

Tridentine Community News

April 11, 2010

Music at the Vatican

Holy Masses televised from the Vatican at Christmas and Easter time invariably provoke conversations about the quality of the music provided at St. Peter's Basilica. The general consensus is that the choir members do not sing in unison, sound excessively operatic, and in general do not set a proper example of how professionally-sung liturgical music at the home base of Roman Catholicism should sound. While the selection of music is quite good, especially in recent years, the performance of it suffers.

The sound that we know from television is that of the Sistine Chapel Choir, which sings only for papal celebrations. In fairness, perhaps the mic'ing of this choir and the audio engineering is as responsible for what we hear as the singers themselves. Regardless of the cause, this choir's sound does need improvement.

The good news is that advances are being made with the other principal choir at the Basilica, the Cappella Giulia, which sings for liturgies not including the Pope, and thus performs more frequently. In 2008, our Holy Father appointed Canadian Fr. Pierre Paul as Director of Music for St. Peter's Basilica and supervisor of this choir. He has reinstated more frequent performance of Gregorian Chant Mass Ordinaries; has produced impressive worship aid handouts which one can occasionally view on-line; and has tightened up the standards for visiting choirs: Audition recordings are now required and are reviewed before an application is approved. This brings us to our next topic, another in our series of occasional "Did you know?" diversions:

How Visiting Choirs Can Sing at the Vatican

It is not uncommon to hear of local parish choirs "singing at the Vatican." Perhaps they have even sung at St. Peter's Basilica. How exactly does a particular choir get such a lofty honor? Was an invitation extended based on a reputation of musical excellence? If you are the kind who doesn't want to learn how a magician performs his tricks, we suggest that you skip the next section of this column.

We hate to burst anyone's bubble, but in many cases, the answer is that they paid for the privilege. At least one company, Peter's Way Tours, specializes in booking choirs to sing at the Vatican. Prior to Fr. Paul's recent policy change stated above, there did not appear to have been any particular qualification required, aside from the ability to pay the tour fee. Fortunately Fr. Paul recognized that the quality, or lack thereof, of visiting choirs can leave an impression on visitors to St. Peter's. Tourists don't necessarily know that a choir is a visiting one. It should at least uphold the Vatican's own sacred music guidelines.

Rather than lament the fact that one pays one's way into such privilege, we should consider the positive aspects: This allows for the possibility that choirs who specialize in the traditional Church repertoire can perform in the Basilica. It may be unaffordable at present, but there might be a day when a method to pay for such a trip is devised. We can only hope and pray.

Comments? Ideas for a future column? Please e-mail tridnews@stjosaphatchurch.org. Previous columns are available at www.stjosaphatchurch.org

As a side note, Peter's Way does not restrict itself to Vatican visits. Their impressive web site lists dozens of possible choir performance tour options throughout Europe and North America.

A Wedding at the Vatican

Readers of this column are blessed to attend Holy Mass at one of our beautiful historic churches. A wedding in any one of our churches is sure to be memorable and photogenic. But perhaps you're up for a bigger challenge. You want to have your wedding at the *ne plus ultra* of churches, something you can talk about for the rest of your life. As with the choir situation, it's easy if you know the tricks of the trade.

You can arrange a wedding at St. Peter's Basilica by following the procedures explained at www.saintpetersbasilica.org. As with Peter's Way, the Vatican has designated a third-party organization, Weddings in Italy by Regency, to be the organizers for such events. They supplied the below photo which is on the Vatican's web site.



Weddings are usually held in the Cappella del Coro (Choir Chapel), one of the side chapels in St. Peter's.

Just in case you're wondering, use of the central papal altar under Bernini's baldacchino is reserved for papal events and for celebrants delegated by the Holy Father. We doubt the Holy Father does weddings, plus sealing off that area for a wedding would be unfair for the throngs of tourists who visit every day. Some things truly are beyond reach.

An Absurd Idea – Or a Challenge?

Putting it all together, it would theoretically be possible to hold a Nuptial Mass in the Extraordinary Form at St. Peter's Basilica with one of our local Tridentine Choirs providing the music. Admittedly, pockets would have to be quite deep to afford that kind of a project. Part of the puzzle is figuring out how to transport one's guests across the Atlantic. Yet the simple fact that it is nowadays even possible is quite something to ponder. We can dream, can't we?