

NEWS

Announcing the St. Cecilia Academy for Pastoral Musicians: An Interview with Father Matthew Ernest

by Mary Jane Ballou

We have all seen increased interest in the revival of the church's tradition of sacred music over the last decade. Well-attended chant intensives and colloquia, regional workshops, and new scholas throughout the United States can attest to that. The new St. Cecilia Academy for Pastoral Musicians is an ambitious program aimed at "the troops in the trenches" — parish music directors. I recently had the opportunity to interview by telephone and email Father Matthew Ernest, the academy's director, about the plans and goals of this new venture at St. Joseph's Seminary in New York.

To start, can you tell me a little about your own musical/liturgical background?

I graduated college with a Bachelor in Music Performance degree, majoring in clarinet and minoring in piano. After working as an orchestral clarinetist, I began my studies for the priesthood for the Archdiocese of New York, during which time I was the house organist at the seminary. Two years after ordination, I was assigned to study liturgy at The Catholic University of America, and I graduated with a doctorate in liturgical studies in 2010. I am currently the professor and director of liturgical studies at St. Joseph's Seminary, and I also direct the Office of Liturgy for the Archdiocese of New York.

What was the inspiration for the St. Cecilia Academy for Pastoral Musicians?

In the New York area, some parishes are able to hire trained musicians as parish music directors. Other parishes rely on dedicated volunteers to provide music ministry. While these individuals are talented musicians, they often come to these positions, both salaried and unsalaried, with limited or no formation in the principles of liturgy and sacred music. For many years, there has not been a comprehensive formation program for pastoral musicians offered in the greater New York area. Numerous requests have been made by pastors of the



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archdiocese for a program wherein musicians can receive the education they need to effectively serve as pastoral musicians. With the support of Cardinal Dolan, the staff of the archdiocese's Office of Liturgy and the faculty of St. Joseph's Seminary began to discuss ways in which this need could be met in our area. The result of these discussions is the St. Cecilia Academy.

Who is the ideal student for the academy?

The ideal student is the professional musician who has been asked to use his or her musical skills within the context of a parish music program, but who has not yet had the opportunity to study liturgy or the principles of sacred music in a focused and comprehensive manner.

What has been the response to the announcement of this new academy??

The response has been enthusiastic and robust. Already, a large number of pastors within the Archdiocese have expressed their willingness to sponsor their parish musicians in their study at the St. Cecilia Academy. We anticipate that, with the arrival of nationally-recognized music scholar Dr. Jennifer Donelson on the faculty of St. Joseph's Seminary this January, our classes will continue to grow.

Do potential students already have to be working in a parish?

The classes at the academy are open to any student who is accepted into one of the Master's programs at St. Joseph's Seminary. Those who are currently working as parish musicians receive a 50% discount off seminary tuition. Parishes are encouraged to cover the cost of tuition for their musicians as a way of encouraging professional development.

Tell me a little about the planned courses and their faculty.

The St. Cecilia Academy currently offers four fully-accredited Masters level courses, in association with St. Joseph's Seminary. They are: Introduction to Liturgy, Principles of Sacred Music, Liturgical Year/Environment of Worship, and Introduction to Chant. The two liturgy courses are taught by me, and the music courses will be taught by Dr. Jennifer Donelson, who is the new Director and Associate Professor of Sacred Music at St. Joseph's Seminary.

Where are the courses are being offered and how long would it take to complete the curriculum?

The courses are offered at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers and the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception (Huntington) on Long Island, depending on the semester. The two seminaries offer video-linked classrooms between the two locations. So, if a student from Long Island wishes to take a course that is being taught in Yonkers, he or she may do so at the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception. Professors are committed to teaching at both sites throughout the semester.

Students who take the academy's courses in successive semesters will complete their study in four semesters (or, one and a half years).

Are there any plans to offer the courses online for students in the further reaches of the archdiocese?

Yes, there are currently plans to offer courses via a video-linked classroom in Poughkeepsie. As well, we hope to be able to offer an online learning option to those students who live outside the New York, New Jersey, Connecticut tri-state area within the year.

I see that this is a cooperative venture of two seminaries in two dioceses – St. Joseph’s Seminary and Immaculate Conception. How were you able to make this happen?

The relationship between St. Joseph’s Seminary and the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception is the direct result of the formation of the St. Charles Borromeo Inter-diocesan Partnership in 2011 by Timothy Cardinal Dolan of New York, Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, and Bishop William Murphy of Rockville Centre. The goals of this partnership included the creation of a single program of priestly formation that begins with undergraduate and philosophical studies in Douglaston (Brooklyn) and continues with graduate-level study at St. Joseph’s. The bishops have also committed themselves to sharing resources for the training of permanent deacons and the education of laity, as well as offering support for the ongoing formation of consecrated women and men. Thanks to the vision of the three bishops in our area, the possibility of offering courses in liturgy and sacred music at both sites became a possibility for the St. Cecilia Academy.

How will these courses integrate with the Master’s program?

Because these courses are fully accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education and the Association of Theological Schools, they may be applied towards the completion of the Master of Arts in Theology and the Master of Pastoral Studies degrees currently offered by St. Joseph’s Seminary. A student who successfully completes the four courses is able to apply the 12 credits earned to the 39 credits needed for a Master of Arts in Theology, and the 48 credits needed for the Master of Arts in Pastoral Studies.

What do you hope your graduates will take with you when they complete the courses?

It is my hope that students at the St. Cecilia Academy will discover the beauty of the church’s patterns and tradition of liturgical and sung prayer in such a way that they are excited to share their newfound knowledge with their parish communities. In the end, the St. Cecilia Academy is about helping musicians to lead their parishioners closer to Christ through the beauty of sung liturgy.

Is anything planned that will help pastors understand the need to enrich parish liturgies and support the graduates of your program in their work?

The office of Liturgy is currently planning several workshops for pastors (e.g., on the revised Rite of Marriage, music for the RCIA). We have also recently conducted an online survey of pastors regarding various aspects of their music programs (instrumentation, staff, hymnals, choral groups, etc.) It is hoped that the information gathered from this survey will assist our office in planning future offerings for pastors that will meet their needs and expectations, as they seek to enhance their programs of sacred music.

Is this an initiative that you hope will be picked up, so to speak, by other dioceses in the U.S.?

It is my hope that dioceses will continue to work together to discover the best ways that offices and commissions on liturgy and worship can serve the needs of parish musicians. Regular dialogue among those who are entrusted with this responsibility is essential in the common effort to foster a genuine liturgical spirituality among Catholics in the U.S.

Where do you see the academy in five years, ten years?

In the short term, I look forward to our summer chant intensive, which will offer a week-long, three-credit introduction to the history, spirituality, and reading of chant. Currently, we are looking to accommodate those interested students who live outside of our area and who may wish to travel to New York for this course. It is anticipated that this kind of outreach to musicians outside the tri-state area will continue through online offerings.

With respect to more long-range plans, I would like to see any expansion of the academy always retain a focus on educating and assisting parish musicians in their crucial work of leading the People of God in sung prayer. I believe that the academy's success and future offerings should be evaluated primarily by the quality of sacred music and worship provided by our graduates in their parishes. With this in mind, it is my hope that the academy's offerings can have a direct and positive impact on the life of the church in New York.

How can potential students learn more?

Students can find out more and apply to the St. Cecilia Academy at the Archdiocese of New York Office of Liturgy's website (nyliturgy.org), or by contacting the office directly (liturgy@archny.org). ❧

