members, who were in wheelchairs, met the pope and received a special healing blessing. A member of the Mission Basilica School Choir was asked to represent a delegation who was not able to bring students with them and also received a personal blessing.

The American delegation included student choirs from four Orange County schools: Mission Basilica School from San Juan Capistrano, St. Edward the Confessor Parish School in Dana Point, Serra Catholic School in Rancho Santa Margarita and St. Cecilia School in Tustin.

The congress, held every five years, is a choral extravaganza. The choirs first sang on Monday during an opening ceremony in St. Peter's at the Sala Nervi. They sang a national Mass at the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome on Wednesday and participated in the Carols from Around the World Christmas celebration Thursday.

The International Congress will conclude its pilgrimage with the World Peace Day Papal Mass at St. Peter's Basilica. Several thousand youth will sing in the liturgy celebrated by Pope Francis today.

“Catholic youth choirs from around the world will be celebrating a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to sing in prominent churches located in Rome and Vatican City,” said Jan Schmidt of Villa Park, executive director of the American Federation of Pueri Cantores. “What sets Pueri Cantores apart is the quality of the music, the great conducting and the beauty of the churches where choirs sing.”

The students sing in Latin and most choirs have practiced since October. In Orange County, Rick Dellefield, musical director from St. Edward the Confessor, hosted joint practices with Mission Basilica and the other Diocesan Schools. In December, students from participating schools in Orange and San Diego counties practiced under Dellefield’s direction. Each singer received a practice CD to help learn his or her part between the weekly rehearsal. In Rome, students participated in Congress or American Federation rehearsals.

On Thursday, Lily and her group arrived at the Vatican before sunrise. Once inside, choirs scrambled for seats near the center aisle where they could see and touch the pope as he came into the hall. Upon his entrance, the group broke out in song with one of many international Christmas hymns that were sung in his honor.

“This experience will continue to fortify our family’s faith and commitment to the church,” Muzzy said. “Lily’s siblings and grandparents were there to witness this opportunity and so our whole family has shared in the joy.”

Did you know?

The International Federation of Pueri Cantores, founded in 1944 in France. It was endorsed by the Holy See in 1965 and is part of the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

There are about 40,000 youth and children in hundreds of Pueri Cantores choirs composed of boys and girls, aged 9 through 18 around the world.

The American Federation of Pueri Cantores was founded in Chicago in 1953 and has grown to more than 150 choirs in 72 U.S. dioceses.

Contact the writer: 714-796-2254 or eritchie@ocregister.com or Twitter: @lagunaini

<http://www.ocregister.com/articles/choirs-698184-pope-school.html>