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Seminarians record compact disc as fundraiser at Mount St. Mary's

EMMITSBURG, Md. -- The spiritual home of Mount St. Mary's Seminary will soon be getting a facelift, and seminarians there are contributing their talents to help finance its restoration. Immaculate Conception Chapel will be 100 years old in 2010, and the seminarians who pray there daily have recorded a CD of liturgical music, "Vespers Schola," to raise funds to restore the chapel and help purchase a new organ.

The varied collection of songs features the seminary's Vespers schola, or choir. Frederick Ziegler, the Mount's organist and director of liturgical music, said the idea to record a CD came after the schola performed in Baltimore's recently restored basilica during the November 2007 meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic of Bishop. Afterwards, several bishops approached both Ziegler and seminary rector Msgr. Steven P. Rohlf's to ask if the choir had a CD.

"We didn't," said Ziegler, "but Msgr. Rohlf's gave me the go-ahead to research recording one." A year later, a mobile recording unit pulled up in front of Immaculate Conception Chapel to record the schola performing 36 songs, including "Panis Angelicus," three versions of "Ave Maria," an entire Sunday solemn Vespers service, Gregorian chants and more. The CD was recorded on Nov. 22, the feast of St. Cecilia, patron saint of music. "The whole project really shows Our Lady's grace in motion," Ziegler said.

The choir performed some songs up to five times to get the best take. Many are performed a capella, in Latin, while others feature organ accompaniment and the seminary's brass quartet.

Jason Burchell, 28, is a first theologian studying for the Diocese of Arlington, Va. with co-sponsorship from the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services. Burchell described singing in the schola as a "beautiful way to convey a love for Christ."

"The guys who sing on this CD are all normal men who are looking to give their lives to Christ, and follow his will for their lives and not their own. We sing not because we want to gain acceptance from others or polish our musical backgrounds, but to inspire, evangelize and grow in our relationship with Christ," Burchell said.

That sentiment is echoed by fellow schola member Mike Zimmer, 24, a second theologian from the Diocese of Lincoln, Neb. "This CD is an opportunity to slow down, and really absorb the music, which will hopefully foster a setting that is more open to God. There is so much in our pop culture that doesn't tend toward a solemn experience with God." Zimmer says his favorite piece on the CD is an "Ave Maria" by German Franz Biebl, one of the most respected figures in

20th-century choral music. “It’s the easiest to pray and sing at the same time. To be able to hear it and listen to it as a prayer is uplifting.”

Msgr. Rohlf, the rector and himself an alumnus of the Mount, praised the accomplishments of the Vespers schola. “Nothing like this has been produced by a seminary schola in 40 years. You will want to hear this CD,” he said.

All proceeds from the sale of the CD will help fund the restoration of Immaculate Conception Chapel prior to its 100th anniversary. The New Haven-based Knights of Columbus has already contributed \$250,000 toward the purchase of the chapel’s new organ, which will be dedicated in honor of the Knights’ founder, Venerable Servant of God Father Michael J. McGivney. The Knights’ supreme chaplain, Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., is also a Mount alum.

There are currently nearly 150 men studying at Mount St. Mary’s in pre-theology and theology programs. They represent 28 U.S. dioceses, one African diocese and three religious orders. Founded in 1808, Mount St. Mary’s Seminary is the second-oldest Catholic theologate in the United States. Early on, the Mount earned itself the distinction of “Cradle of Bishops.” By its bicentennial year, the university and seminary could boast nearly 50 episcopal alumni. At present, Mount seminary alumni total more than 2,600, and approximately 1,100 of them are active in priestly ministry today.

Editor’s Note: The “Vespers Schola” CD sells for \$15 (+\$4 shipping/handling) and is available at the Mount St. Mary’s University and Seminary Web site, <http://www.msmary.edu/scholacd>, by calling the seminary at 301-447-5295, sending a fax request to 301-447-5895, or by e-mail at scholacd@msmary.edu.