What does it mean to be a schola cantorum?

Here at St. Monica we describe our music program as a Schola Cantorum. Similarly, my title and my role is listed as Director of Sacred Music and Principal Organist. These may seem like pretentious titles and terms, or unnecessary usages of fancy language; but they are not. On the contrary, these are important distinctions which have been carefully chosen to remind ourselves of a simple truth: we are the ones who have been tasked to promote, preserve, and perform the Church's "treasure of inestimable value". This description comes straight from the Second Vatican Council's constitution on Sacred Liturgy: Sacrosanctum Concilium. (Sacrosanctum Concilium 112) If you have not read this document, I highly encourage you to do so.

So what, then, does it mean to be a schola cantorum? Is it the same thing as a choir? Does it even matter? As we have already heard, the Church herself views the musical tradition of the church as the highest treasure of the arts. In addition the council fathers go on to say that "…sacred music is to be considered the more holy in proportion as it is more closely connected with the liturgical action". This, then, gives us our answer.

As the name suggests, a schola cantorum can be defined as a school of singing. This is a good starting point, but that definition doesn't really do justice to the role of a schola. Yes, we are students, but of what? Are we simply learning to sing beautiful music well? If that is the reason that you are here, then I would recommend some self-reflection. I do not believe that to be the case though, and I know that everyone here has chosen to be here for a higher purpose. We are more than students, we are disciples; not merely of music, but of Christ Himself.

As disciples we are meant to be striving for knowledge of, and relationship with Christ. As students, we take our discipleship as the reason for our efforts. We are responsible, in a way, for the liturgical life of our parish, for the spiritual growth of its members, for the edification and sanctification of the people, and of course for giving glory to God. (SC 113) Because of these reasons, we take our learning seriously, and give our best to God so as to bring as much beauty to the liturgy as we are capable of.

And what are we called to be learning? The answer once again comes from the Church herself. Sacrosanctum Concilium 116 says:

> The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman Liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services. But other kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, are by no means excluded from liturgical celebrations, so long as they accord with the spirit of the liturgical action…

Clearly then, it is the chants of the Church that we are called to embrace first, before the addition of other kinds of sacred music. This is why we are a schola cantorum rather than simply a choir. Words have meaning, and it is important to use the correct words to describe important things.

So what is a schola cantorum? To me, it is a group of disciples first, who studies the realities of our faith in Christ. From there, it is dedicated to the practice and performance of the music of the Church. We are the ones whose voices are lifted up on behalf of the the people's to render praise unto God. We must take our task seriously and reverently for the holy Mass is the highest form of prayer that we have. It is not something to be taken lightly, because that is where God himself comes down to us, to feed us that we might have food for the way back to Him.

Before I close I would like to leave you with two quotes:

"If you are called upon to play a church service, it is a greater honor than if you were to play a concert on the finest organ in the world… Thank God each time when you are privileged to sit before the organ console and assist in the worship of the Almighty." **– Albert Schweitzer**

"Music is God's gift to man, the only art of Heaven given to earth, the only art of earth we take to Heaven." – J.S. Bach