

SAINT ROSE OF LIMA CATHOLIC CHURCH'S PARISH PROFILES

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Funeral Schola

Saint Rose Funeral Schola Celebrates 26 Years of Comforting Family and Friends

Belonging to the Saint Rose music ministry for 38 years as a cantor and choir member has brought great joy to Rick Kauphusman. However, for him, another music group—the Funeral Schola—has a very special place in his heart.

“I am really ministering to people in need when I am singing in the Schola,” he says. “That gives me a very good feeling. Most often I don’t know the deceased, never met them, never talked with them; yet, when someone comes forward and speaks about that person, more often than not, I get all choked up hearing all the wonderful things they say.

“When people are hurting and when we are there, I think very often the family is surprised that we have as many as 20 members of the Schola singing for them,” Rick continues. “There are times when the Schola outnumbers the family and friends of the deceased. Everyone in our group is very dedicated and would be at the funeral if at all possible.”

When Janet Hjelmgren, Saint Rose Director of Music Ministry, joined the staff more than four years ago she was thrilled to see the Schola. In her experience in liturgical music it was very unusual for a church to have a group of this size and beautiful sound.

“They are an amazing music ministry,” she says. “They are very prayerful people, and deeply dedicated. I am blessed to be working with them.”

From Immaculate Conception to Saint Rose

This year is the 26th anniversary of the Saint Rose Funeral Schola. Former pastor, Fr. Walter Sochacki, brought this unique concept with him from his previous church, Immaculate Conception in Columbia Heights in 1994. That same year Diane Kretsch was hired as a music coordinator and charged with creating a choir for funerals.

“In developing a plan I wanted the new choir to represent the community at all the funerals,” says Diane. “The ministry should come first and the music would follow. I wanted everyone to understand there was no commitment; come when you can. I also made sure this group was an equal part of the entire music ministry.”

After a bulletin notice and Diane speaking at Mass, they did indeed come, especially older parishioners. Fourteen men and women attended the first practice in January, 1995. The group grew to about 50 at one time. The Schola has lost members over the years, but more recently several members of the adult choir have retired and joined the Schola. Today there are about 45 active singers, with 25 to 30 attending every funeral, weather permitting.

A couple of years ago a February blizzard limited the group to only four singers—Janet, Rick, Pat O’Shaughnessy and Bob Houck. Bob, a legendary parish volunteer and an early member of the Schola, says singing that day was one of the best things he has ever done in church. “That was the first time I had a chance to sing in such a small, talented quartet.”

Pat Perrizo also joined the Schola near the beginning. With a limited musical background (high school glee club) she brought a unique talent to the group. “Being involved in grief ministry for many years I think music at a funeral can be a form of therapy,” she says. “For people that are hurting music can be very comforting.”

Pat says the members of the Schola share a common bond—bringing peace and comfort to family members and friends of someone who has died. “For many it is a difficult journey and we hope our music is one small way to help them with their grieving.”

Pat remembers one woman and her daughter left their pew and came up to the choir at the end of the funeral to say thank you. “That took a lot of character on their part and it was meaningful to us.”

Janet is amazed at how many comments and thank you cards the parish receives about the Schola. “Visitors are so touched by the beauty of the singing, the loving and prayerful spirit that each singer brings to the grieving families and by how many people participate in this wonderful ministry,” she says.

Join and Share Your Caring for Others

Janet says she is always looking for new people to join the Schola. “This is a place where you can share your caring for others. You will get back more than you will give,” she says. “This is a very special group.”

Not only are members of the Schola committed to their participation in this ministry, they always want to get better. That’s why, says Janet, “the group works very hard on vocal techniques to create beautiful sounds for the family and why we continue to expand our musical repertoire.”

In a normal year the Schola will sing at about 45 to 50 funerals. Members come when they are available; there is no obligation. The group practices a half-hour before each funeral and once a month September to May.

Janet emails and phones each member with information about an upcoming funeral. “These days, with a hold on group singing, I send them the names of the deceased so they can pray for them and their families,” she says. “In this way, they are continuing their music ministry. It will be a great blessing when we are able to come together and sing.”

“I encourage anyone interested in music to join us, says Pat. “It is a wonderful group of people who have become friends over the years. Although I have been a part of the Schola for more than two decades, I cannot read music, but I am blessed to be part of such a dedicated ministry.”

As former director Diane says: “The entire parish should be really proud of this wonderful group that gets together to say goodbye to family members. It is so uplifting to be a part of this ministry. Each singer wants to go home and be a better person.”