

Notre Dame Folk Choir's former director to give public lecture on raising up liturgical musicians

Steven C. Warner forged a successful sacred music career in the years following Vatican II, but the longtime choir director and composer suspects job opportunities for today's young musicians are severely lacking.

The American musician, best known for founding and directing the Notre Dame Folk Choir, said the Church's attitude towards young musicians needed to change.

"In some ways, the structure of the Church is an obstacle in the United States, as well as other countries worldwide," Warner said.

"If you want to devote your life to sacred music, then you are also entering into a covenant – a career covenant – with the Church, and the institutional church needs to support young people in this career choice."

Warner's own pursuit to become a sacred music leader coincided with his arrival at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. He went from playing guitar in bars to building up the world-famous Notre Dame Folk Choir from scratch.

"Back then, the Saint Louis Jesuits were in the limelight, and I could both see and hear what their formula introduced to a post-Conciliar church: solid Scriptural references, lyrical melodies that were not trite, and accompaniment that was far more mature than what the Church had experienced in the 60's," Warner said.

"I saw room for amazing growth in the fields of sacred music."

In the process of building up a repertoire for a growing Folk Choir, he mentored and encouraged dozens of young Catholic musicians in the art of sacred music across his 36 years as director.

This month, the renowned musician will share his experiences of nurturing young musicians in a public lecture hosted by the ACU Centre for Liturgy.

During the lecture on 20 May, Warner will also speak about the power of community choirs in helping young people foster their Christian faith, based on his experiences leading the Notre Dame Folk Choir.

Founded by Warner in 1980 to bridge the gap between contemporary compositions of the post-conciliar Church and the repository of traditional choral music, the Folk Choir continues to serve the University of Notre Dame as one of its principal liturgical choirs.

While director of the choir, Warner often took his Folk Choir singers and musicians on retreat to the Abbey of Gethsemani, home to the Trappist monks of Kentucky.

Those retreats led to an unlikely friendship between Warner and renowned Trappist monk and composer, Fr Chrysogonus Waddell.

"It was the oddest of matches, but one that proved to be so potent and revealing about how we found our voices in the Folk Choir," Warner said.

"The retreat pilgrimages we did there, every other year, shaped my own understanding of what stirred young people's hearts, and it had nothing to do with styles of music."

In fact, Warner thinks an over-focus on categorizing Catholic music according to particular 'styles' can be distracting. He is hesitant to use the terms 'folk', 'contemporary', 'traditional' or even 'praise and worship', to describe the varying genres of Church music available today.

"I have always found the terms to describe genres slippery, and not necessarily helpful when it comes to discussing church music," Warner said.

"What is 'folk' music? Musicologists would have a very precise definition of what that is, and it's not at all related to what most ecclesial discussions mean by the term.

"The same could be true with other terms: 'contemporary', 'praise and worship', 'traditional'. Each one of them has a nuance, and in most instances, I find that applying labels is not helpful.

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“In my lecture, I’ll be glad to discuss these terms – their pitfalls, and their positive applications.”

ACU Centre for Liturgy director Professor Clare Johnson said Warner’s vast experience of working with young musicians would be immensely valuable for the Australian context.

“We are so pleased to host Steve Warner for a public lecture on encouraging young liturgical musicians in their vocation,” Professor Johnson said.

“Steve’s gift for engaging the talents, minds, and spirits of young musicians in the performance of liturgical music comes from his natural affinity for working with young people and the expert musicianship he both embodies and teaches to them.

“All those who have the privilege of working with emerging liturgical musicians can learn a great deal from the wisdom and experience of Steve Warner. The high musical standards he inspires in the young people who work with him become a medium for their spiritual growth as they take an active leadership role in liturgies.

“We look forward to hearing about his approach to nurturing future generations of musicians to serve our church.”

Register for the Public Lecture with Steven C. Warner at the ACU Centre for Liturgy [website](#).

Photo caption: Steven C. Warner conducting the Notre Dame Folk Choir inside the Basilica of the Sacred Heart on the campus of the University of Notre Dame, USA. Credit: Matt Cushore.

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