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St. Edward Catholic School choir students joined other choirs at San Policarpo at an Italian Mass. The students also sang at a papal Mass Jan. 1 at St. Peter's Basilica with 4,000 other choristers from around the world as part of the 44th International Congress of Pueri Cantores (Photo courtesy of St. Edward Catholic School)

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Song and music are gifts capable of touching the hearts of young people, drawing them out of spiritual anxiety and bringing them closer to God, Pope Francis said.

Greeted with song Dec. 30 by young people from the International Foundation of Pueri Cantores — an organization that promotes sacred music and the formation of children in choirs for liturgical singing — the pope praised the young vocalists for helping them pray and open their hearts to God, which is “fundamental for the life of the Church.” He said, “There is much need for joy in the world,” and music can provide that.

The event included members of the St. Edward Catholic School choir, who traveled to Rome on Dec. 26, 2023, to take part in the International Congress of Pueri Cantores, joining 4,000 choristers from around the world. Several from the St. Edward group met hands with Pope Francis, including one of the school's first graders.

This Pueri Cantores pilgrimage, held once every five years, brings together children's choirs worldwide for a weeklong celebration of sacred music and fellowship.

"So many people, also young people, are prisoners of their anxiety or of boredom; song and music can touch hearts, give beauty, restore a taste and hope for life," Pope Francis said.

But the pope also insisted that choir members are not "just any kind of artists; you don't put on a show." Rather, their role is to help others pray through their own sung prayer.

For that reason, Pope Francis said it is important for the children to "keep your heart close to Jesus not only when you sing, but always, and this is done through prayer each day."

The pope cited the well-known saying by St. Augustine: "One who sings prays twice." Singing, he added, "is an act of love, and doing so we pray with words and music, with heart and voice, with devotion and with art."

The foundation includes 1,000 choirs — all-boys, all-girls or mixed — and represents some 40,000 young people in 43 countries. The organization brings groups of young people to Rome and to meet with the pope once every four years. Pope Francis told the young singers that being part of a choir is a "school of humility" since each singer is part of something "bigger than him or her and in which all are at the service of all."

"A singer who looks to put his- or herself at the center, or to prevail over the others, is not a good singer, indeed they risk ruining the work of everyone and this is immediately felt," the pope said.

He encouraged them not to "show off" but rather to strive "to blend together so that in unity, which comes from humility, your singing expresses true friendship with God, with others and among yourselves."

Sacred music, the pope said, is particularly humble since it "knows how to step aside at the right time, to make room for silence, where everyone can listen in secret to the words that only Jesus knows how to say to each of us. Singing well together requires effort, just as living well together requires effort.

Other events during the trip included the St. Edward choir joining other American choirs to sing in the Mass of Nations at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls on Dec. 29, 2023.

The highlight of the trip was attendance and participation in a papal Mass celebrated by Pope Francis on Jan. 1 in St. Peter's Basilica. The group also explored the ruins of Ancient Rome, took a private Vatican Museum tour, and celebrated the New Year in Rome. Choir members and their families also saw Pope Francis and heard him speak during their rehearsal in the Paul VI Hall.

On March 2, the Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart will host the 2024 Pueri Cantores Houston Youth Choral Festival and Mass, celebrated by Daniel Cardinal DiNardo, according to www.pcchoirs.org.

